Children's Right to be Heard: Exploring Children's Perceptions of Happiness and Factors Contributing to Happiness in the Pre-School Environment.

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Thesis submitted to the Dublin Institute of Technology in part fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Masters in Child, Family and Community Studies.

Donna Tobin

October 2014

Supervisor Nicola Hughes
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: ______________________________________________________
I would like to thank all the children who participated in this study. Thank you for sharing your opinions and experiences with me. This research study would not have been possible without your participation and invaluable insights.

I would like to thank my work colleagues for their flexibility in facilitating this research study. Also thank you for your continuous encouragement and amazing support. I would also like to thank my family and friends for their unfailing patience and understanding. Thank you all for your motivation over the past two years. I feel very fortunate to have had such fabulous and supportive people in my life.

Lastly, I would like to thank my supervisor, Nicola Hughes. Thank you for your guidance and advice throughout this research process; it has been very much appreciated.
Table of Contents

Declaration of Ownership.............................................................................. ii
Acknowledgements...................................................................................... iii
Table of Contents......................................................................................... iv
Abbreviations............................................................................................... viii
Glossary........................................................................................................ ix
List of Figures............................................................................................... x
Appendices................................................................................................... xi
Abstract......................................................................................................... xii

Chapter One: Introduction.......................................................................... 1
1.1 Introduction............................................................................................ 1
1.2 Aims and Objectives.............................................................................. 1
1.3 Rationale for the Study.......................................................................... 2
1.4 Outline of Study.................................................................................... 3

Chapter Two: Literature Review................................................................. 4
2.1 Introduction............................................................................................ 4
2.2 Sociology of Childhood......................................................................... 4
2.3 Policy and Legislation.......................................................................... 5
2.4 Policy in Practice.................................................................................. 7
2.4.1 Comparative Studies......................................................................... 9
2.5 Participation.......................................................................................... 10
6.1 Introduction ............................................................................................................. 46

6.2 Conclusions ........................................................................................................... 46

6.3 Recommendations ................................................................................................. 48

References ..................................................................................................................... 49

Appendices ...................................................................................................................... 60
## Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CECDE</td>
<td>Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DCYA</td>
<td>Department of Children and Youth Affairs</td>
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<tr>
<td>DEIS</td>
<td>Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DES</td>
<td>Department of Education and Science</td>
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<tr>
<td>ECCE</td>
<td>Early Childhood Care and Education</td>
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<td>HSE</td>
<td>Health Service Executive</td>
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<tr>
<td>OECD</td>
<td>Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development</td>
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<td>NCCA</td>
<td>National Council for Curriculum and Assessment</td>
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<td>NCS</td>
<td>National Children’s Strategy</td>
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<td>UNCRC</td>
<td>United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child</td>
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<td>UNICEF</td>
<td>United Nations Children’s Fund</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# Glossary of Terms

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Early years sector:</td>
<td>Umbrella term used to describe any and all services for children from birth to six years including.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Years Professional/Teacher:</td>
<td>A person working in a service for children from birth to six years.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pre-school:</td>
<td>A setting which provides a care and education service for children the year before they attend National school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National School:</td>
<td>The setting children of school going age attend. Compulsory education begins in Ireland at age six, although the majority are enrolled in school by age five.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happiness:</td>
<td>Happiness is a mental or emotional state of well-being characterised by positive or pleasant emotions.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participation:</td>
<td>Involvement, engagement and contributing to a task.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mosaic Approach:</td>
<td>A multi-method approach to data collection. Where children are active participants in the research process. Tools such as children's own photographs, tours, focus groups, art, observations and maps can be joined together to develop a deeper understanding of children's perspectives on their early childhood settings.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## List of Figures

| Figure 4.1 | Smiling-Child’s perception of a physical feature representing happiness… | 26 |
| Figure 4.2 | Uniform-Child’s affiliation with the pre-school community……………… | 28 |
| Figure 4.3 | My Drawer- Child’s sense of ownership within the environment………….. | 28 |
| Figure 4.4 | Aistear Books- Child’s identity recognised in the environment………… | 29 |
| Figure 4.5 | Home Visit- Partnership between pre-school and home environment……… | 30 |
| Figure 4.6 | Big School Door- Interest in National School………………………… | 31 |
| Figure 4.7 | Caterpillar- Item in outdoor area………………………………………. | 31 |
| Figure 4.8 | Playground- Depiction on outdoor play area………………………….. | 32 |
| Figure 4.9 | Grass and Trees- Interest in the natural environment…………………… | 33 |
| Figure 4.10 | Nature- Representation of happiness outdoors…………………………… | 33 |
| Figure 4.11 | Peers- Importance of peer relationship………………………………… | 34 |
| Figure 4.12 | My Best Friend- Importance of teacher/child relationship……………… | 35 |
| Figure 4.13 | Feeling like Spiderman- Experience of risky play………………………… | 37 |
# Appendices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Appendix</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Appendix A</td>
<td>Information Letter for Parent</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix B</td>
<td>Parental Consent Forms</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix C</td>
<td>Assent Forms</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix D</td>
<td>Information Sheet for Children</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix E</td>
<td>Ethical Approval</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix F</td>
<td>Guiding Questions</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix G</td>
<td>Face Scale</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix H</td>
<td>Sample Focus Group Transcription</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Abstract

There has been a growing recognition for children’s voices to be heard on matters which affect their lives. This has been encouraged by the ratification of the UNCRC in Ireland which has influenced numerous other policies. This study aims to provide an opportunity for young children to have their voices heard and demonstrate how children can be involved as active research participants in empirical research. An emphasis was placed on positive psychology. The aim was to explore the children’s perception of happiness and ascertain the factors which contributed to their happiness within the pre-school environment. Fifteen children attending a pre-school in urban Dublin were the research participants. An adaptation of the Mosaic approach was used to collect the data. Specifically methodological tools included photographs, focus groups and drawing activities.

The findings from the study indicated that children could offer insightful and valuable information regarding their understanding and experiences of happiness. Children’s perceptions of happiness were linked to physical features, emotional well-being, familial relationships and comedic influences. Four main themes emerged with regard to factors contributing to the children’s happiness in their pre-school environment. These included; a sense of identity and belonging, outdoor learning environment, relationships with peers and teachers and play opportunities. The study identified that as primary stakeholders in the early years setting children have meaningful insights to share. Based on the findings recommendations were made for further similar research to be carried out in alternative geographical areas in Ireland.
CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction
The late 20th century has seen increased attention paid to children’s participation rights. Policy propels an image of children as active agents who have a right to have a say in their own lives. However, while children are very visible in theory, in practice this is not always the case. The researcher found that both nationally and internationally there is a limited amount of research available which addresses children’s perceptions of happiness particularly within their pre-school environments. This study aims to explore pre-school children’s perception of happiness and identify the factors which contribute to their happiness in the pre-school environment.

1.2 Aims and Objectives
The overall aim of this study is to provide an opportunity for children’s voices to be heard and ascertain young children’s understanding of happiness. More specifically the study addresses the following research questions:

- How effectively can pre-school children participate in empirical research?
- What are pre-school children’s perceptions of happiness?
- What are the factors contributing to children’s happiness in the pre-school environment?
- How do the factors expressed by children in an urban area of Dublin on happiness compare with national and international research carried out with pre-school aged children?

In order to address these questions fifteen children from a pre-school in urban Dublin participated as active subjects in the research process. A mixed method approach based on the Mosaic approach was used to gather data. The methodological tools used include, photographs, focus groups and drawing activities. These provided a verbal and non-verbal
means for children to participate and express their opinions which offered greater insight into the children’s pre-school experience.

1.3 Rationale for the study

This study is rooted in theory which acknowledges the rights of children to have a say in matters which affect their lives (James and Prout, 1997; Lansdown, 2005). Since the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC; Children’s Rights Alliance, 2010) in Ireland in 1992, there has been a growing recognition of children’s voices to be heard in matters which affect them due to the changes which have taken place in the sociology of childhood (Hayes, 2002). This has led to the development of numerous policies in Ireland that encourage children’s participation. These included The National Children’s Strategy (Rogers, 2013). Síolta: the National Quality Framework (CECDE, 2006) and Aistear: The National Curriculum (NCCA, 2009).

However, despite the fact that policies promote the importance of children having a right to be heard in matters which affect them, there have been surprisingly few efforts made to gain their perspectives on their experiences within early childhood care and education (ECCE) services (Einarsdottir, 2005). Researching children’s perspectives is valuable in itself (Green and Hogan, 2005). This study aims to enact children’s rights by providing them with opportunities to be heard.

This study also aims to extend our understanding of how children experience their ECCE service. There is very little research available where children have been afforded the opportunity to evaluate their ECCE services. This research is being carried out to obtain meaningful insights from those who experience the service first hand on a day-to-day basis (Katz, 1993).

There is a primary focus on positive psychology and the promotion of happiness in this study. While adults may be able to observe signs of happiness in children, this study hypothesizes that if we truly wish to promote happiness, it is necessary to investigate how children experience it (Holder, 2012). O’Rourke and Cooper (2010) found that little is known about what causes happiness for children. This study aims to extend our knowledge on the factors which contribute to children’s happiness within their ECCE service. This knowledge gained can assist in the promotion of happiness and the enhanced well-being of the participants.
For a personal perspective as an early years professional this research will extend my understanding of the factors contributing to the children’s happiness within the service. The findings will be used to strengthen the practice and improve the quality of the service for children by creating a happier environment and by promoting the factors which contribute to the children’s happiness.

1.4 Outline of Study

The present study is divided into six chapters. Chapter One provides a brief outline of the research study, the aim of the study and the rationale for the research. Chapter Two presents the literature review. The literature looks at research in relation to the sociology of childhood, policy and legislation around children’s rights in Ireland and how this is translated into practice. It also explores concepts of happiness in childhood and empirical research involving children with a focus on early years services. Chapter Three outlines the research methodology used in the study, the sample of participants and how these participants were selected. The chosen methodological approach is defined, the ethical considerations are discussed as well as how the data collected will be analysed. Chapter Four presents the research findings and primary themes which emerged from the data. Chapter Five offers a discussion based on the research findings and the main themes which were identified. Finally, Chapter Six draws a conclusion to the study and offers recommendations stemming from the research findings and discussions.
CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter will explore issues which affect children’s right to be heard, including the sociology of childhood and policy and its implementation into practice with regard to children’s rights and participation. Emerging from the field of participation is the notion that children’s happiness can be promoted through active participation (Graham and Fitzgerald, 2011). Further to this, the theme of happiness is explored. Research studies which focus on identifying the factors that contribute to children’s happiness are also examined. Lastly, studies where children are active subjects in research are identified. A particular emphasis is placed on these themes within the realm of early childhood care and education. The literature will include evidence from international studies as well as the most contemporary research available in Ireland.

2.2 Sociology of Childhood

Ensuring that children’s voices are heard in matters which affect their lives requires children to been seen as valuable participants in decision making (Moss, 2007). The literature identifies that there has been a repositioning of childhood, which has come a long way from the old notion that children should be seen and not heard (James and Prout, 1997; Lansdown, 2005; Graham and Fitzgerald, 2011). The emergence of childhood has its roots in the 19th century, before this the majority of societies had little concept of childhood as a distinct period of growth and development (Rodgers, 2013). Concerns raised regarding children’s welfare and treatment during the Industrial Revolution paved the way for new laws to be developed to protect and promote children’s standards of living. This brought with it increased focus on societies moral obligations towards children’s welfare during the 20th century (Miller, 2009).

However, different societal constructs of childhood are historically and culturally bound as they are embedded in the norms and popular discourse of that specific society (Didilica, 2012). In most westernised societies the social constructive perspectives has gained much momentum. This theory emphasises the social context within which children operate and
challenges the view that children are “adults in waiting”, who pass through linear stages of predetermined processes (Rodgers, 2013, Kehily, 2009, Santrock, 2011). The seminal work of Arié’s (1996) propelled the idea that children’s lives are socially constructed and deserve to be taken seriously. James and Prout’s (2005) work further highlighted the importance of childhood as a period in an individual’s life which is worthy of investigation in its own right.

This sentiment of childhood as a respected social position is becoming increasingly evident in the literature (Kehily, 2009). Moss (2007) strongly argues that children should be viewed as experts in their own lives and as competent individuals particularly in regard to decision making processes. Mac Naughton and Smith (2009) acknowledge that developments have led to children being seen more as social actors and rights-bearing citizens, who can offer validity and meaning to their own lives.

The change in concepts of childhood which society holds offers a significant statement on the values that underpin and determine national and international policies. In recent history, it has been argued that the most influential international policy with regards to children’s rights has been the UNCRC (Alderson, 2008).

2.3 Policy and Legislation

Freeman (1995) notes that the UNCRC was a landmark with regards to children’s rights, as it represents a global consensus on the status of children and has been a stimulus towards children becoming more visible in society. Children’s rights within the convention have been categorised into the “3P’s” 1) provision, 2) protection and 3) participation (Quennerstedt, 2010). The latter; particularly, is evident in article 12 and 13 of the UNCRC (UN, 1989) which establishes children’s right to express their views in matters affecting their lives and children’s right to freedom of expression respectively.

While all states within the United Nations bar the USA, South Sudan and Somalia have ratified the UNCRC (The Economist, 2013), it has been argued that it is still a considerably mild document. While it has made children more visible it is based on moral pressures rather than mandatory legislation (Freeman, 2007). The UNCRC has been criticised by Rogers (2013) as lacking a clear plan for implementation. Within the Irish context there has been considerable progress made since the UNCRC was ratified. One of the major responses and
driving forces behind promoting children’s rights in Ireland has been the development of The Nation Children’s Strategy (NCS) (Rogers, 2013). The NCS (2000) states that children will have a voice in matters which affect them, children lives will be better understood and children will receive quality supports and services. Pinkerton (2004) acknowledges the positive approaches which were taken in developing the strategy to ensure children were consulted. However, he warns that evaluating the strategy will require children and adults working closely together to better understand children’s lives. Following the NCS (Government of Ireland, 2000), progressive steps included the appointment of a Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (2011), the creation of the Office of the Ombudsman for Children (2004) and the establishment of Dáil na nÓg (2001) (Children’s Right Alliance, 2010).

The State of Our Nation report (Office of the Minister for Children, 2006) identified that Ireland’s second report on the implementation of the UNCRC found improvements, particularly in the areas of civil rights and freedoms. While development was evident it also acknowledges that improvements still need to be made. In regard to monitoring the progress of the UNCRC, state parties are required to submit a report every five years. Kennan, Keenaghan, O’Connor, Kinlen, and McCord, (2011) claim that there has been considerable delays in Ireland, with the third and fourth reports outstanding since 2009. This tardiness on the part of the government raises questions in relation to their commitment to prioritising children’s rights. Similarly, the follow up to replace the NCS, the National Early Years Strategy (NEYS), was due to be published in 2013 and it is still unclear at the time of writing when this document will be published. However, the Report of the Expert Advisory Group on the impending NEYS suggests the strategy should be underpinned by the UNCRC (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2013).

In relation to legislation, the Child Care Act 1991 and the Children’s Act 2001, are regarded by Kennan et al. (2011) as poor in effect when compared to article 12 of the UNCRC. Hayes (2002) acknowledges that the Irish Constitution (1937) holds the basis of the values in society. She identifies that children’s rights are poorly represented in the Constitution; moreover children are inextricably linked to personas such as the family or the state. Children’s advocacy groups have been campaigning for a change in constitution for years in an effort to make children more visible (Van Turnhout, 2011). The Children’s referendum which was held in November 2012 proposed the 31st amendment of the constitution to recognise the rights of all children and to protect and direct these rights. The result was a yes vote with 58 percent (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2014). However, the
referendum has been challenged and is due to be appealed in the Supreme Court in 2014. Hence, while it is not yet enacted it signifies a shift towards the possibility of improved visibility of children within the constitution. Otherwise, it is argued that the lack of constitutional support will continue to undermine children’s rights (Ombudsman for children, 2007).

The literature suggests that Ireland is policy rich when it comes to children’s rights yet implementation poor (Rodgers, 2013; Kennan et al., 2011; Moloney, 2014). With this in mind it is not surprising that despite the developments, the Council of Europe (2004) identify that children generally feel weak in comparison to adults and feel they have little or no say in certain aspects of their lives.

2.4 Policy in Practice

Maloney (2014) ascertains that in Ireland there is a gap between policy and practice, particularly in ECCE sector. A documentary broadcast on RTÉ in May 2013 entitled “A Breach of Trust” provided an exposé of poor practice and fundamental flaws within the sector. This mismatch between policy and practice may be, in part due to the fragmented emergent of the sector as it developed in Ireland (French, 2013). The sector rose out of a demand for childcare as a response to women entering the work place. As a result little thought was given to the actual experiences children would encounter once inside these organisations (Rogers, 2013). The literature (Moss and Pense, 1994; Lippman, Anderson Moore and McIntosh, 2009) points out that ECCE tends to be tied up with questions of economic productivity and human potential rather than focusing on how it is experienced by the children within the service.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2012) have found that investment in the ECCE sector does yield promising future returns and can lead to economic productivity. Statistics such as these are enticing for governments and they do bring welcomed investment and attention to the sector. However, Morrow and Mayall (2009) argue that governments who value children in terms of their worth for future capital, risk fast forwarding childhood. Urichard (2008) suggests we should view children as “being” in the present and “becoming” for the future, as paying attention to both is a more realistic concept.
What is imperative to this argument is the role of quality. Quality is a key element in providing meaningful experiences for children and providing better future outcomes (Penn, 2009). Quality is necessary to bridge the gap between policy and practice.

In 2009 the Irish government announced the introduction of a free pre-school year for all children before commencing Primary school (Maloney, 2014). The uptake of the scheme has been successful with at 97 percent uptake of places (Department of Children and Youth Affaires, 2012). However, Rodgers (2013) claims that universal provision alone will not guarantee positive outcomes for children unless the quality of the service is high. The publication of Síolta (CECDE, 2006) The National Quality Framework is aimed at improving quality. It contains 16 standards the first of which is dedicated specifically to children’s rights. The development of a national curriculum framework for children aged birth to six entitled Aistear (NCCA, 2009) provides broad principals and themes to guide practice. The framework promotes the child-centred approach for children to be seen as active citizens with rights and responsibilities. However, the implementation of these documents is first and foremost not mandatory. Secondly, they are reliant upon their interpretation by trusted professionals and this equates to varying degrees of implementation and standards of quality (Rogers, 2013). Rogers (2013) claims that this inconsistency in practice requires further investigation into ECCE services to enhance our understanding of the pedagogical work which is taking place.

This is supported by international researchers Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (1999) who describe the process of deconstructing children’s experiences within services. They believe children themselves are the ideal contributors to this process. Despite the fact that children are the primary stakeholders in ECCE services surprisingly few efforts have been made to examine their perspectives (Einarsdottir, 2005). Duignan (2005) and Miller (2009) stress the vital necessity to include children by recognising that although children may not have as a high a level of cognitive capabilities as adults, children do know how they feel and what is important to them. Lansdown (2005) goes further to suggest that children should be consulted not purely because of measures of quality but as a matter of social justice.

However, in evaluating the quality of provision in Irish pre-school services, the voice of the child is silent. The HSE employ a heavy handed top-down approach with little regard giving to understanding the pedagogical experiences for children (Maloney, 2014). Katz (1993) critiques this type of approach to assessment of ECCE services by assuming that if a true
picture of the quality is to be obtained that it is those who experience the services on a day-to-day basis who can provide the most meaningful insights. She advocates for the inclusion of a bottom-up approach to assessing quality. Researchers agree that the bottom-up approach can be transformational in improving teaching practice (Goldspink, Winter, and Foster, 2008; Cook-Sather, 2002). Holder (2012) maintains that without listening to children, services may be able to ascertain whether their programs achieve some of the desired outcomes yet they will not be able to determine the impact on a particularly meaningful level.

2.4.1 Comparative studies

The level of participation that is afforded to children is determined by the contemporary discourse towards childhood in varying cultural environments (Lansdown, 2005). While international perspectives are culturally specific, they can provide positive models for best practice and self-reflection with regard to children’s rights.

Interestingly, a number of countries have incorporated the notion of listening to children into ECCE programmes. The Reggio Emilia approach which has been operating for over 30 years in Northern Italy endorses a strong child-centred approach. It has a particular focus on project work where children play an active participatory role in structuring events, decision making and co-constructing their environment (Edwards, Gandini, and Forman, 1995).

The New Zealand early childhood curriculum; Te Whariki recognises children as active citizens, with a valuable place within society and as able participants in planning and evaluating their learning environment (Clarke, Kjorholt and Moss, 2005; Smith, 2007). Similarly in Scandinavian countries children’s rights are strongly embedded within their ECCE practices. There is salient emphasis placed on democratic practices (Moss, 2007; Smith, 2007).

Considering that Scandinavian childcare is widely regarded as being among the best in the world, participation with children would appear to be a mark of quality that cannot be overlooked (Start Strong, 2013; Goldspink et al., 2008). However, the level of change it would require to bring Ireland’s ECCE services to the quality standards achieved in Scandinavian countries would be multitudinous (Barnardos and Start Strong, 2012). On the other hand, it has been argued that it is not realistic to simply presume that we can transplant one model of best practice in the hope that it will work as effectively within a new context. The previous Minister for children Frances Fitzgerald (2013) argues that we don’t need a
Scandinavian model in childcare, she suggests that what we need is a uniquely Irish model that meets the needs of Irish children. Nevertheless, Moss (2007) advocates the development of a European approach towards ECCE. A discussion in the magazine *Children in Europe* (2008) addressed this issue and proposed ten principles which should underlie practice across Europe. One of the key principles was the essential value of participation.

### 2.5 Participation

The literature suggests that involving children as active participants in their early educational experiences has many benefits, such as affirming children as competent social actors, improving self-esteem, developing an understanding of democratic processes and creating improved social competence (Lansdown, 2005; Miller, 2009). The literature notes that in an era where people are voting less and undemocratic politics is rising, that it is more important than ever to develop participation skills (Moss, 2007; Dupree, Bertram and Pascal, 2001). However, one of the most cited criticisms throughout the literature around involving children, is the perceived lack of respect children will have toward authority, or the fear that children will have “too much” control (Crivello, Camfield, and Woodhead, 2009; Miller, 2009; George, 2009). Contrastingly, research suggests that when children are afforded choice in line with their development, improvements have been identified in family relationships, community involvement and reciprocity (Lansdown, 2005; George, 2009). Children’s age and maturity are key factors in decision making processes. Miller (2009) identifies that it is important for adults to gain a deeper understanding of children’s participation as often what adults perceive as well intended freedom from responsibility, children feel as powerlessness. If successfully implemented the literature proposes that participation contributes positively to children’s well-being and social and emotional development, and argues that the two are interrelated and should not be considered in isolation (Graham and Fitzgerald, 2011; Kennan et al., 2011)

### 2.6 Happiness

O’Rourke and Cooper (2010) identify a correlation between children’s participation and their level of happiness. In recent years there has been a growing interest in researching
happiness. This may be due to the general acceptance that happiness is a desirable emotion and also that there is a need for more information to identify what actually influences happiness, as this is necessary to inform policy and legislation (Thoilliez, 2011). However, Cromby, Diamond, Kelly, Maloney, Priest, and Smail (2007) argue that research into happiness is a “current preoccupation”. They suggest that it is a misconception that we can improve our world through happiness and refer to it as “wishful thinking”. Yet, a study carried out by Diener and Lucas (2004) suggests that the issue of happiness merits much attention, as findings from there study concluded that 10,175 adults in 48 countries declared that they desired high levels of happiness for their children.

The literature promotes the idea of research which explores the positive factors contributing to children’s lives (Morrow and Mayall, 2009). Holder (2012), reasons that it is imperative to identify the factors which contribute to human flourishing. He promotes the practice of positive psychology. That is asking individuals the question of “What is right with you and how can we promote it?” (Holder, 2012 p.xi). Holder suggests that until recently positive psychology has largely been ignored. The notion of positive psychology does not disregard the traditional fields of psychology but suggests a complimentary combination of both (Compton, 2006). Lippman et al. (2009) supports this idea but warns that although focusing on the positive aspects of children’s lives is appealing, it is not always easy. They argue that the absence of positive factors is less likely to motivate interest then the presence of negative ones.

Dyer (1998) believes that emotions are one of the most important aspects of a child’s life. However, it is argued that they are often ignored and focus is placed on cognitive development, even though emotions influence almost every facet of our lives. Daly (2002) argues that the aim of education should be more focused on holistic development. She believes that quality pre-school experiences involve meeting children’s emotional needs and not placing an over emphasis on cognitive domains (Daly, 2002). Further evidence suggests that social and emotional development during the early years affects the health, well-being and competence for future adult life (Seligman, 1995; Lyubormirsky, King and Diener, 2005). Furthermore, research implies that while emotional well-being and happiness are important factors in their own right, they filter out and have a strong influence on other areas of development, such as school success and general quality of life (Coombes, Appleton, Allen, and Yerrell, 2013; De Roiste, Kelly, Molcho, Gavin, and Nic Gabhainn, 2010). This indicates that early years practitioners have a responsibility to be aware of what constitutes
childhood happiness and to consider ways to enhance it. Despite this, O’Rourke and Cooper (2010) found it difficult to ascertain the factors of happiness because little is known about what causes happiness in children.

2.7 What Makes Children Happy?

Research strongly suggests that there are likely to be differences between what constitutes happiness for adults and for children (Holder and Coleman, 2008; O’Rourke and Cooper, 2010). This may be explained by the difference in cognitive maturity and life experience (Holder and Coleman, 2008). Consequently, Holder and Coleman (2008) suggest that further research is needed on identifying factors associated with childhood happiness.

Holder and Coleman’s (2008) research based in Canada with children aged nine to twelve found that social relations, temperament, popularity and physical appearances were contributing factors to children’s happiness. They found that demographics had little impact on children’s variations of happiness. Contrastingly, in their research Oatley and Jenkins (1996) found that in general poorer socioeconomic status was a principal stressor in emotional development. Similarly, the Growing Up in Ireland (Williams, Murray, McCrory and McNally, 2013) study found that three year olds living in social disadvantage were more likely to be included in the problematic range in terms of socio-emotional development. Further Irish research carried out by McAuley and Layte (2012) found that socioeconomic disadvantage contributed significantly toward happiness but it was by no means the sole factor. Contrastingly, Luther and Latendresse’s (2005) research from the United States found that the emotional development of children of affluent parents may be at risk due to excessive pressure to achieve and by physical or emotional isolation from parents. Due to the subjective nature of well-being and happiness, Pascal and Bertham (2009) ascertain that if we wish to identify and successfully interpret children’s experiences that the involvement of children themselves in research is paramount.

2.7.1 Children’s perspectives of Happiness

Recently there has been a shift in attitudes towards children’s participation in research; the focus is being placed on children as subjects rather than objects of studies (Pascal and
Bertram, 2009). Qvortup (1994) explains that the scarcity of research carried out with children may be due to the fact that previously giving children an opportunity to participate in research was seen to be disregarding the rules of good scientific research. Pollard and Lee (2003) note that the insufficient amount of information available about children’s happiness may be due to the subjective nature of happiness and limited validity of a tool to measure it. However, Einardottir (2005) suggests that researchers who have included children’s perspectives with regard to their own lives have found that children can provide reliable and valuable information. Woodhead (1999) believes that researchers have a responsibility to understand how children today interpret their world as their experiences are likely to be different to those of previous generations.

Ofsted (2012) carried out research in the United Kingdom among children on the topic of happiness. The children identified happiness as feeling joy, achievement and being with people you love. This research concurs with the literature as it highlights the multidimensional nature of happiness and the difference in perspectives of happiness at varying life stages. O’Rourke and Cooper (2010) carried out research with 312 primary aged students in Australia and found that a sense of friendship, belonging and optimism were strong indicators of happiness. They further ascertained that parents and teachers rated the students happier then students rated themselves. This strengthens the idea that if we wish to get an accurate view of children’s emotions, then involving children in the research can be particularly beneficial. While these studies are useful in reinforcing the positive and essential nature of including children, they are focused on older or middle aged children and reveal little about the thoughts and ideas of children under the age of eight. This is a common trend as Lansdown (2005) found that relatively few studies have paid attention to children under the age of eight years.

There are some studies however which validate the ability of younger children to provide quality data for research. Einarsdottir’s (2005) research was carried out with children aged five and six in Icelandic play schools. Findings indicated that good relationships with other children, being able to choose what to do and playing with open ended materials added to the quality of the children’s experience. Within an Irish context, the Aistear in Action Initiative (NCCA and Early Childhood Ireland, 2013) asked children what they liked best about their pre-school. The themes which emerged from the children’s responses included: imaginative and socio-dramatic play, outdoor play, field trips, relationships with peers and practitioners and sharing information with parents. However, the children’s perspectives were not the
central focus of this study. It had a primary aim of supporting staff to implement the Aistear curriculum.

Further research within the Irish context was carried out by Start Strong (2011). They included 600 children aged between three and five years in their study. Children were asked to give their ideas about what services for young children should ideally be like. The main findings were that children placed high value on being able to shape their own daily activities. The importance of play, creativity, imagination, partnerships with families, outdoor play and animals were also identified. This research is particularly interesting as it is grounded in an Irish context and the large sample is of very young children. Yet, the study is limited as the methods of data collection were not uniform across services; they vary between the use of structured questions, open ended questions and/or creative art work. There is also limited background information regarding the participants. Analysis and discussion of the findings is minimal as the researchers chose to allow the children’s work to speak for itself as oppose to imposing their interpretation on the findings. Morrow (2008) acknowledges that children are powerless in society and that often they are not in a position to challenge the interpretation of research findings. The large sample is beneficial as it allows for overarching themes to emerge from a variety of ECCE services. However, the lack of discussion and the broad-based data collected makes it difficult to draw strong recommendations from the research.

Clark’s (2007) research involved children of a similar age to Start Strong’s study; children between the age of three and four years. Clark carried out a study in a service in South London. The aim was to gather the children’s perspective of their existing environment. Her findings revealed that personal markers, such as children’s identity being reflected in the environment and privacy and classroom set-up were important factors for young children. Clark used the Mosaic approach providing children with a variety of means to communicate their ideas and thoughts. Findings were specific to the centre, which fails to allow for generalisation. However, they are useful thinking points for practitioners reflecting on their own practice and environment.
Conclusion 2.8

The literature has identified the growing emphasis on the children’s rights movement. It has highlighted that listening to children can have benefits to the individual child, the ECCE service and society as a whole. However, it suggests that within the Irish context greater efforts need to be made to ascertain children’s perspectives on their ECCE environments. The field of positive psychology offers an encouraging medium to investigate children’s experiences. The literature has acknowledged that there is little information available about what contributes to happiness for young children. Previous successful studies promote the involvement of children as active participant and the methodology of qualitative research has proven to be particularly useful in gaining an insight into children lives. The researcher aims to build on the previous literature available and also to address the gaps which have been identified particularly within the Irish context. The researcher aims to focus on very young children aged between three and four years old. The focus is based on using strength based methodologies to gain children’s perception of their pre-school environment with particularly reference to factors contributing to children’s happiness in pre-school.
CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

The core objectives of this research were to promote children’s rights to be heard and to ascertain elements of the pre-school environment which contributed to children’s happiness. The researcher proposed to explore this by adopting a participatory approach to research facilitated by the use of the Mosaic approach (Clark and Moss, 2001).

This chapter provides an overview and discussion of the methodology chosen, ethical considerations and details the setting, sample and phases of the research process. The chapter continues with an examination of the data analysis techniques used.

3.2 Overview of methodology

For the purpose of this research a qualitative methodological approach was adopted. Qualitative methods can provide greater depth in understanding experiences which are socially constructed (Greig, Taylor and MacKay, 2007). Although qualitative methods can restrict the generalisation of studies they do offer greater insights from participants (Green and Hogan, 2005).

For this study an adaptation of the Mosaic approach which was developed by Clarke and Moss (2001) was chosen. It provides a multi-method approach which has been identified as beneficial for working with young children as it provides a variety of modes of expression (Crivello et al., 2009). Due to time restrictions three research tools from this approach were chosen. These included cameras and photographs, focus groups and drawings. These techniques will be discussed in detail in this chapter. The tools from the Mosaic approach offered a developmentally appropriate approach to research with very young children and allowed the researcher to gain children’s views and experiences of their ECCE setting from a range of viewpoints (Roberts-Holmes, 2011).
3.3 Ethical Considerations

The UNCRC (UN, 1989) highlighted children’s rights to participation and protection. This underpinned the research by ensuring that children’s voices were listened to and that the impact of the research was to benefit the children. Recognising the competences children possess, did not diminish the researchers responsibility to be aware of vulnerabilities and ensure children’s best interests and rights were at the forefront of the research at all times (Mukherji and Albon, 2010; Sinclair, 2004).

3.3.1 Consent and participation

Informed consent was sought from the children’s parents before beginning the research. Information on the purpose of the research and the methods which would be used was provided for the parents in the form of a letter (Harcourt, Perry and Walker 2011). The letter (Appendix A) was explained verbally to parents for visual or literacy considerations and they were provided with a copy. Following this, the researcher was available to answer any questions parents had. Consent was obtained from parents using parental consent forms (appendix B; Green and Hogan 2005).

Children’s assent to participate was extremely important as children’s rights were a linchpin in the research. Children’s assent was obtained at each stage of the process and this was observed by their pre-school teacher (Appendix C; Greig et al., 2007). The researcher explained what participating in the study involved to the children and used a visual aid sheet to assist this explanation (Appendix D; Harcourt and Conroy, 2011). Children were reminded that if they did not want to participate at any stage they were free to refrain from the activity. Ethical consideration with regard to participation was ongoing throughout the study. The researcher was vigilant for any verbal or non-verbal cues suggesting that children felt uncomfortable. Parents were kept informed about the research process and opportunities for them to discuss concerns were available during informal daily meetings (MacNaughton and Hughes, 2009).

The researcher was aware of disparities of power between adults and children. The researcher acknowledges that as a teacher working in the service, the relationship between the adult and children could sometimes be asymmetrical. Efforts were made to level the power relations. The researcher made it clear to the children that they were the experts and the
researcher would like their help (Clark, Kjorholt and Moss, 2005). The researcher ensured that at all times the children were treated with respect and their contributions valued.

3.3.2 Confidentiality

The pre-school and participants were not named in the study and every effort was made to ensure they were not identifiable through the research write up. All the gathered data was stored securely and only used by the researcher in line with the Data Protection Act 1998 (Alderson and Morrow, 2011). The researcher was mindful of child protection issues and any child welfare disclosures would be reported to the manager including the name of the participant and the nature of the incident, this would result in a limit to the confidentiality of the individual child (Roberts-Holmes, 2011; Department of Children and Youth Affaires, 2012). As the research was carried out within the pre-school service it was explained to parents that the ethical standards and regulations which the service operates within would be upheld. Children were made aware from the outset that the data they provided would be shared with others, however, their names or photographs of themselves would not be included (Green and Hogan, 2005).

Ethical consideration around the use of photographs was of upmost important. Photos which contained individual’s faces were not reproduced in the study to protect anonymity (Roberts-Holms, 2011).

3.4 Setting

The setting for the research was a community based pre-school in urban Dublin, where the researcher is a member of staff. The pre-school is located within a national school and is in a designated DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) area¹. This pre-school was chosen due to accessibility for the researcher. Mukherji and Albon (2010) believe that a researcher who knows the children can be an invaluable asset, as the children and adult are familiar with one another. However, they do mention that in an effort to please the adult children may try answer “correctly”. In order to alleviate this, techniques and props were used so as the adult was not seen as holding the power. Children were free to choose what

¹ DEIS; the action plan for inclusive education was established in 2005 and is focused on addressing and prioritising the educational needs of children and young people from disadvantaged communities (Department of Education and Skills, 2014).
they took photographs of, these photographs where then used in the focus group. This provided children with a greater sense of control over topics discussed (Robert-Holmes, 2011). A puppet was used as it has been identified that children can feel happier talking to a puppet rather than researchers (Clark and Moss, 2005). The researcher also made every effort to remain unbiased towards answers/statements made by the children.

The setting is influenced by the HighScope curriculum which, similar to the research objectives, values the contribution that children can make to the learning environment and is a balance between child led and adult led experiences (Epstein, 2007). Hence the ethos of the pre-school was supportive towards the research study.

3.5 Sample

In advance of official arrangements being made, ethical approval was obtained from the Dublin Institute of Technology’s Head of School (Appendix E; Robert-Holmes, 2011). Once this was conformed the sample group was chosen. The sample group was chosen by the class teachers. It was communicated to the teachers that the researcher aimed to include children from the lower and upper age ranges, a mix of both genders and children who had been availing of the pre-school service for the past nine months. The children chosen to take part included eight boys and nine girls. The children were aged between three years seven months and four years eight months. Other than these requirements non-probability sampling was employed (Muherji and Albon, 2010). The researcher acknowledges that this type of sampling requires human judgement in identifying research participants which can lead to sampling bias (Cottrell and McKenzie, 2011).

The sample was chosen from children based in two different pre-school classrooms but from the same service. It is important to note that although both groups were familiar with the researcher, the researcher was better acquainted with one group.

As previously mentioned, prior to carrying out the research consent from parents and assent from children was obtained. An informal meeting was held with the parents during daily drop-off/collection times. The details of the research study were explained to the parents and they had an opportunity to ask questions. They were encouraged to read over the information letter and consider their children’s participation. If they had any further questions the
researcher was available daily to answer them.\textsuperscript{2} In total permission was gathered from 17 children and their parents to participate in this study. All 17 participants that were approached to participate accepted the invitation. However, due to illness two boys were unable to attend the service while the research was being carried out. This resulted in 15 children participating in the research study. Due to the restricted time frame on the research process not all 40 children attending the service could be included in the study. The researcher acknowledges that due to the sample size the findings are not representative of the whole population (Mukherji and Albon, 2010). As the researcher was familiar with the group and had worked on facilitating similar experiences and strategies it was unnecessary to carry out a pilot study with this sample group.

3.6 Data Collection

Influenced by the Mosaic approach (Clark and Moss, 2001) the data was collected by both the researcher and the children using three different research tools; children’s photographs, focus groups and drawings. In consultation with the manager and staff in the setting, arrangements were made for flexibility within the daily routine so data collection could be facilitated with small groups of children; five groups of children with three participants in each group (Robert-Holmes, 2011). The different research tools were used within one week so the activities were meaningful and fresh in the children’s memories.

3.6.1 Children’s photographs

On the days when photographs were taken arrangements were made to ensure the researcher had time to facilitate the data collection. Before the children participated in the activity the researcher again explained the study to the children and gained their assent. While the researcher observed and listened to the children participating in the study, other members of

\textsuperscript{2} One parent questioned if the photographs would be taken at home as well as in pre-school. The researcher explained this study was focused on the pre-school environment. Another parent was interested in learning more about the reasons why the researcher choose this particular topic. The researcher explained the personal motivations and gap in this type of research in Ireland and benefits to the service as reasons why this subject area was chosen.
staff observed and engaged with the group of children who were not participating in the research\(^3\).

The children used a digital camera which was the property of the school and which the children were familiar with. Photographs were an effective research tool as they are appealing and engaging for children, they also provided a tangible strategy for discussing abstract emotions such as happiness (Mukherji and Albon, 2010).

Children were reminded that the focus of the photographs were of things that made them happy in pre-school. Other than reminding the children of this the researcher adopted a “passive role” and listened and observed as the children selected images to photograph. Children were informed that they could take up to 10 photographs; this required the children to think carefully about the images they would take. Children were free to move around within the service to take photographs.

After they had taken their photographs, the researcher reviewed the photos with the children. Reviewing the photographs, as well as close observation and listening was key. This provided an opportunity for the children to explain the significance of certain photos and minimised inaccurate interpretations by the researcher. It also allowed the children to filter through any photos which may have been taken in error when using the camera (Harcourt et al., 2011). After revisiting the photographs the participant was invited to take part in a focus group the next day.

**3.6.2 Focus Groups**

In preparation for the focus group a small brightly decorated library room was booked which was familiar to the children, it was suitably located within the school building and offered minimal distractions, interruptions or background noise. Arrangements were made with the class teachers for the most convenient periods to carry out the focus groups. Each child participated in one focus group. The researcher facilitated five focus groups in total, with three children in each group. A voice recorder was introduced to the children and the researcher clarified that it was okay to record their voices so that she could remember what they were going to talk about.

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\(^3\) As part of the HighScope daily routine the children are divided up into different groups and partake in different activities based on their interests. The children who were not taking part in the research were engaged in activities with other members of staff and this would be in keeping with standard practice in the service.
A variety of developmentally appropriate methods were used during the focus group. A puppet was used as a prop to engage the children. This technique was used to help the children feel comfortable, as a puppet can allow thoughts to be discussed in the third person (Palaiologou, 2012). It also assisted in developing a more level power balance between the adult and the children. Questions or guiding statements which were used were open-ended to prompt discussion with the children and allow for a range of possible answers (Appendix F).

Photographs which the children had taken the previous day were also used. The images which each child took had been printed and were compiled into a small book unique to each child. Children then had the opportunity to choose which photos they wished to discuss. This afforded a greater sense of control to the children (Roberts-Holmes, 2011; Didilica, 2012).

A Face Scale was also used to assess the children’s self-perception of their happiness and offered a visual aid which could open discussion. It was based on a Likert-type scale which has five faces, arranged in a horizontal line. The faces varied from very unhappy to very happy (Appendix G; Holder and Coleman, 2007). The variety of methods used during the focus groups assisted the children’s engagement and interest.

As facilitator of the groups the researcher aimed to remain objective while also ensuring that each participant had an opportunity to be heard. Ensuring children were comfortable and happy to be involved required sensitivity and flexibility from the facilitator (Green and Hogan, 2005). The facilitator was also aware of “group think”, where individuals could be strongly influenced by others in the group. To alleviate this, the researcher encouraged and recognised the importance of everyone having their own opinion and not responding over enthusiastically to certain children or statements (Roberts-Holms, 2011). Once the focus groups had been completed the researcher transcribed the collected data (Appendix H).

3.6.3 Drawing Activity

The final method of data collection used was a drawing activity. This provided an alternative means of communication for children to express their views (Einarsdottir, Dockett and Perry, 2009). Robert-Holms (2011) identified drawing as an effective method of data collection as it is a powerful means through which children represent their feelings. The children were asked to think of a time they felt happy in pre-school or of things which would
make them happy in pre-school. Blank white sheets of paper, pencils and markers were provided for the children to use during the drawing activity.

During the drawing activity the children were engaging in conversations. This was important as the emphasis was on the process and the narratives provided by the children and not on the interpretation of the finished products (Einarsdottir et al., 2009). The children’s verbal discussions provided increased validity to the data (Mukherji and Albon, 2010). It is worth noting that the researcher was aware that questioning children’s artwork can cause anxiety for some children, for this reason the researcher commented on drawings without directly asking the children to explain their work (Einarsdottir et al., 2009).

3.7 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was carried out by the researcher as this was best suited to the qualitative methods used. The data collected was reviewed several times so the researcher was familiar with it (MacNaughton and Hughes, 2009).

A basic coding system was developed highlighting broad themes and different topics emerging from the data (Robert-Holmes, 2011). Initially data from the three methods were gathered and analysed separately. Following this the emerging themes were compared and analysed across the different domains. Integrating all three methods of data collection provided increased validity to the findings (Robert-Holmes, 2011).

The researcher had to be careful when analysing the data. There is a danger when interpreting children’s meaning to make assumptions; children often do not have the power to contradict findings (Alderson and Morrow, 2011). For this reason throughout the research the children had a key role in analysing the data, through discussions they provided meaning and interpretation of the data collected (Harcourt et al., 2011; Clark and Moss, 2005). The researcher was aware of her own opinions and every effort was made to analyse the data with scientific honesty and keep the researchers influence to a minimum (Mukherji and Albon, 2010).
3.8 Conclusion

The aim of the research was to provide children with a voice in relation to their pre-school experiences. A strengths based methodology was adopted to identify the factors which contributed to children’s happiness in pre-school. An adaptation of the Mosaic approach was used as this qualitative approach was justified as a means for achieving the research objectives. The approaches included photographs, focus groups and drawing activities. Ethical issues were considered and were at the forefront of the research process. The data obtained from the methods was transcribed, coded and analysed and the findings are presented in Chapter four.
CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

This study aimed to promote children’s rights by exploring their perception of happiness and the factors contributing to their happiness in pre-school. This chapter details the findings which emerged from using an adaptation of the Mosaic approach to research. It focused on the use of photographs, focus groups and drawings with pre-school children. These approaches provide opportunities for children’s voices to be heard and provide greater insight into how they experience their ECCE setting. The average age of the participants was four years and one month, they had been attending the pre-school for nine months and the group comprised of six boys and nine girls. Themes presented in this chapter were identified as they were repetitive and recurring regularly across the various data collection domains (Ryan and Bernard, 2003).

4.2 Defining Happiness

This section provides insight into the children’s perception of happiness. During the focus groups a puppet was introduced to the children (see Appendix F). The children were asked if they could help by telling the puppet what happiness meant as she did not understand. Also during the focus groups the children commented on photographs they had taken which represented happiness for them in pre-school. Finally, the children expressed feelings of happiness by participating in a drawing activity. The data collected from the children’s responses were divided into the following sub themes as interpreted by the researcher; physical features, emotional well-being, familial relations and comedic influences. The children’s definitions of happiness give us a greater insight into how these children think about the concept of happiness. It also demonstrates that pre-school children can have an in-depth understanding of happiness and extends our knowledge on how happiness is experienced by children.
4.2.1 Physical Features

Six of the fifteen children commented that happiness was connected with physically observable features of an individual. Brad suggested happiness is ‘when you have a smile on your face.’ When commenting on Figure 4.1 Collin linked facial expressions with happiness, he commented ‘this one is big smiling and see she’s happy.’ This suggests that for participants, facial expression was a strong determining factor in their perception of happiness. Poppy explained happiness was related to displays of affection. She commended ‘it means you’re happy face when someone hugs you... I think it’s getting a big kiss.’

Figure 4.1- Smiling

4.2.2 Emotional well-being

The data indicated that 6 of the 15 participants defined happiness according the influence it has on one’s emotional disposition. Collin commented happiness ‘means you’re excited.’ Children defined happiness as having positive effects on overall temperament. Lola acknowledged ‘Happy is when you feel good.’ While Bernie compared the difference between feeling happy and sad saying ‘Yeah you feel good when you’re happy and you feel bad when you’re sad.’ Participants identified that happiness could be defined through social interactions with others. Steve suggested happiness is ‘when you’re so kind to a person’. Three other participants identified that co-operation was an important influence in evoking feelings of happiness. Arnold stated happiness was ‘when you’re so, so happy…when people share their toys with you.’
4.2.3 Familial relations

Interactions with parents were mentioned by three of the children in their definition of happiness. For example Steve commented ‘I feel happy ‘cos my Dad always tickles me.’ It was also identified that parents providing material items for children contributed to feelings of happiness. Beth remarked ‘When my mammy buys me Dora stuff and paint, it makes me too, too happy.’

Siblings emerged as a familial factor which influenced happiness. Three of the children made links between happiness and interactions with their siblings. Lucy stated ‘I feel happy when my brother plays chasing with me, that’s fun.’

4.2.4 Comedic influences

An emerging theme from children’s responses was the idea that comedy influenced feelings of happiness. Comedic falls or acting “silly” appeared to appeal to the children’s sense of humour. Collin remarked ‘It’s funny when people fall that makes me laugh, they go whoo, whoo, whooo!’ Concurrently Beth stated ‘When I’m watching tele and Daddy Pig slips over I laugh’ and further added ‘When something funny happens that makes me laugh, like when people sing daa-doo-daa-doo’. Following this remark the other children in the focus group erupted into laughter. This suggests that this type of comedic sense of humour can impact on children’s disposition and feelings of happiness.

4.3 Identity and Belonging

Identity and belonging emerged as a recurring theme from the data. Findings suggest being recognised as a unique individual and creating links between the pre-school and children’s other social environments contributed to the children’s happiness. From children’s photographs alone 9 out of the 15 were linked to the children’s sense of identity and belonging. This section has been divided into three subthemes. These are as follows; a sense of belonging within the setting, parental involvement and links with the community.
4.3.1 A sense of belonging within the setting

It was evident from the data that a sense of belonging within the pre-school contributed to the participants’ level of happiness. A sense of allegiance to the setting was identified as a contributing factor. While looking at a photo she had taken Tanya commented ‘I have a picture of my school. It’s my school you know.’ There also emerged a sense of elitism as participants mentioned certain features which identified them as a member of the pre-school community. Brad remarked ‘You’ll be happy ‘cos you get to wear a uniform in pre-school.’ Similarly Arnold commented when looking at Figure 4.2 ‘I have a photo of Steve’s uniform, look, his uniform!’

![Figure 4.2 - Uniform](image)

![Figure 4.3 - My Drawer](image)
Children signified that seeing themselves represented within the environment and having a sense of ownership was salient. Lola remarked ‘Look there’s a picture of my drawer (I took a picture of it) ‘cos I can put all my stuff in there.’ Commenting on Figure 4.3 Tanya acknowledged ‘This is a picture of my drawer. Where’s my symbol? Oh yeah, I can see green and that’s my symbol.’

Within the pre-school as a means of documenting children’s learning and development each child had a learning portfolio unique to them, called Aistear books. Five of the participants mentioned or photographed their Aistear book. The data would suggest that feelings of value and respect were gained by the children as they saw themselves positively represented in the environment. Commenting on Figure 4.4 Poppy stated ‘We read them [Aistear books] all the time, they have pictures of me and all of them and I made them.’ It seemed important that the Aistear books could be used a link between home and the pre-school environment. Brad supports this by saying ‘There are pictures in there of…things you didn’t do in school.’ The use of the Aistear books to record special events was also mentioned. ‘Look there it was my birthday in school. These photos stay in my Aistear book’ commented Lucy.

4.3.2 Partnerships with Families

Twenty percent of participants mentioned partnerships between their families and the pre-school as contributing to their happiness. Bernie commented on her drawing, Figure 4.5
saying ‘I like my teachers cos they come to my house.’ The notion of parents spending time in the pre-school was a recurrent theme. The pre-school where the research took place offered “special days” to all the families. Special days involved a member of the child’s family spending a day in pre-school. The children spoke positively about their experiences of their special days. Lucy remarked ‘It was so fun, my mammy got to play with me.’

While participants acknowledged special days were enjoyable due to the involvement of a family member, they also commented on special duties they had an opportunity to carry out. In describing her special day Bernie said ‘I got to call out the lunches on my special day. Oh and your mammy comes to school too.’ Similarly Poppy commented ‘I gave out the plates and then I do the lunches and my mammy came to school.’ These comments suggest that the idea of having a specific role within the daily routine appealed to the children.

4.3.3 A sense of community

The data collected signified that creating a sense of inclusion and connectedness with the community contributed to children’s happiness.

Participants indicated that they enjoyed links with the wider school community. The topic of “big school” arose in three out of five of the focus groups. Figure 4.6 shows the photograph taken by Arnold who commented, ‘I took a picture of the big school door. I liked seeing inside there.’ When asked if there was any activity she would like to do more in pre-school Bernie suggested ‘I’d like to go to big school more.’ The suggestion from the data is that the pre-school children enjoyed linking with the national school.
Establishing connections with the local community also emerged from the data as an experience which the children enjoyed. When asked if there was anything they would like to do more of in pre-school Larry suggested ‘Go to the church’ When looking at a photograph of a visit from the postman Harriet commented ‘Look I’ve Postman Joe and I was happy.’ She added while looking at another photo ‘And here’s Garda Eimear and it was fun the other day with her.’

4.4 Outdoor Learning Environment

The data indicated that enjoyment of the outdoors play was a factor which contributed to the children’s level of happiness.

The outdoor environment featured strongly in the data collection methods. Eleven out of 15 children chose to photograph the outdoor area.

Figure 4.7 - Caterpillar
The findings suggest participants would like to spend a greater amount of time outdoors. Commenting on Figure 4.7 Tanya remarked ‘I hide in the playground, ‘cos I don’t want to go inside cos I want to play some more outside.’ The data suggests children enjoyed spending time outside regardless of weather conditions, the children even offered suggestions of alternatives during “inappropriate” weather. Brad stated ‘I’m very happy when I get to go to the playground. Yeah and if the playground is wet or something…you can go on the bikes and trikes.’

![Figure 4.8 – Playground](image)

The outdoor area was acknowledged as playing a significant role as one of the items that made children happy about coming to pre-school. Harriet commented on figure 4.8 stating “I love going to school ‘cos the see-saw and the slide.’

The data also highlighted children’s attraction to natural environments. Commenting on Figure 4.9 Collin remarked ‘When someone takes a picture of trees that makes me feel happy.’ ‘Yeah I like grass’ agreed Sally.
During the drawing activity Beth, commenting on Figure 4.10, said ‘I like playing in the sky and in the trees and in the grass and with all the people and toys that make me happy’

Findings indicated that connecting to others and establishing secure relationships within the setting impacted on participants level of happiness. Relationships with peers and teachers emerged as two influential components.

4.5.1 Peer Relationships

Twelve out of 15 participants chose to photograph a peer. It was clear from the children’s comments that peer relations had a major influence on their level of happiness. Larry stated
‘I feel like this when someone pushed me <pointing to a sad face> and this when my friends play with me <pointing to a happy face>’ (See appendix X). Harriet echoed the importance of social interactions with peers by saying ‘I feel very, very happy in school ‘cos I get to see all my friends. My friends play with me ‘cos playing makes me happy.’

Learning rules of social norms came through as an important aspect of interactions with peers. Sally suggested that in order to make pre-school a happier place ‘we have to share and don’t make your friends sad no more ‘cos you have to really, really, share every toy.’ Brad commenting on Figure 4.11 said ’When my friends play with me I feel happy.’ One focus group however identified gender difference between peers. Both girls in the focus group agreed that in their ideal pre-school ‘Boys are not allowed…only girls’ Beth commented. ‘Only just girls, that’s all’ Sally concurred. None of the other focus group expressed a gender preference in describing their ideal pre-schools.

![Figure 4.11 - Peers](image)

### 4.5.2 Teacher Relationships

Ten out of 15 children chose to photograph their teachers. It is interesting to note that in one of the pre-school classrooms the children were more familiar with the researcher, these children chose to photograph the researcher. However, in the second pre-school classroom none of the children photographed the researcher but did photograph their own teachers. This would suggest that developing a strong meaningful relationship with a key adult influenced children’s happiness. Lucy commented ‘I’m very happy when I come to school ‘cos I get to see me teachers.’
Teacher characteristics which children referred to as contributing to their happiness were the qualities typically found in the informal relationships. Tanya remarked ‘I have a photo of my teachers ‘cos they play with me.’ Sally commented on the warm relationship she had with her teacher. When drawing Figure 4.12 she remarked ‘Look, there’s my teacher’s name ‘cos she’s my real, real, real, real, best friend.’

![Figure 4.12 – My best friend](image)

The level of choice afforded to the children seemed to contribute to their level of happiness. Lola stated that she enjoyed when ‘kids tell the teachers what they want to play with.’ When discussing what made him happy in pre-school, Brad remarked ‘you get to pick what to play with and that’s what makes it so much better.’

While participants identified that choice contributed to their happiness, others shared their desires for increased autonomy. Collin stated ‘In my pre-school I will be the teacher and I will take care of myself, all by mine self.’ Similarly Beth commenting on her ideal pre-school stated ‘Me and Sally can be the teachers there.’

### 4.6 Play

In every focus group the topic of play was mentioned as a contributing factor to children’s happiness. Tanya, pointing to a happy face commented ‘I feel like this in pre-school because
Participants identified many unique and individual preferences with regard to their favourite type of play. Much reference was given to areas that allowed for pretend play and areas which contained open ended materials. Sally remarked ‘I took a picture of the sand area, it’s nice to play in there…When I play in the house area it makes me feel happy.’ These types of play require time and space for children to refine their skills. Collin acknowledged children enjoy opportunities to investigate when he commented ‘I like this picture ‘cos this one is about Arnold and he’s, he’s exploring.’ William stated ‘Just give the kids some toys, that way then they’ll be happy.’ There was also a suggestion to rotate materials. Brad proposed ‘We could change some of the toys, we could put some out and bring different ones in.’

While freedom to explore was identified as being important 5 of the children also identified their enjoyment of games with rules. William suggested that in pre-school ‘There should be more fun, like, play more games.’ Children further identified that games with rules can be beneficial to their developmental needs. Steve suggested ‘I know we should do some training and exercise to get fit and get stronger.’ Arnold remarked ‘I think we need a football gym. You need an exercise bike and a football and you have to kick a football and do all the moves.’

### 4.6.1 Risky Play

Five of the children identified risky play\(^4\) as appealing to them. These views were expressed solely from boys. Arnold compared his favourite game to a war video game. Steve stated ‘my brother likes to play dangerous games and me too.’ When asked about his ideal pre-school, Collin remarked ‘I want to climb on the table and on the walls and up on the roof…cos I get higher and higher.’ He added that in the playground he also likes to climb and signified how adventurous play makes him feel. He commented on Figure 4.13 saying ‘I like the playground. I go up on the ropes. I put my hands and feet’s on it and I go up the robes and I’m like Superman.” Brad also remarked that he would like fire and to fly in pre-school.

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\(^4\) Risky play can be defined as free play which is thrilling and challenging for children and can involve some risk of physical injury (Sandseter, 2011).
4.7 Conclusion

This chapter has considered the data gathered, which was collated using qualitative research measures based on an adaptation of the Mosaic approach. The findings demonstrate that children can be valuable informants of their experiences within early year’s services. The next chapter will discuss the findings in relation to current research and literature.
Chapter Five

Discussion

5.1 Introduction

The main aim of this study was to explore pre-school children’s perception of happiness and ascertain the factors which contribute to children’s happiness within the pre-school environment. One of the primary intentions was to examine how young children could actively participate in empirical research. By including children as the research participants, it enabled them to have a say in matters which affect their daily experiences and fulfilled their right to be heard.

In this chapter the findings which emerged from the study will be explored in more depth. The findings will be discussed in relation to the current and contemporary literature in the field. Areas of discussion include; methodological approaches, perception of happiness and factors contributing to happiness in pre-school. The limitations and advantages to this study will also be addressed.

5.2 Methodological Approaches

The literature suggests that there is a gap in the early years sector with regard to studies which involve very young children as active subjects in research (Clark, 2007; Lansdown, 2005). This may be due to the social positioning of young children and the perceived barriers which researchers and early years practitioners feel they may encounter when involving children as research participants (George, 2009; Clark, 2007; Sheridan and Pramling Samuelsson, 2001). However, this study found that children can offer valuable contributions and precise insights into their daily experiences, particularly within early years services. This finding is in keeping with previous studies which have confirmed that children, even at a young age have the capabilities to express their opinions in a very astute manner and can participate as valuable informants in the evaluation of their everyday lives (Dupree et al., 2001; Farrell, Tayler and Tennent, 2004; Einarsdottir, 2005; Clark, 2007).

The methodological approach chosen was based on an adaptation of the Mosaic approach pioneered by Clark and Moss (2001). The data was collected through the use of photographs,
focus groups and drawing activities. This facilitated the involvement of children as active participants. The literature identifies that when children are invited to participate this can have a positive impact on their emotional well-being (Graham and Fitzgerald, 2011; Kennan et al., 2011). This study concurs with these findings. Children in this study acknowledged that they enjoyed opportunities to make decisions and display their autonomy. The researcher found that the methodological tools were developmentally appropriate for use with pre-school aged children. The strategies were adaptable to the pre-school curriculum and the process could act as a blueprint for practitioners wishing to provide increased opportunities for children’s participation. The concept of promoting increased participation is important if we wish to uphold the ethos embedded within the UNCRC. It is also in keeping with best practice within the ECCE sector as two salient documents; Siolta (CECDE, 2006) and Aistear (NCCA, 2009) recognise the need to promote and foster children’s rights.

5.3 Perceptions of Happiness

The researcher acknowledges that happiness is a complex domain. It can be difficult to define as perceptions of happiness are both individually and culturally constructed (Barblett and Maloney, 2010). However, findings from this study did identify common themes which emerged from the children’s responses with regard to what happiness meant to them.

Six of the participants associated the meaning of happiness with physical attributes. This finding is not surprising when you consider that research shows that infants even younger than 12 months have successfully been able to decode and understand facial expressions appropriately (Zuckerman and Przewuzman, 1979). Findings suggest that children, like adults rely on facial expression to receive a vast amount of information about an individual’s emotional state. The notion that children strongly depend on visual stimuli in order to identify emotions is concurrent with previous research (Camras, 1986). This finding is useful for early years practitioners as it reinforces the importance of visual communication as an effective means of conveying ideas to young children.

Findings from this study also identify that children understood happiness at a deeper level. Participants associated happiness with positive feelings such as “feeling good” and “excited”. This suggests that the pre-school children comprehended the impact that happiness has on their temperament and well-being. Children indicated that to them happiness was connected
to acts of reciprocity with their peers. This finding concurs with results from previous research where social relationships with peers and how we act towards others influence children’s level of happiness (Holder and Coleman, 2008; Ofsted, 2012).

In defining happiness 20 percent of children mentioned their families. Perhaps one of the reasons why families were strongly connected to the children’s understanding of happiness, may be due to the fact that children spent a greater proportion of their time with family members. Familial relationships are of significant importance to children at this age (Huebner, 1991). This is understandable considering a typical four year old pre-schooler spends just three percent of their waking time availing of the free pre-school year (McKeown, Haase and Pratschke, 2014). With this in mind it is imperative that pre-school services work in partnership with families in order to gain an in depth understanding of the children’s lives and support children’s developmental needs.

Interestingly it also emerged from the data that participants perceived comedic influences as being a contributing factor towards happiness. For young children laughter may be an obvious and easily recognisable sign of happiness. Research has shown that humour can assist children in information acquisition (Goldstein, 1993). These findings can assist early years practitioners in their pedagogy practices as they identify means of assisting children’s learning and promoting children’s happiness. This is concurrent with the belief that happier children find learning easier (UNICEF, 2003).

5.4 Factors contributing to happiness in pre-school

This study suggests that the pre-school children were valuable informants in providing insight into the factors which contributed to their happiness in pre-school. According to the findings this section has been sub-divided into four sections for discussion; identity and belonging, outdoor play, social relations and play.

5.4.1 Identity and Belonging

This study found that a strong sense of identity and belonging was a contributing factor to the children’s happiness within pre-school. This finding is in line with previous research in the area. O’Rourke and Cooper (2010) found that for children, belonging and happiness were closely connected. Similarly, to the present study Clark (2007) found that children frequently
made reference to personal markers within the environment as features which were appealing to them.

One of the recurrent talking points for children was their Aistear books. These learning journals provided a visual and written record of the children’s learning and development. Interpretation of this finding suggests that the Aistear books allowed children to see themselves positively reflected in the environment and this can help establish and promote positive identities (French, 2007). Documenting children’s learning in Irish pre-schools is largely up to the preferred method of the individual service. The findings of this study suggest that this method of documenting children’s development can support feelings of inclusion, security and happiness. The findings in this area also reflect Ofsted’s (2012) findings that for children happiness is largely connected with being comfortable in your own skin and satisfied with yourself.

Another finding from this study was that partnerships between the pre-school and families had a positive effect on children’s happiness. Participants commented that links made between families and the pre-school, such as home visits or special days, were enjoyed by the children. As previously mentioned this is likely to be linked to the importance of familial relationships for children at this age. Considering that parents are the primary carers and educators of their children they have an enormous impact on children’s perceptions of happiness. Findings suggest that communication between families and the pre-school have a positive effect on children’s emotional well-being. These findings reflect Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological theory, which suggests that links between the different microsystems in a child’s life can have beneficial effects on children’s development.

This study further reflects Bronfenbrenner’s theory in that participants expressed their enjoyment of experiences which linked with the National school and wider community. Forming communication links and partnerships with National schools has been recognised as best practice for pre-schools as it can greatly assist the transition from one setting to the next (Fabian and Dunlop, 2007). The pre-school in this study was on the same site as the National school which made the communication easier; however this could be problematic for other services.

Participants also identified their interest in extending their knowledge of the local community. This is similar to findings of the Aistear in Action initiative (NCCA and Early Childhood Ireland, 2013). Children’s interest in community involvement offers a platform to
facilitate children’s social engagement within the community, foster children’s well-being and enhance social capital (Farrell et al., 2004). Positive representations of children’s community from an early age may contribute to their sense of happiness by giving them a positive sense of who they are and where they come from. This can assist children in becoming emotionally strong and self-assured (NCCA, 2009).

5.4.2 Outdoor Learning Environment

This study found that the outdoor environment had a positive influence on the children’s happiness. Children commented on the playground, length of time spent outside and enjoying features of nature. Spending time outdoors appeared extremely appealing to participants of this study. There is a vast amount of research to concur with the findings of this study which identify that pre-school children enjoy spending time outdoors (Dupree et al., 2001; Farrell et al., 2004; Wilkinson, 2008; Einarsdottir, 2005). This is not surprising as children have a natural desire to move and enjoy open spaces (NCRC, 2006). The findings suggested that children would like to spend more time outdoors. Often children may not have the choice of whether or not to play outdoors. This can be due to ratio stipulations or even practitioner’s reluctance to spend time outside (Stephenson, 2002). However, with four out of five children in Ireland not meeting the guidelines for physical activity (Creed, 2014), practitioners need to recognise that outdoor play can enhance children’s emotional and physical well-being.

Participants remarked that features of the natural environment were appealing to them. According to research, this may be due to the fact that green areas can have a calming effect on children by reducing aggression and promoting happiness (Henley, 2010). Due to health and safety regulations, inappropriate weather conditions, lack of understanding about the importance of outdoor play and/or parental requests to keep children clean (Duffy, 2007) children in childcare settings may miss out on valuable opportunities to explore natural play environments and in turn opportunities to increase their level of happiness.

5.4.3 Social Relationships

Findings from this study concur with research which indicates that relationships with peers and key adults are a strong predictor of happiness (Holder and Coleman, 2008). Close connections and interactions with peers seemed to be a primary indicator of happiness. The importance of social relationships has been found to be a significant factor in children’s
happiness across many cultures (Einarsdottir, 2005; Ofsted, 2012). Research suggests that happiness and social relationships can have a bi-directional effect on each other. Holder and Coleman (2008) hypothesize that happiness promotes friendships and positive relationships may promote happiness. Findings propose that friendships can have both positive and negative effects on children’s happiness. Practitioners have a responsibility to support social relationships and assist children’s interactions with peers in constructive ways as this can have strong implications on children’s levels of happiness.

This study also found relationships with teachers had a role to play in children’s level of happiness. The research found that children enjoyed positive relationships with key adults and these were often informal teacher/child relationships based on play and friendship. This is contrary to previous findings where pre-school teachers’ main role was identified as teaching, handling conflicts or supervising as authority figures (Einarsdottir, 2005; Sheridan and Pramling Samuelsson, 2001). It is rather heartening that such close and warm relationships were identified between teachers and children. These close relationships may be due to the role adults adopted as play partners alongside the children. Sharing children’s play portrays to them that adults value their play experience (Wilkinson, 2008). The close bonds may also be due to the fact that children were offered choice with regard to certain aspects of the daily routine. This signifies that adults trust and respect children to make decisions with regard to their own play and learning. However, the children expressed opinions that they would enjoy increased autonomy with several participants commenting that in their ideal pre-school they would like to be the teachers. This suggests that the children still feel adults hold the greater balance of control.

5.4.4 Play

It is pleasing, but not surprising that this study identified play as a contributing factor to children’s happiness. Play is a natural, enjoyable and instinctive characteristic of childhood and a powerful context to facilitate children’s learning and development (Kernan, 2007; Wilkinson, 2008). In this study play was mentioned as a contributing factor to happiness in all of the focus groups. Participants specifically identified that they enjoyed participating in play situations which provided them with opportunities to use their imagination, be creative and manipulate materials. Children in this study gave similar responses to those in previous studies where imaginative play, creative play and play with open ended materials was most favoured by young children (Dupree et al., 2001; Einarsdottir, 2005; NCCA and Early
Childhood Ireland, 2013). These findings suggest that children need access to appropriate materials as well as time and freedom to explore and experiment. Often early year’s teachers can feel under pressure to reduce the amount of time children spend playing and instead redirect attention to activities which they feel assist children in reaching predetermined targets (Barblett and Maloney, 2011). This study suggests that we can promote children’s happiness through play. With this in mind, play and learning need to be recognised as two inseparable dimensions in pre-school pedagogy (Pramling Samuelsson and Johansson, 2006).

An interesting finding from the study was that 27 percent of participants expressed an enjoyment for playing games with rules. While children begin to play games with rules as infants, for example peek a boo, it is typically in middle childhood that they develop the logic and social way of thinking that allows these types of games to become most amusing (Wilkinson, 2008). In interpreting the findings it may be that games with rules were appealing to the children as they provided opportunities to affirm friendships, share experiences and met their developing social and intellectual needs (Wilkinson, 2008). Further to this, when adults engage with children in games with rules it balances the position of power and they both participate on equal grounds (Sheridan and Pramling Samuelsson, 2001). Introducing opportunities for these types of games can facilitate children’s cognitive and emotional development.

It was interesting to find that five of the participants identified that risky play contributes to their happiness. All the participants who acknowledged this were male, suggesting that this type of play was most appealing to the boys in the study. The children’s enjoyment of risky play is similar to research carried out by Coster and Gleeve (2008) who found that children considered this type of play to be fun, enjoyable, thrilling and assisted in promoting pride and self-confidence. However, the idea of risky play can sound contradictory to practitioners’ role in caring for children and providing safe environments. Abiding to the pre-school regulations and being compliant with health and safety requirements can often be an obstacle for pre-school services who wish to create a more challenging environment for children (O’Rourke, 2011). Sandseter (2011) suggests that an exaggerated focus on safety can be problematic as it can limit children’s potential opportunities for risky play. This finding identifies that, children in this study associate risky play with feelings of happiness. O’Donnell (2011) suggests that to facilitate children’s desire for challenging environments, pre-schools can carry out a risk assessment to determine whether the benefits to development are greater than the risks of danger.
5.5 Limitations

The current research provides an insight into the perceptions and factors which contribute to happiness of children in their pre-school environment in an urban area in Dublin, Ireland. However, it is necessary to acknowledge that there are limitations to this study. First of all, happiness is difficult to define. Due to this the perceptions and factors which the participants identified as contributing towards their happiness are based on subjective measures and individual opinions. The study sample is small, comprising of 15 participants. The sample was also representative of a mono cultural group and based on findings from one pre-school service based in a DEIS primary-school in urban Dublin. This restricts generalisation of the findings. The time frame restricted the implementation of other techniques included in the Mosaic approach, including input from practitioners and parents. This would be beneficial to give a more rounded picture of the factors which contribute to children’s happiness and would have allowed for comparisons between children’s and adults views. However, this study does provide insightful information on how children experience their ECCE service as little research has previously been carried out with pre-school children in this type of setting in Ireland. It also extends our knowledge of how children understand happiness and the factors that contribute to it in the ECCE setting.

5.6 Conclusion

This chapter has examined the findings of this study in relation to the methodological technique used, children’s perception of happiness and the factors which contribute to children’s happiness within the pre-school environment. It has also highlighted the limitations of this study. In the next chapter, conclusions will be drawn and recommendations put forward.
Chapter Six
Conclusions and Recommendations

6.1 Introduction

The aim of this study was to explore pre-school children’s perception of happiness and the factors which contribute to their happiness in their pre-school environment. One of the primary purposes was to involve children as active agents in the research process. An emphasis was placed on the use of positive psychology as the study was focused on the factors which contributed to children’s happiness.

6.2 Conclusions

The primary intention of this study was to ascertain from the children what their perceptions of happiness were and the factors contributing to happiness in their pre-school environment. The study demonstrated how children could effectively participate as active subjects in empirical research. These findings support previous studies which identify children can offer researchers deeper insight into their everyday lives (Einarsdottir, 2005; Clark, 2007). It also found that the children enjoyed having choices in matters which affect them.

The methodological approach used was an adaptation of the Mosaic approach which included the use of photographs, focus groups and drawing activities (Clark and Moss, 2001). One of the key ingredients of the study was the utilisation of developmentally appropriate modes of communication which allowed children to demonstrate their capabilities as competent communicators. This study offers a blueprint for early years practitioners as it demonstrates how children can actively participate in the evaluation of their ECCE environment.

The present study placed a central focus on happiness. The researcher identified that little is known about the factors contributing to children’s happiness (O’Rourke and Cooper, 2010). It is important to acknowledge that happiness is a subjective emotion and the research was carried out in one pre-school and is embedded in the context of the children’s experiences.

It was apparent from the research that although happiness is a difficult to define term, even children at a young age were capable of providing an in depth understanding of what happiness meant to them. While the children did rely on visual stimuli as a means of
identifying happiness, they went further and identified underlying reasons for happiness. It was interpreted from the research that pre-school children associated happiness with positive emotions, interactions with other, particularly family members and comedic experiences.

This study honed in on the children’s happiness specifically within the pre-school environment. The study found that a sense of identity and belonging within the service was important for the children. Children often referred to personal markers and learning journals which were unique to their individual personalities. Similarly, partnerships with families and links with the community were identified as an influential factor of children’s happiness. However, the use of such pedagogical strategies, while encouraged by early years policies (CECDE, 2006; NCCA, 2009), are implemented at the discretion and interpretation of the early years practitioner.

Children in the study made reference to their interest in nature and a desire to spend a greater amount of time outdoors. While outdoor play has been identified as beneficial for children’s physical development (Creed, 2014) this study also found it can be a contributing factor to children’s emotional well-being.

Participants in the study indicated that for them, feelings of happiness in pre-school were closely associated with social relationships with peers and teachers. Interactions with peers appeared to be significantly important to children’s level of happiness. Interestingly, children identified quite informal relationships with teachers, that were based on friendship, as a contributing factor to happiness. Some of the children highlighted that they would enjoy increased autonomy within the pre-school environment. This can be a daunting thought for early years practitioners. However, providing opportunities for decision making and choices in line with children’s age and development can be empowering and fulfilling and could contribute towards children’s feeling of happiness (Lansdown, 2005; Miller, 2009).

Play emerged as an important contributing factor to children’s happiness. Children identified their enjoyment of play opportunities such as creative and imaginative play which can be facilitated by open ended materials and freedom to explore. However, it was interesting to discover that the children also indicated their enjoyment of games with rules and risky play. Risky play in pre-school is a hot topic of discussion. This is due to the fact that although the benefits of this type of play are recognised by many, abiding to health and safety regulations may restrict children’s access to risky play (O’Rourke, 2011).
The present study was exploratory in nature. Findings are based on the subjective opinions of one group of children. The qualitative approach used allowed the researcher to gain an insight into the children’s everyday experiences as primary stakeholders of their pre-school service. It extended our understanding of how children think about happiness and its contributing factors.

6.3 Recommendations

Based on the present research study and findings the following recommendations are aimed at furthering the important position of children within early years settings, contributing to our understanding of children’s experiences within early years services and enhancing our understanding of how we can promote children’s happiness within early years services.

1. Further research to examine children’s understanding of happiness and the factors contributing to children happiness in pre-schools from alternative geographical perspectives and wider sample groups in Ireland.

2. Dissemination of the recent findings of this study to early years practitioners, (i) the sharing of the methodological approach as a blueprint for increasing children’s participation and (ii) identifying how children can contribute in the evaluation of their early years environment.

3. Dissemination of the current findings on factors which contribute to children’s happiness to early years providers and encourage reflective practice around the themes highlighted.

4. Increased recognition of children as citizen here and now. Increased opportunities for children’s voices to be heard in qualitative research, particularly pre-school aged children.
References


Appendix A: Information Letter for Parents

Dear Parents,

This academic year 2013-2014 I will be completing my studies for a Masters in child, family and community studies, in Dublin Institute of Technology, Mountjoy Square, Dublin. The research area I have chosen for my dissertation is exploring children’s perception of happiness the factors which make children happy in pre-school.

I am interested in gaining the children’s insights into their pre-school experiences and what they enjoy about pre-school. To gather this information will require the children becoming the main research participants. I plan to gain the children’s perspectives by using a Mosaic approach to research. This approach has been developed especially for use with young children so that children’s voices can be heard on matters which affect their daily lives. The type of research tools used includes cameras, focus groups and drawings. The research may use quotes from the children and focus groups will be recorded to remember what children said, children’s drawings may also feature in the finished thesis. However, the children and service will never be named in the study. All the data collected will remain confidential and will not be used for any other research project. Photographs which children take containing individuals will not be displayed in the thesis or they will be edited to ensure anonymity.

Involvement in the research study is completely voluntary. Participants may withdraw from the study at any stage. The research activities will be carried out within the pre-school session. The rationale of the study will be explained to the children and they will be aware that they are not obliged to take part in these activities.

When this thesis is completed, it is hoped that the study will provide important information on the experiences the children enjoy most about pre-school and hence we will be able to improve the quality of the service by ensuring that the children’s views are represented in our approach.

If you wish to speak to me regarding your child’s participation in the study or require any further information I will be happy to arrange a meeting with you. If you have any concerns about the study and wish to contact an independent person, my research supervisor Dr. Nicola Hughes can be contacted at nicola.hughes@dit.ie. If you are happy for your child to participate in the research I would appreciate if you could fill in the enclosed consent form and return it to me as soon as possible.

Yours sincerely,

____________________________

Donna Tobin

Pre-school teacher
Appendix B: Parental Consent Forms

Parental Consent Form

**Research Topic:** Children’s Right to be heard: exploring children’s perceptions of happiness in the pre-school environment.

**Researcher’s Name:** Donna Tobin  
**Faculty:** DIT, Mountjoy Square.

To be completed by the child’s parent/guardian

Child’s Name: ______________________________

1. Have you been fully informed/read the information sheet about this study?  YES/NO
2. Have you had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study?  YES/NO
3. Have you received satisfactory answers to all your questions?  YES/NO

4. Do you understand that you are free to withdraw from this study?
   • at any time  
   • without giving a reason for withdrawing  
   • without affecting your future relationship with the Institute  YES/NO

5. Do you agree to take part in this study the results of which are likely to be published?  YES/NO

6. Have you been informed that this consent form shall be kept in the confidence of the researcher?  YES/NO

Signed:_____________________________  Date: ____________________________

Name in Block Letters: ____________________________________________________

Signature of Researcher: _______________  Date:_____________________________
Parental Consent Form Agreement

I am happy for my child to participate in the research project titled “Children’s Right to be heard: exploring children’s perception of happiness in the pre-school environment.” I understand that the research will be carried out by Donna Tobin and the dissertation submitted to DIT, Mountjoy Square. I have been fully informed and read the information sheet about the study. I have had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss the project. I have received satisfactory answers to all my questions. I understand that I am free to withdraw my child from the study at any time without giving a reason for withdrawal and I understand this will not affect my future relationship with the service. I agree for my child to take part in this study and understand that the results of this study may be published. I have been informed that this consent form shall be kept in the confidence of the researcher.

I have read this consent form, and I agree to give permission for my child to participate in the study.

__________________________________________  ____________________
Printed Name of Child

__________________________________________
Printed Name of Parent or Guardian

__________________________________________  ____________
Signature of Parent or Guardian  Date

__________________________________________
Signature of Researcher  Date
Appendix C: Child Assent Form

Child Assent Form

Research Topic: Children’s Right to be heard: Exploring children’s perceptions of happiness in the pre-school environment.

Researcher: Donna Tobin

Child’s name: ____________________________

1. Verbal explanation to the child and asking for the child’s verbal assent

I would like to find out what the children in our pre-school like to do in pre-school and what makes them feel happy. If you would like to help me, you can take some photographs with the camera of things that are important to you in pre-school or things, people or places in pre-school which make you feel good. I would like to share the photos you take with my teachers and our friends. If you don’t want to take photos anymore, you just let me know.

Would you like to take some photographs?

Witness Affirmation: The above verbal explanation was given to the child, and the child verbally agreed to the above request.

Signature of Witness: __________________ Date: ____________

2. Verbal explanation to the child and asking for the child’s verbal assent

I have printed the photographs that you took yesterday of things which make you happy in pre-school. I would like to show them to you and your friends. Would you like to look at the photographs and talk with me and your friends about why these pictures are important to you? I will be using a voice recorder to record your voices so I can remember everything we talk about is that okay? If you at any time you don’t want to talk about these photographs I will bring you back to your classroom.

Witness Affirmation: The above verbal explanation was given to the child, and the child verbally agreed to the above request.

Signature of Witness: __________________ Date: ____________

3. Verbal explanation to the child and asking for the child’s verbal assent

I would like you to use some markers or pencils to show me or talk about things that make you feel happy in pre-school. You can draw a picture or use the materials as you wish. You can talk about what you are drawing/making if you like. Or you don’t have to talk about them if you would prefer not to. Would you like to make a picture? Is it ok if I share your creation with my teacher and other friends in college?

Witness Affirmation: The above verbal explanation was given to the child, and the child verbally agreed to the above request.

Signature of Witness: __________________ Date: ____________

63
Appendix D: Children’s Information Sheet

Information Sheet for Children

I go to college. Does anyone know what college is?

In college I am doing lots of work and I want to find out what makes you feel happy in pre-school. I am very interested in what you boys and girls can tell me and I want to listen to what you have to say. In my bag I have some things which will help me while to remember what makes you feel happy in pre-school.

I have a notebook, a pen, a camera, colouring pencils, play dough and a voice recording.

I will use the notebook to write down what you tell me.

The camera is for you to take photographs of things which make you feel happy.

The voice recorder is to record your voices so that I can listen to our conversation later on. Is that okay?

The pencils and markers are for you to create things with.

Is it okay if I show the pictures, photographs and creations to my teacher in college and my other friends?

(Harcourt & Conroy (2011)
Appendix E: Declaration of Research Ethics and/or Assessment of Risk.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title of the proposed project:</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Children’s Right to be heard: Exploring children’s perception of happiness in the pre-school environment</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Applicant Details (Use Block Capitals):</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Surname: TOBIN</td>
<td>Forename: DONNA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Title: MS.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Present appointment: Student: M.A. Child, Family and Community Studies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| School/Department/Centre: DIT Mountjoy Square | Faculty: DIT Mountjoy Square |  |
| Work Tel: [Redacted] | Fax: [Redacted] |  |
| E-mail: [Redacted] |  |  |

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<th>Other departments/organisations/individuals involved:</th>
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<th>Source of Funding:</th>
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Has the current research project already received approval from another research ethics committee? N/A If so, please enclose relevant information and documentation

**Generic Projects:**

Researchers may receive approval for a cluster of similar research activity by approval of a *generic protocol* to cover repetitive methodologies or activities. A *generic protocol* should comprise a covering letter setting out the circumstances and rationale for generic approval, outlining the procedures to be followed in all such projects, in addition to completion of the appropriate appendices.

If this project is part of a cluster of research with similar methodology, please tick here and submit a generic protocol to cover all such projects. ☑
**Insurance**

Normally, DIT insurance covers standard research activity, including fieldtrips. Are you aware of any unusual or exceptional risks or insurance issues to which DIT’s insurance company should be alerted? If so, please list the issues:

Please note that no contract should be entered into for clinical/medical (including drug testing) or surgical trials/tests on any human subject until written confirmation has been received from the DIT’s insurers that the relevant insurance cover is in place.

Are you or any members of the research team a member of any organisation that provides professional indemnity insurance?  

No

Name of the organisation: N/A

Please provide written confirmation of the terms of insurance cover.

**Professional Code of Conduct**

Please reference, if appropriate, the Code of Ethical Conduct produced by your relevant professional organization(s), which also informs your research.

*Please note that: Where those requirements conflict with DIT requirements, the latter will normally be followed. In all such circumstances, please contact the Office of Research Ethics for clarification.*

All researchers must confirm with the Data Protection Act 1988. Please consult the DIT Data Protection Officer for advice.
IDENTIFICATION OF ETHICAL ISSUES AND/OR RISK

Do any of the following ethical issues or risks apply in your research? If so, tick all box(es) which apply and complete the relevant Appendix, which can be downloaded from http://www.dit.ie/DIT/graduate/ethics/index.html

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<th>Yes</th>
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<th>Does your research involve…</th>
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<td>X</td>
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<td>Impact on human subject(s) and/or the researcher(s) [Appendix 1]</td>
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<td>Consent and advice form given to subjects prior to their participation in the research [Appendix 2]</td>
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<td>Consent form for research involving ‘less powerful’ subjects or those under 18 years [Appendix 3]</td>
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<td>Conflict of interest [Appendix 4]</td>
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<td>Drugs and Medical Devices [Appendix 5]</td>
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<td>Animal Welfare [Appendix 8]</td>
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<td>General Risk Assessment [Appendix 9]</td>
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<td>Hazardous Chemical Risk Assessment [Appendix 10]</td>
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<td>Biological Agents Risk Assessment [Appendix 11]</td>
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<td>Work involving Genetically Modified Organisms Risk Assessment [Appendix 12]</td>
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<td>X</td>
<td>Field Work Risk Assessment [Appendix 13]</td>
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If other risk and/or ethical issues are identified please provide a written submission which outlines the issues and the manner in which they are being addressed.

Please tick the appropriate box below

**No, there are no** ethical issues and/or risks involved in your research project, please tick here, and sign the declaration on page 5.

**Yes, there are ethical** issues and/or risks involved in your research, please tick here and complete the appropriate forms identified above.
In accordance with the Principles of the Declaration of Helsinki and DIT Principles and Procedures, I declare that the information provided in this form is true to the best of my knowledge and judgement.

I will advise the DIT Research Ethics Committee of any adverse or unforeseen circumstances or changes in the research which might concern or affect any ethical issues or risks, including if the project fails to start or is abandoned.

Signature of applicant 1: _Donna Tobin_

(An electronic signature is permissible)
CONSENT FORM

FOR RESEARCH INVOLVING ‘LESS POWERFUL’ SUBJECTS OR THOSE UNDER 18 YRS

Researcher’s Name: DONNA TOBIN

(use block capitals) Title: MS

Faculty/School/Department:

DIT, MOUNTJOY SQUARE.

Title of Study:

Children’s Right to be Heard: Exploring children’s perception of happiness in the pre-school environment

4.1 In what way, if any does the proposed study benefit the individual subject?

This research study recognises children’s rights to have their voice heard in matters which affect their everyday lives. It seeks to explore the factors which contribute to children’s happiness in the pre-school environment so as these can be promoted to meet children’s needs.

4.2 Has parent’s/guardian’s consent to be obtained? YES

If Yes, in what form - verbal, written, witnessed, etc. – will consent be obtained. Please attach a copy of the relevant forms.

Written Consent Form

4.3 Will the child’s or young person’s assent be sought? YES

4.4 Are the risks of the investigation judged to be minimal or nil? YES

Researcher’s Signature ___________________ Title_______________
Appendix F: Guiding Questions for Focus Group

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Agenda</th>
<th>Information/Questions</th>
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| Welcome | Greeting
          Housekeeping
          Explain how the children can help and what’s expected of them
          Explain ethical considerations
          Reiterate right to remove themselves from the study at any time and return to classroom. |

**Discussion. Guiding questions.**

- Introduce Selyna (puppet) to the children: explain that Selyna is sad. She’d like to be happy but she’s not sure what happy means. I wonder if you could help by telling Selyna what happy means?

- Selyna is going to join a pre-school soon but she’s feeling a little nervous. I wonder if you could help Selyna feel better by telling her some the things that make you feel happy in pre-school.

- Do you remember the photographs you took yesterday? Would you like to have a look at them and maybe you could show some of them to Selyna.

- I have some pictures of faces, they all look different. Will you look at these faces and show Selyna how you feel when you come to pre-school.

- I wonder if you could create your very own pre-school what would it be like?

- Is there anything you would like to do more of in pre-school?

| Close    | Thank participants for their time. Invite them to join in a drawing activity. Remind them of their right to participate only if they wish to. |
Appendix G: Likert Face scale of Emotions

![Likert Face scale](image_url)
Appendix H: Transcription from Focus Group 3

Focus Group Number: 3  Participants: Brad, Lucy and Larry
Date: 28 May 2014  Transcribed by: Donna Tobin

Facilitator: This is my friend, the one that I was telling you about, her name is Selyna. But Selyna looks a bit sad. (Donna to puppet) How are you feeling Selyna. (Selyna wisper in Donna’s ear.) Oh Selyna told me she’d like to be happy but she doesn’t know what happy means. I wonder could you explain to Selyna what happy means?

Brad: Agh, like, when you have a smile on your face.

Facilitator: Oh so when you have smile on your face if you feel happy.

Lucy: I know, like when my brother plays chasing with me.

Facilitator: When your brother plays chasing with you.

Lucy: Yeah.

Brad: Yeah and my brother lets me have a turn of his Xbox.

Facilitator: When you’re brother lets you play with his Xbox.

Brad: Yeah, he has like, Lego movie and master builder.

Lucy: My brother has the Lego movie too.

Larry: Spiderman makes me feel happy.

Facilitator: Spiderman makes you feel happy Larry.

Larry: Yeah.

Facilitator: Selyna, how are you feeling now? (Selyna whispers in Donna’s ear) Oh Selyna said she is feeling a little bit nervous. Shall we find out if we can help?

Brad: Yeah.

Lucy: I will help.

Larry: Yeah

Facilitator: Selyna told me that she’s going to pre-school soon but she doesn’t know what it’s going to be like and she was wondering if you could tell her about some of things in pre-school that make you feel happy.
Brad: You’ll be happy cos you get to wear a uniform.

Facilitator: Oh you get to wear a uniform.

Lucy: And I get to see all my friends.

Facilitator: Oh you get to see all your friends in pre-school.

Brad: And sometimes we have a day off. On my first day off I’m gonna sleep in bed for a whole day because my leg is sore. Look. (Pulls up tracksuit leg to show other bruise on his knee)

Facilitator: Oh that does look sore. You might need to take a rest for that alright.

Brad: Yeah

Facilitator: I have an idea of how we could show Selyna some happy things from pre-school. Boys and girls do you remember yesterday when you took some photos of the things that make you happy in pre-school?

Lucy: Yeah that was just the other day.

Facilitator: Well I printed them off for you and I have them here for you.

Brad: Oh yeah, that was like yesterday.

Facilitator: Hands each child their booklet of photographs they took. Children begin flicking through photographs.

Larry: That’s you. (Holding up a photo of facilitator).

Facilitator: You took a picture of your teachers. I wondering is there any of the photos you want to show or tell Selyna about?

Larry: (Flicks through photographs) There’s the house area. (Flicks again) And Annie. I want to see Brad’s pictures.

Brad: Here’s my symbol. (Looks more closely at the photograph.) Oh yeah where was that? (Pushing photo towards facilitator)

Facilitator: I see your symbol but I’m not sure is that was your drawer?

Brad: Nope.

Facilitator: Maybe your Aistear book?

Brad: Yeah, it’s my Aistear book!

Facilitator: I’m not sure if Selyna knows about your Aistear books.
Brad: There are pictures in there, in your Aistear book, of even things, like, things you didn’t even do in school in there.

Facilitator: So there’s pictures in your Aistear book of things you do when you’re not in school.

Brad: Yeah. They are always in the book area, where you read books cos it helps you to read your Aistear book.

Facilitator: Oh do you think that’s important?

Brad: Yeah, ‘cos, agh, so you know your letters when you go to big school and there is a writing area and sometimes you can watch tele.

Facilitator: And do you think it’s good to watch tele.

Brad: Yeah my brother have a, a, a movie collection and a book collection. (Looks through photographs). Oh and you can play shop-keepers in school. That is fun.

Facilitator: Playing shop-keepers is fun?

Brad: Yeah and you can take the post letters in there too. And you get to play in the playground.

Larry: I took a picture of the playground too.

Facilitator: Oh Selyna is wondering what why you took a photo of the playground.

Brad: You get to play in it if it’s sunny and if it doesn’t rain for like five minutes. Can I write my name on this. (Holding up photos.)

Larry: Can I write my name too?

Facilitator: Yes, you can.

Brad: Will I write it on the back?

Facilitator: Yeah, you could write it on the back.

Lucy: My photo is my mam. She came to school?

Facilitator: I wonder when that was?

Lucy: That was my Special day. (Looks at photograph) Yeah, it was so fun.

Facilitator: I wonder does Selyna know about Special days?

Lucy: My mam got to play with me.

Facilitator: Your mam got to play with you?

Lucy: Yeah.
Larry: Hey, she (Selyna) said ‘Hiya’ to me.

Facilitator: She said “Hiya”.

Larry: Yeah, her did.

Lucy: (Looking through photos) That’s all my friends in the sand area.

Facilitator: You took a photo of the sand area.

Lucy: Yeah ‘cos you can make sandcastles.

Facilitator: You make sand castles in there.

Lucy: Yeah, and it was my birthday in school too. These books stay in my Aistear book in the middle of my class.

Facilitator: Oh yes, your Aistear book?

Lucy: Yeah, I have an Aistear book.

Larry: I’ve a dinosaur in my Aistear book.

Lucy: And there’s you (holding up a photo of the facilitator).

Facilitator: Oh, your teacher?

Lucy: Yeah. I can take photos of them. And when the teachers play with all the kids, that’s funny. And when they’re in the art area that is so fun.

Facilitator: I wonder what is so fun about it.

Lucy: We get to paint an all.

Brad: You get to pick what to play with and that’s what makes it so much better.

Facilitator: I wonder is there anything else that can make it better.

Brad: Having lunch and playing in the playground and playing inside.

Facilitator: So playing inside and playing outside and having lunch is fun?

Brad: Yeah, and if like the playground is wet or something and it’s not raining in that other place you know, that other place outside, you can go on the bikes and trikes.

Facilitator: So you can go on the bikes and trikes too?

Brad: Yeah.

Facilitator: Selyna is interested in how you feel every day when you come to preschool. She brought along these pictures of face so you could show her. (Present’s Likert style face scale to participants).
Lucy: (pointing to smiley face) I feel very happy because I get to see my teachers.

Brad: Sometimes I feel like this (points at very happy face). And sometimes I feel like this (points at very sad face) when I fall or something. But I’m very happy when I get to go to the playground.

Larry: I feel like this (points to sad face) when someone pushed me and (pointing at very happy face) this one when my friends play with me.

Facilitator: Selyna is wondering if you had your very own preschool what might it be like?

Brad: I would want fire and maybe to flying.

Lucy: Mine would have lasers. So if someone came into my classroom the lasers would turn on and kill them.

Facilitator: Why, do you think people shouldn’t go in your classroom?

Lucy: Yeah, because they are not allowed. ‘Cos some robbers might try to get in and steal all the kids’ stuff.

Facilitator: So you think it’s important to keep all our stuff safe.

Larry: I would have Fireman Sam to keep me safe.

Brad: Yeah, so if you have a fire from the lasers we would have Fireman Sam to help.

Larry: And a fire truck. I need a fire truck so I can sit in it and drive it and press the alarm on it and it would have a door and could go forwards and backwards too.

Facilitator: Is there anything you think we should do more in pre-school?

Larry: Agh go to the church, my mammy bring me there yesterday.

Brad: I’d like to play with the sand area and the agh house area more.

Lucy: Sometimes I need to stay at home and have a rest. But I agh, want to um make a laptop too.

Brad: We could change some of the toys agh we could put some of the toys out and bring different ones in. We could am like we could buy some new pencils and maybe some building stuff.

Lucy: I think we should change the phones and um then change the dresses.

Larry: Another fire engine? I’ve one in my house.

Facilitator: You all have lots of ideas for your very own pre-schools. Selyna how are you feeling now? (Selyna whispers in Facilitators ear). Oh Selyna wants to thanks you, boys and girls for your help she said she feels happier now and she’s looking forward to her pre-school.
Brad: Yeah, am you, like should be happy. Just go there.

Facilitator: Thanks for helping me to cheer up Selyna today. I was wondering if you would like to make a picture of times that you feel happy in pre-school for Selyna tomorrow?

Lucy: I can make a picture in the art area.

Brad: Yeah we have pencils, and maybe markers or like paint in the art area.

Lucy: Yeah.

Larry: Yeah I will do that, I will.

Facilitator: Ok. Thanks. Well Selyna is going to say bye-bye for now and we’re going to go back to our classroom. Bye Selyna.