

# Early Childhood

**How Aistear was developed:**  
A Portraiture Study

### View the full Aistear document online

Children took part in the development of *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*. The *Framework for Early Learning* was renamed *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* in 2009. Through a research study called *Listening for Children's voices: Children as partners in the Framework for Early Learning*, children explained

- what they enjoyed doing
- who they liked being with
- what places they enjoyed being in.

This information helped shape *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*.

12 children in 11 settings took part from different areas of the country from Cork to Donegal. The children ranged in age from nine months to six years and included four girls and eight boys. Read the children's portraits below to find out what they told us.

#### 1. Cover page and contents

- Alan
- Andrew
- Matt

#### 2. Section One: Contents and Introduction

#### 3. Section Two: Portraits of children

#### 4. Babies

- Cathal
- Jayne

#### 5. Toddlers

- Amy
- Sean and Patrick

#### 6. Young children

- Harry
- Zachary
- Louise
- Caroline

#### 7. Conclusion

#### Acknowledgements

A big thank you to all involved in the study - parents, practitioners and especially the children. Your participation helped greatly in the development of *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*.



National Council for Curriculum and Assessment  
An Chomhairle Náisiúnta Curaclaim agus Measúnachta

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# Listening *for* children's stories: Children as partners in the Framework for Early Learning

A portraiture study

June 2007

## **Participating in the study**

The NCCA would like to thank all those who took part in the portraiture study. Thank you to the managers and principals for facilitating the various facets of the study in their settings, and to the practitioners who invited the researchers into their rooms over many visits. A special thank you to the children's parents who met with the researchers and shared insights into their children's lives. Most importantly thank you to the children in the portraits—to Cathal, Jayne, Amy, Seán, Patrick, Harry, Zachary, Louise, Caroline, Alan, Andrew and Matt—for sharing their experiences in their early childhood settings with the NCCA researchers.

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# Contents

Section 1: The portraiture study	
Introduction	11
Purpose	11
Portraiture	12
Definition	12
Rationale	13
Methodology	14
Access to early childhood settings	16
Overview of early childhood portraits	17
Understanding the portraiture study	22
Section 2: Children's Experiences	
Introduction	25
The portraits	27
Babies	29
Toddlers	50
Young children	76
Section 3: Conclusion	164
References	180
Appendices	
Appendix A: Letter of Introduction	181
Appendix B: Information booklet for parents and practitioners	183
Appendix C: Informed consent forms	188
Appendix D: Interview schedules	193
Appendix E: Thank you letters	199



## List of photographs

### **Cathal's portrait**

- A.1: Cathal
- A.2: Cathal explores his environment (1)
- A.3: Cathal explores his environment (2)
- A.4: Cathal and Linda
- A.5: Cathal communicating and imitating
- A.6: Cathal's kissing routine
- A.7: Cathal finds a willing play partner in the mirror (1)
- A.8: Cathal finds a willing play partner in the mirror (2)
- A.9: Cathal spending time outdoors (1)
- A.10: Cathal spending time outdoors (2)

### **Jayne's portrait**

- B.1: Jayne
- B.2: Jayne's physical well-being
- B.3: Having fun with Jack
- B.4: Playing in harmony with Michael
- B.5: Jayne's favourite place (1)
- B.6: Jayne's favourite place (2)
- B.7: Jayne dancing to *Is this the way to Amarillo?*
- B.8: Relaxing with Jack
- B.9: Jayne drawing
- B.10: Jayne drawing
- B.11: Jayne listens to a tune

### **Amy's portrait**

- C.1: Amy
- C.2: Amy with Margaret
- C.3: Amy and friends making beach display

- C.4: Amy and Owen in cubby hole
- C.5: Amy looking at the books
- C.6: Amy dancing with friends
- C.7: Amy at sand play
- C.8: Amy and Lily at the lentils
- C.9: Amy drawing
- C.10 Amy doing jig-saws
- C.11 Amy and Caoimhe playing hide and seek

### **Sean's and Patrick's portrait**

- D.1: Seán and Patrick with Mum
- D.2: Patrick and Gerard playing football with Dad
- D.3: Patrick with his Granddad
- D.4: Patrick climbing on one of the farm gates
- D.5: The boys in the church
- D.6: The boys in the sand tray
- D.7: Reading a story with Mum
- D.8: Seán with the pudding bowl
- D.9: The boys with Dad on the lawnmower
- D.10: Patrick on his big red tractor
- D.11: The boys on the phone to Dad

### **Harry's portrait**

- E.1: Harry
- E.2: Harry at breakfast time
- E.3: Harry with Molly
- E.4: Harry with tape recorder
- E.5 Harry in the library (1)
- E.6 Harry in the library (2)
- E.7: Harry in the library (3)
- E.8 Harry with the toy animals (1)



E.9: Harry with the toy animals (2)

E.10: Harry on one of the new chairs

### **Zachary's portrait**

F.1: Zachary

F.2: *An ghrian* (the sun) which includes Zachary's footprints

F.3: Zachary exploring with a straw at the water tray

### **Louise's portrait**

G.1: Louise

G.2: Dancing to music (1)

G. 3: Dancing to music (2)

G.4: Drawing a picture

G.5: Reading *The Hungry Caterpillar*

G.6: Louise playing with playdough (1)

G7: Louise playing with playdough (2)

G.8: Sand and water play (1)

G.9: Sand and water play (2)

### **Caroline's portrait**

H.1: Caroline

H.2. Children on the climbing frame

H.3: Caroline and friends listening to a story

H.4: Caroline sliding a boat down the slide

H.5: Caroline and David at the sand tray

H.6: Caroline and Michelle cutting out playdough

H.7: Caroline, Rory and David at the water tray (1)

H.8: Caroline, Rory and David at the water tray (2)

H.9: Caroline drawing a house

### **Alan's portrait**

- I.1: Alan
- I.2, I.3: Lunchtime
- I.4: Alan and Bill working together
- I.5: Small group making a collage
- I.6: Alan's own photo of his favourite place indoors
- I.7: Alan matching words and pictures
- I.8: Action rhymes
- I.9: Alan making a collage
- I.10: Alan kicking a football at a target
- I.11: Alan on the trampoline
- I.12: Planting seeds and bulbs (1)
- I.13: Planting seeds and bulbs (2)
- I.14: Alan's favourite place out of doors.

### **Andrew's portrait**

- J.1: Andrew
- J.2: The May altar
- J.3: Nemo the goldfish and his undersea world
- J.4: Group star chart
- J.5: Andrew and friends playing a counting game
- J.6: A chasing game in the school yard
- J.7: Andrew's art work: a bowl of fruit

### **Matt's portrait**

- K.1: Matt
- K.2: Mat playing BINGO with his friends
- K.3: Matt's drawings and early writing
- K.4: Matt's favourite place in the classroom
- K.5: Matt's photo of what he didn't like doing in school
- K.6: Matt playing percussion instruments

K.7: Matt and his friends exploring concepts of sinking and floating (1)

K.8: Matt and his friends exploring concepts of sinking and floating (2)

K.9: Matt playing a maths game

K.10: Matt building with bricks

## List of tables

- Table 1: Babies' portraits (Birth to 18 months)
- Table 2: Toddlers' portraits (Twelve months to three years)
- Table 3: Young children's portraits (Two and a half years to six years)
- Table 4: A day in the nursery for Cathal
- Table 5: A day at the childminders for Jayne
- Table 6: A day in the centre for Amy
- Table 7: A day for Seán and Patrick at home
- Table 8: A day in the crèche for Harry
- Table 9: A day in the naíonra for Zachary
- Table 10: A day in the pre-school for Louise
- Table 11: A day in the Early Start class for Caroline
- Table 12: A day in the Montessori pre-school for Alan
- Table 13: A day in junior infants for Matt

# Section 1: The portraiture study

## Introduction

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) which advises the Minister for Education and Science on curriculum for early childhood is currently developing the *Framework for Early Learning*. The Framework is premised on an understanding of children as being active in shaping and creating their own lives. This perspective supports the inclusion of children's voices in decisions which affect them. To this end, the NCCA has used a portraiture study to facilitate children as partners in developing the Framework.

This document *Listening for children's stories: Children as partners in the Framework for Early Learning* presents the NCCA's portraiture study. The document is presented in three sections.

- Section One explains what portraiture is and outlines the reasons for using this methodology. It also provides a brief overview of the children who took part in the study.
- Section Two explains the rationale for laying out the portraits under the themes of Well-being, Identity and belonging, Communication and Exploring and thinking. The portraits are also presented in this section in three over-lapping age-groupings—babies, toddlers and young children.
- Section Three concludes the document with a summary of some of the highlights in the descriptions of the children's experiences of early learning and development in their respective settings. This summary draws attention to messages from the early childhood literature which the portraits reinforce. These messages inform the development of the *Framework for Early Learning*.

## Purpose

The consultation on the discussion paper *Towards a Framework for Early Learning* (NCCA, 2004) highlighted two priorities in the NCCA's work in developing the *Framework for Early Learning*. One priority concerned the need to consult with children

during the process of developing the Framework, to ensure that children's voices would be appropriately represented in the Framework. A second and related priority concerned the need to ensure the Framework would connect with the everyday experiences of children and practitioners in a range of settings, that it would be sensitive to the reality and diversity of these settings, and that it would include further consultation with parents<sup>1</sup> and various professionals in these settings. To meet these two priorities, the NCCA designed a portraiture study to develop portraits of children's experiences of early learning and development in a range of settings in Ireland.

## Portraiture

### Definition

Portraiture is a form of qualitative research enquiry which seeks to give voice to the experiences of research participants in a particular setting. It does this through a story which documents and illuminates *the complexity and detail of a unique experience or place, hoping that the audience will see themselves reflected in it* (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann Davis, 1997, p.14). The portrait is placed in a social and cultural context and is shaped through dialogue between the researcher and the research participants. In their practice of research as portraiture, Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann Davis (1997) described portraiture as *painting with words*. They spoke of their search for a form of inquiry which would bridge *the realms of science and art* in order to create stories that convey the perspective of the subjects and the meaning they attribute to what they do and say and how they behave.

The portraits in this document deepen the NCCA's understanding of early learning and development in different settings as currently experienced by the children in the study and supported by their practitioners<sup>2</sup>. The portraits are concerned with the local rather than the global. While collectively they are not generalisable to early learning and development nationally, they provide rich and generative insights into children's experiences and how these can be most appropriately supported in the *Framework for Early Learning*.

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<sup>1</sup> The NCCA uses the term *parent* throughout this document to refer to the child's primary caregivers and educators. These include the father and mother and/or guardians of the child.

<sup>2</sup> In the case of Seán and Patrick, their portrait focuses on the children's experiences of learning and developing in their home and supported by their parents.

## Rationale

Portraiture allowed the NCCA Early Childhood Team to describe the rich, complex and diverse experiences of children within the socio-cultural context of their settings. Portraiture also gave the flexibility to use multiple methods and sources of data in creating the final portraits.

While portraiture has many similarities with other qualitative research methods, it has two distinguishing features (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann Davis 1997). The first feature is that portraiture begins by searching for *what is good and healthy* about the experiences of the participants in the settings. A key question the researcher asks then is *what is good here from the participant's perspective?* This question leads him/her to observe, interpret and document a very different reality than the researcher who uses externally imposed measures of success. While portraiture has been criticised for its failure to interrogate what it conceals (English, 2000)<sup>3</sup>, its focus on illuminating complex dimensions of goodness is ideally suited to the NCCA's priority to bring children's positive experiences of early childhood to the development of the *Framework for Early Learning*.

The second defining feature of portraiture is that the researcher *listens for a story* whereas in other areas of ethnographic research the researcher listens *to* the story of the research participants. The *I* or *we* of the researcher(s) is explicit or implicit throughout the final portrait. Welty (2003) makes a crucial distinction between these two forms of listening. In the latter, the researcher adopts a more passive and receptive stance whereas the researcher in portraiture adopts an active, engaged position which involves participating in, identifying and selecting the story and helping to shape the story's coherence. This active engaged stance means that the *self* of the researcher is critical to the way of listening, selecting, interpreting and composing the portrait.

Portraiture involves four major organising elements to guide the researcher in his/her work. These relate to context, voice, relationships and emergent themes (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann Davis 1997).

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<sup>3</sup> English, F. (2000). A Critical Appraisal of Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot's Portraiture as a Method of Educational Research. *Educational Researcher*, Vol. 29, No. 7 (Oct., 2000), pp. 21-26

In the NCCA's portraiture study

- **context** placed the children and their actions in a particular time and space. This enabled the researcher to understand more clearly how the experience of the individual children was shaped and framed by the particular family, setting and community in which they learned and developed.
- **voice** referred to the impression of the researcher on both the process of gathering and interpreting the data and the finished portrait. Voice also related to the voice of the participants. The researcher *listened for* the message and meaning from the children through listening to their verbal contributions and observing their gestures and body language which often spoke louder than words. This was important for all children but was particularly significant for very young and/or pre-verbal<sup>4</sup> children or children who had special educational needs who relied heavily on non-verbal communication.
- **relationships** were the means by which the portraits were constructed, shaped and drawn. It was through the developing relationship and dialogue between the researcher and child, parent and practitioner that the portrait was shaped and co-constructed and a balance in participation was achieved between the voice of the researcher and the voice of the participants.
- **emergent themes** throughout the study led to the development of more discerning questions and more appropriate means of collecting information. Researchers followed the child's lead and adjusted data collection methods depending on the individual child they were working with.

## Methodology

In designing the portraiture study, the NCCA drew on the work of Clark and Moss (2001) in identifying methods for gathering and analysing information which would be sensitive to the strengths and abilities of children from birth to six years, and which would enable the Early Childhood Team to listen for children's hundred languages.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>The NCCA uses the term *verbal* children to refer to those children who have the capacity to communicate their feelings, ideas and thoughts through spoken words. *Pre-verbal* refers to those children who are working towards developing this capacity, and who rely to a greater extent on vocalizations, gestures, expressions and movements in communicating with others.

<sup>5</sup> Malaguzzi, the founder of the Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education, used the phrase *the hundred languages* to convey the importance of providing children with opportunities to express themselves through many different media including play, painting, dance, music, sculpture, puppetry and writing as well as spoken word.



The Mosaic Approach (Clark and Moss, 2001) provided the *how* of the NCCA's portraiture study and emphasised the processes of dialogue, reflection and action as much as the data gathering tools.

### **Gathering and interpreting the information**

The NCCA's overarching question in the portraiture study asked, *what are the children's experiences in their particular setting?* A series of interview schedules (Appendix D) were drawn up to guide the researchers in answering this question. Each researcher adjusted the information gathering methods and the wording of questions depending on the child he/she was working with. The following are some of the guiding questions used to build the portraits:

1. What does the child enjoy doing in this setting? Why?
2. What places does he/she enjoy being in? Why?
3. Who does he/she enjoy being with? Why?

The NCCA used a range of methods to capture what the children were making, saying, doing, thinking, experiencing and communicating. Methods used included:

- Observation (researcher's own perspective)
- Photography (of and by the children)
- Audio- and video-recording (of and by the children)
- Child conferencing (interview with the child and a friend)
- Walking tours and mapmaking (the child takes the researcher on a tour and makes a map as a means of exploring the information recorded on the tour)
- Interviews with parents and practitioners (to gain their perspectives and insights into the child's experiences in the setting).

Each NCCA researcher used a variety of methods which were appropriate given the individual child's age, strengths, interests and abilities to capture his/her views and experiences. Differences between children for example in physical, intellectual or linguistic ability or in ethnicity or culture as well as the varying constraints of working in the individual settings also influenced the choice of methods used to gather information. The process of gathering and analysing the information was spiral. Information was analysed on an on-going basis with a view to identifying themes, patterns and questions that required further exploration.

Interviews, observations, video footage and photographs were analysed to compile the portraits. Parents<sup>6</sup> and practitioners were given drafts of the portraits during the compilation stage and their feedback and comments informed the redrafting work. A copy of the final portrait was given to the participants together with thank you letters for parents, practitioners and children (Appendix E).

## Access to early childhood settings

In the process of arranging access to the settings, parents and practitioners were informed about the purpose of the study and were given an introductory letter (Appendix A) outlining the activities involved so that they had the relevant information to assist them in deciding whether to participate or not in the portraiture study. A short information booklet (Appendix B) was also compiled to explain to practitioners, parents and children what the study involved. Once settings had agreed to take part, the researchers provided a statement<sup>7</sup> about themselves from An Garda Síochána to the Manager/Principal. Informed consent from parents and practitioners was then documented using consent forms (Appendix C).

Due to the ages of the children, the issue of informed consent was especially relevant and children's participation in the study was subject to their parents' consent. On receiving this consent the NCCA endeavoured to ensure that the children understood that they could stop participating in the study at any time and that they did not have to participate in activities or answer questions that they didn't want to. In the case of all children, particularly pre-verbal/non-verbal children, the researchers were mindful of non-verbal responses and stopped any activity if the children appeared to be unhappy or uncomfortable in any way.

The Early Childhood Team visited the settings during the period from April to May 2006, with visits to only one setting taking place in June. The Team spent time with the children, their practitioners and parents across a maximum of six visits per setting with

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<sup>6</sup> In providing feedback on the draft portraits to the NCCA researchers, a number of parents commented on how well the portraits represented their child/children. A number of the parents shared the portraits with their children.

<sup>7</sup> It was not possible to provide Garda Clearance statements to the settings as at the time of undertaking the study, garda vetting was only available to a very small part of the early years sector. However the research team applied under the Data Protection Act 2003 to have themselves checked on the Garda Criminal Records Database and a letter was issued by An Garda Síochána to each of the researchers stating that no personal data had been found on them.

visits ranging in duration from two hours to five hours.<sup>8</sup> The NCCA's work with the children was informed by the principles for best practice in child protection as presented in *Children First*, (Department of Health and Children 1999), the Government of Ireland's National Guidelines for the Protection and Welfare of Children. The NCCA also drew on the work of Hill (2005) in developing protocols for safeguarding the welfare and protection of the children and the researchers. These protocols addressed issues such as where information was gathered from the children and in the presence of whom.

In preparing to exit the settings, the NCCA shared the portraits (draft and final versions) with the children, their parents and practitioners. In addition, the digital camera/video recorders used by the Team to gather information for the portraits, were presented to the settings to support them in exploring how they might use portraiture to develop their practice in extending and enriching children's early learning and development.

## Overview of early childhood portraits

The NCCA Early Childhood Team worked with 12 children<sup>9</sup> in 11 settings in the portraiture study. Collectively, the portraits reflect a range of different types of early childhood setting in Ireland, including statutory, community and private. In addition, they represent an urban/rural mix, an age range from birth to six years, a mix of boys and girls, and cultural and linguistic diversity.

Tables 1, 2 and 3 introduce the children<sup>10</sup> who took part in the study.

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<sup>8</sup> The length of the visit depended on a number of factors including the type of setting, the age of the child, the practitioner's routine and schedule and the purpose of the visit.

<sup>9</sup> There are eleven portraits as one portrait captures the experiences of two brothers in a home setting.

<sup>10</sup> The NCCA has used pseudonyms throughout this document to protect the identity of the children, practitioners and settings who participated in the study.

**Table 1: Babies' portraits (Birth to 18 months)**

<p><b>Cathal</b></p>	<p>Cathal is nine months old and is a happy, sociable and affectionate baby. He attends a daycare nursery from 9.00 a.m. to 5.00 p.m., four days per week. His favourite activity in the nursery is playing beside a wall mounted mirror. Cathal's portrait demonstrates the importance of the Key Worker relationship in providing responsive care for babies.</p>
<p><b>Jayne</b></p>	<p>Jayne is seventeen months old and is a quiet, contented little girl who likes her own space. Jayne attends a childminding service from 9.00 a.m. to 5.00 p.m., five days per week. She likes dancing to music and playing outdoors in the setting. Jayne's portrait comes from the perspective of home based childcare, where she has the opportunity to interact with children across a range of age groups in a home from home environment.</p>

**Table 2: Toddlers' portraits (12 months to three years)**

<b>Amy</b>	<p>Amy is two and a half years old and attends a community crèche that supports both the use of English and Irish. She goes to the crèche from 7.30 a.m. to 5.00 p.m. five days per week. Indoors Amy likes messy play, dancing and singing while outdoors she likes going on the slide and playing hide and seek. Amy's portrait illustrates her busy day partaking in free-play and in a range of child and adult initiated activities in the toddler room.</p>
<b>Seán and Patrick</b>	<p>Seán is nineteen months old and his brother Patrick is four and a half years old. Seán and Patrick live on a farm and enjoy going for walks with their Mum, visiting the farm with their Dad, and playing together outside on their tractors or in the sand. Indoors they like to read books and to play with their tractors and diggers. The portrait of Seán and Patrick highlights the boys' strong sense of belonging to their local community.</p>

**Table 3: Young children's portraits (2 ½ to 6 years)**

<b>Harry</b>	Harry is three years old and is a happy and good natured child. He attends a crèche every day from Monday to Friday, from 9.30 a.m. until 5.00 p.m. He enjoys listening to music and reading books. Harry has recently been diagnosed as having autism and his portrait demonstrates various strategies his practitioners use to support him in his learning and development.
<b>Zachary</b>	Zachary is four years old and is an active and energetic little boy with a competitive nature. His parents originally came from Nigeria. He attends a Naíonra from 9.15 a.m. to 12.45 p.m. every day from Monday to Friday. Zachary's portrait describes his experiences in the Naíonra and in particular, his communication through Irish.
<b>Louise</b>	Louise is four years old and is a happy, sweet natured little girl. Louise attends a sessional pre-school for Traveller children from 9.00 a.m. to 12.00 p.m. Monday to Friday. She enjoys creative activities and books. Louise's portrait illustrates the importance of valuing traditions and culture in promoting a sense of identity and belonging for children.

<b>Caroline</b>	<p>Caroline is four and a half years old. She is very independent and likes to take the lead. She attends an Early Start unit five mornings a week, from 9.00 a.m. to 11.30 a.m. She loves coming to school and particularly enjoys márla, drawing and colouring. Caroline's portrait is set in the context of experiences in an Early Start unit located in a classroom within an urban primary school.</p>
<b>Alan</b>	<p>Alan is almost five years old and is a happy, articulate and confident child. He attends a Montessori community pre-school five days a week from 9.00 a.m. to 2.00 p.m. He has been attending the setting for almost two years and Alan's portrait presents his daily experiences in the Montessori classroom.</p>
<b>Andrew</b>	<p>Andrew is almost six years old. He is in a multi-grade infants class in primary school, five days a week. He loves learning new things especially in maths and science, and going for bicycle rides in the forest park. His portrait illustrates the importance of building on the child's individual interests and strengths, and of integrating learning.</p>

<b>Matt</b> <sup>11</sup>	Matt is five years and nine months old. He is a happy, motivated and self-confident young boy. He is in a single-grade junior infants class in primary school. He goes to school from 8.50 a.m. to 1.30 p.m. Monday to Friday. Matt loves constructing with bricks, playing with toy cars, painting and playing chase in the playground. His portrait illustrates the importance of hands-on learning and learning through language in the infant classroom.
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## Understanding the portraiture study

The NCCA study presents portraits of the experiences of 12 children in a variety of early childhood settings. It was designed to support the NCCA's work in developing the *Framework for Early Learning*. The two criteria for designing this inquiry were the need to consult with children and the need to ensure the Framework would take account of the realities of children and practitioners in a range of settings in the Irish context. In prioritising these functions of the study, it is important to note the limits and delimits of the portraiture study (what it achieves and what it does not achieve) as a piece of research. These limits are critical to understanding the link between this portraiture study and the *Framework for Early Learning*. They are outlined below:

- The selection of the **sample** of portraits was based on a number of criteria. The NCCA endeavoured to include a range of setting type from the child's own home to out-of-home settings such as crèches, pre-schools and infant classes in primary schools. The Team also prioritised the inclusion of children who collectively reflected as much as possible the early childhood period from birth to six years. The representation of cultural and linguistic diversity and special

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<sup>11</sup> The NCCA worked with Andrew and Matt, two boys of similar age and both in junior infant classrooms. Andrew's portrait captured his experience in a multi-grade setting while Matt's portrait captured his experience in a single-grade



educational needs were also important considerations. Finally, the Team planned to reflect a gender balance across the children who participated in the study. However, as the Team members were guided by the practitioners in the different settings, it was very challenging to maintain the gender balance. This is reflected in the fact that four girls and eight boys participated in the study. The portraiture study provides insights into the experiences of the twelve children who participated. As such, it was not designed (nor could it hope) to represent the full diversity of early childhood settings which children experience in Ireland today.

- To facilitate maximum and frequent engagement with the children and their practitioners and parents in a variety of early childhood settings nationally, the Team selected settings in close proximity to their own homes/workplaces, which collectively represented the diversity of early childhood settings. Merriam (1988) explained, *One wants to discover, understand, gain insight; therefore one needs to select a sample from which one can learn the most* (p. 48).<sup>12</sup> While the portraits present the experiences of children across three provinces, they do not represent a complete **geographical spread**.
- The Early Childhood Team visited the settings during the period of **time** from April to May 2006, with visits to only one setting taking place in June. The Team spent time with the children, their practitioners and parents across a maximum of six visits per setting with visits ranging in duration from two hours to five hours.<sup>13</sup> The scheduling of the study inevitably impacted on the age of children at the time the portraits were being developed. This explains, for example, why children in junior infants at the time of the study were almost six years old.
- The portraits themselves celebrate the positive experiences of the participants - of babies, toddlers and young children, in their settings as they experience them. As such, this focus on the positive is subjective – based on the child's, his/her parents', the practitioner's and the researcher's perspectives. It is important to note that the settings do not set out to represent **best practice**, although the reader may note elements of best practice or otherwise, while reading through the

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setting. The NCCA Team had hoped to work with a girl in one of the settings but following the recommendations by the practitioners concerned, we worked with two boys instead.

<sup>12</sup> Merriam, S. B. (1988), *Case study research in education: A qualitative approach*, San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

portraits. It is important to remember, therefore, that it is the child's unique experience and voice which provided the focus of the portrait in each case.

- Seven **NCCA staff** were involved in designing and completing this study. Members of the team have worked during their careers in a variety of settings with children of different ages. They also have particular expertise and knowledge of the early years sector in Ireland arising from a range of professional qualifications as well as practical experience. The completed set of portraits is based on individual and collective analysis of data by members of the Team.
- Finally, it is important to note that the portraits presented in this study are **deeply embedded in the context in which they were developed**. Thus, the make-up of the portraits would differ depending on the type of settings selected, the social and economic conditions of the regions in which the settings were located, the period of time in which they were completed, the perspectives of children selected on what constitutes a positive experience, and the members of staff involved in the collection and analysis of data who themselves have different experiences and educational qualifications in working with very young children.

While these considerations should be kept in mind when reading the portraits, it is nevertheless the case that the portraits provide rich and generative insights into the children's everyday interactions, experiences and activities in a range of different early childhood settings in Ireland, and that they have enlivened and enlightened the NCCA's work in developing the *Framework for Early Learning*.

The next section of this document discusses the presentation of the portraits under four themes and presents the portraits themselves.

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<sup>13</sup> The length of the visit depended on a number of factors including the type of setting, the age of the child, the practitioner's routine and schedule and the purpose of the visit.

## Section 2: Children's experiences

### Introduction

This section presents the eleven portraits from the NCCA's study. The portraits are organised in three groupings according to the over-lapping age-phases outlined in the NCCA's consultative document, *Towards a Framework for Early Learning* (2004):

- babies, (birth to 18 months)
- toddlers (12 months to 3 years)
- young children (2½ to 6 years)

Each portrait begins with a short description of the child followed by some background information on the setting in which the researcher worked with the child. Each child's experiences and reflections are then presented using the *Framework for Early Learning's* four broad and interlinked themes:

- Well-being
- Identity and Belonging
- Communicating
- Exploring and Thinking.

A brief description of the themes as presented in the consultative document, *Towards a Framework for Early Learning* and its Executive Summary (NCCA, 2004) is outlined below.

#### **Well-being**

The child's physical, emotional and intellectual well-being is nurtured within the context of warm and supportive relationships with others.

Well-being can be defined as being content and healthy. While this is important for all learning, it is especially so for early learning. Well-being is encouraged within warm and supportive relationships with others. The child's emotional well-being is related to

the quality of his/her early attachments with adults. Warm and trusting relationships, where the child feels loved and where he/she is encouraged to express himself/herself, help the child to be positive about learning. This, in turn, helps him/her to become more independent, and able to cope with change and challenge. Physical well-being is also important for learning as this enables the child to explore, to investigate, and to physically challenge himself/herself in the environment. (*Towards a Framework for Early Learning*, Executive summary, 2004, p.13)

### **Identity and Belonging**

Strong feelings of identity and belonging contribute to inner well-being and security.

Identity is about the characteristics, behaviours and understandings children have, both individually and shared with others. Belonging is about having a secure relationship with or connection to a particular group. It is important that children develop a healthy and positive sense of their own identity, and their place in society. Positive messages about their family, culture, faith/no faith, and language help them to feel valued and respected in society. Relationships with others also contribute to the child's sense of identity and belonging. It is essential that each child is surrounded by messages of respect, love, praise, and encouragement. (*Towards a Framework for Early Learning*, Executive summary, 2004, p.13)

### **Communicating**

The child's ability to communicate is at the very heart of early learning and development.

Communicating is about expressing and sharing thoughts, information and feelings. It helps children to indicate their needs, to build relationships with others, to explore their feelings, to create knowledge, and to represent and understand the world around them. Children give and receive information in different ways. These different forms of communication generally reflect developmental stages during early childhood. While most children will eventually master oral language as their main form of communication, others may need to use a range of non-verbal means of communication, including pictures, symbols or gestures. All children should be supported and helped to communicate to the best of their ability from the earliest

possible age. (*Towards a Framework for Early Learning*, Executive summary, 2004, p.13-14)

### **Exploring and Thinking**

The child makes sense of his/her environment in a multi-sensorial way. Through active exploration, the child has opportunities to develop in many ways, including cognitively and physically.

Exploring and thinking involve investigating and making sense of the world. Early childhood is a time of great opportunities for exploring, investigating and interpreting these experiences to form ideas and theories about the world. In exploring and thinking, children use their communication, physical, and sensory-motor skills. Trusting and loving relationships with adults provide the security for the child to explore and to find things out. In doing this, the child builds ideas about how things work and why things are the way they are. Interactions between the child and the adult, as well as interactions between peers, enrich and extend this exploring and thinking. (*Towards a Framework for Early Learning*, Executive summary, 2004, p.14)

The portraits are presented on pages 29 to 163 of this document.

## Babies: Birth to 18 months

## Cathal

Cathal (Photo A.1) is nine months old and is the first and only child in his family. He is a happy, sociable and affectionate baby. At home Cathal gets pleasure from singing, music and interacting with people. He enjoys fun games with his Mum and Dad as well as going on walks, going to the park and visiting his granny. Cathal attends a childcare centre called Happy Start Nursery in the north-west of Ireland.

Photo A.1: Cathal

## Happy Start Nursery - Background and context

Happy Start Nursery is a privately run early years service offering full day care, sessional care and after school care for young children. The nursery was established in 1997 with the assistance of a grant from the local Enterprise Board. The service was extended in 2002 with the support of a grant from the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform through the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme. The nursery is situated in a scenic rural townland with a population of approximately 100 people. This is approximately two miles from the nearest town which over the past fifteen years has become one of the most rapidly growing centres of trade and industry in the north-west region.

There are currently 42 children on the roll with 25-30 attending on a daily basis. The nursery opens at 8.00 a.m. in the morning and closes at 6.00 p.m., five days per week, 52 weeks per year.

In total, the service employs nine members of staff who have participated in a range of childcare related courses and programmes both accredited and non-accredited. The ongoing professional development of staff is viewed as an integral part of good early years practice, and training opportunities are regularly made available to the staff team.

## Curriculum and assessment

The manager of Happy Start Nursery stated that the overall aim of the nursery is to *provide childcare services in a caring, understanding and stimulating environment with a holistic approach to each child's development*. She also stated that nursery staff were guided by principles emerging from research that *children learn at their own pace, participate in activities that they are interested in, and are able to play and work with activities for as long as they choose*.

Five members of staff work in the baby and toddler room. When they plan activities for the younger children, they find that the four broad themes outlined in the *Framework for Early Learning* - Well being, Identity and belonging, Communicating and Exploring and thinking, are particularly useful. The nursery staff are familiar with the four themes as



they have participated in training and professional development organised by the local County Childcare Committee<sup>1</sup> in this area. Within the themes, topics are chosen which will encompass children's abilities, interests and needs as identified by each child's parents and Key Worker<sup>2</sup>.

Staff regularly observe and record aspects of children's learning and development and consider evaluation of children's involvement in the activities as being central to their practice in order to determine suitability to children's individual needs.

When joining the nursery, parents are asked to complete a child profile which contains information specific to the individual child such as – special interests, likes, dislikes, names of family members, favourite books/stories, and so on. A follow up Settling In Report is compiled after approximately one month in the setting to allow parents to know how children have settled in, how they are getting on and if there is a particular area of development staff are going to concentrate on.

In addition to daily verbal exchanges between Key Worker and parents in the morning and evening, a Record of Care sheet is completed daily for babies and toddlers. A record of achievement is compiled over a longer period for pre-school children. The record of achievement is compiled in a scrapbook or file and includes samples of the child's work, photographs, and any comments made by parents either in verbal or written form. Staff regularly take photographs of children participating in activities and these are displayed around the setting for parents to see. Some photographs are sent home, some are added to the child's record of achievement.

## Cathal's experiences in Happy Start Nursery

Happy Start Nursery was recommended to Cathal's parents by a friend. Cathal joined the nursery when he was four months old and on average attends for 32 hours per week over four days. Cathal's parents reported an easy transition from home to the

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<sup>1</sup> County Childcare Committees are voluntary organisations funded by the Irish Government under the National Childcare Investment Programme 2006-2010 with a remit to support the development of new and existing childcare services at county level.

<sup>2</sup> The Key Worker system describes how an individual member of the childcare team takes responsibility for the needs of an individual child in order to promote a sense of security and consistency through the development of close relationships and responsive care routines.

nursery which they described as being much more upsetting for them than for Cathal himself.

**Table 4: A day in the nursery for Cathal**

Arrival 8.15-8.30 a.m.	In the busy atmosphere of the nursery during arrival time in the morning, Cathal flaps his arms and smiles at staff. Verbal exchanges of information take place and Cathal's prepared changing bag is left with staff.
Breakfast 9.00-9.30 a.m.	Cathal eats a bowl of cereal for his breakfast followed by his bottle. He has a good appetite.
Activities	Cathal explores containers and baskets, repeatedly emptying and filling them with different objects. He plays with musical toys and pushes different buttons which play a tune. He claps when the music starts, listens until it finishes, smiles and repeats the sequence. Staff are extremely responsive to his needs and if he shows signs of being bored with an activity he is moved to a different area to keep him stimulated and interested.
Change	His Key Worker, Linda makes the most of this one to one time with Cathal, maintaining eye contact and interacting with him throughout the changing routine. He responds by laughing, cooing and smiling.
Sleep	Staff recognise when Cathal is tired and respond by settling him down for a nap in a cot in the sleep room. The routine is flexible and adapts to Cathal's changing needs. Some days he takes more sleeps than others.
Dinner 12.30-1.00 p.m.	Cathal's favourite dinners include potato, vegetables and gravy, beans and potato or chicken casserole. Linda uses feeding times as an opportunity to develop independence skills for example encouraging him to hold his own bottle or spoon.
Activities	Cathal tries to pull himself up on stable furniture and equipment. Staff respond to this development allowing him plenty of space and encouragement. Linda offers positive reinforcement by clapping and cheering when he succeeds in what he sets out to do and he reciprocates by smiling and clapping.
Change	Changing time is used as an opportunity for play – Linda makes time to touch Cathal's skin with different textured materials and talking and playing with his fingers and toes.
Tea 3.30-4.00 p.m.	Cathal sits in a low chair to eat his dinner and plays peek a boo games with Linda throughout. He eats mashed banana and rusk followed by his bottle.
Activities	Cathal crawls over to a member of staff, she takes him by the hands, and he pulls himself up and dances while the staff member sings. They move over to a vertical mirror on the wall which adds to Cathal's enjoyment of the activity as he can see himself and he squeals with delight.
Change	Linda changes his nappy whilst talking and singing to him and makes the routine fun.
Sleep	Cathal falls asleep in the swing and he is gently lifted by a member of staff and placed in a cot in the sleep room.
Activities	Cathal interacts well with adults on a one to one basis. When the

	manager picked him up, he initiated a 'kissing' game with some lovely reciprocal exchanges, including laughing, giggling and delighted squeals. This was a lovely example of a 1:1 exchange within a trusting and secure relationship which is so important for Cathal's emotional safety and positive self image.
Departure 5.00 p.m.	On seeing his Mum at collection time, Cathal waves his arms, laughs and reaches out to be picked up. His Mum gives him a big hug and Cathal responds with his kissing routine. Linda gives her a verbal overview of Cathal's day. His bottles and record of care document are put in his changing bag, and he is ready to go home.

## Well being

The baby and toddler room where Cathal spends most of his day is rectangular in shape and is divided into two areas. The room is brightly painted and large windows facilitate lots of natural light and allow Cathal to see outside. The baby area has a range of different textured floor coverings including carpet, colourful mats, floor cushions and soft cushion floor vinyl making it both comfortable and stimulating for Cathal to explore (Photos A.2 and A3). This area has a sofa for staff to use to feed the babies as well as a range of baby equipment such as low chairs, a swing, and a high chair. The activity area has a ball pool, vertical and horizontal mirrors on the wall, a range of push and pull toys, simple shape sorters, stacking toys, balls, fabric and board books, pop up toys, musical toys, blocks and cubes. Toys are housed in and on top of open low level units within easy access for Cathal who is just becoming mobile. The age range of the children currently in the baby and toddler area is from eight months to two and a half years and consists of seven girls and eight boys.

Photos A. 2 and A.3: Cathal explores his environment

In an effort to provide consistency of care and to promote feeling of security in the out of home setting, a Key Worker called Linda has been assigned to Cathal. Linda's responsibilities include verbal exchanges of information at handover times from and to parents in the morning and evening, interacting with Cathal and always making sure he is stimulated and has something to do (Photo A.4), and generally being aware of his individual needs by responding to his vocalisations, gestures and cues. I observed Linda compiling Cathal's daily Record of Care which included details of feeds, sleeps and changes as well as comments on his form/mood, toys he played with and things he did. At the end of each day, the completed Record of Care is put into Cathal's changing bag for his parents to read at home and a copy is retained on his personal file in the nursery.

Photo A.4. Cathal and Linda

## Identity and Belonging

Cathal's Mum commented that *Cathal adapts well to the nursery on a daily basis and seems happy and comfortable in his surroundings*. He demonstrates this in a number of ways, for example, he smiles and uses positive body language such as smiling and waving his arms when he comes into the setting in the morning, he interacts well with staff and he sleeps and eats well. Cathal's parents recognise that he has a special relationship with Linda, his Key Worker. They find it comforting and reassuring that he has the continuity of one key person outside the home to relate to closely during the

day, particularly if he was upset they feel that Linda would be the best person to comfort him. The Manager of Happy Start Nursery mentioned that she *recognises the positive effects of a good relationship between nursery staff and parents for both Cathal's feelings of security and progress in learning and development.*

Informal daily verbal exchanges promote two-way communication and consistency of care for Cathal between the home and the nursery. Staff believe that an ongoing exchange of information and respectful relationships between parents and staff can also broaden and enrich Cathal's experiences both at home and in the nursery setting.

The environment is clean, bright and child friendly. Throughout the nursery, attractive displays of children's work and colourful photographs of children participating in various activities not only communicate the work of the setting to parents but also demonstrate the value placed on children's individual creations. For young children like Cathal, this also promotes a sense of belonging to the group.

## Communicating

Both Cathal's parents and the childcare staff agree that Cathal is a good all rounder as there isn't anything he doesn't particularly enjoy doing. He is good at entertaining himself and very little upsets him. Cathal is extremely sociable and demonstrates an ability to communicate with others in a number of ways. He pays great attention to facial expression and makes eye contact with adults to initiate communication. He watches and imitates adults in clapping hands (Photo A.5) and peek a boo games frequently shaking his head or covering his eyes. His language is developing into conversation conveyed through a variety of jabber using different tones and pitches.

Photo A. 5: Cathal communicating and imitating

Cathal takes great interest in what's going on in the room and can watch adults and other children<sup>3</sup> intently for several minutes. He squeals or shouts to attract attention to himself, waits for the adult response and smiles or laughs when he gets it. He has also perfected a kissing routine (Photo A. 6) as a means of communication which he has now worked out always results in positive attention.

Photo A.6: Cathal engaged in his kissing routine

## Exploring and Thinking

Cathal can sit up unaided and makes a good effort at trying to reach objects. He has just started to crawl and spends a lot of his activity time on the floor surrounded by toys and activities and soft floor cushions. A soft, comfortable and safe floor space allows him freedom to move, roll, stretch and explore uninterrupted – with the adult close by.

Photos A.7 and A.8: Cathal finds a willing play partner in the mirror

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<sup>3</sup> Although Cathal watches other children with interest, I did not observe him directly engaging with other babies.

Cathal's favourite place is a corner in the baby activity area with a floor level mirror on the wall. In his reflection he finds a willing play partner and spends time looking at himself, touching and kissing his reflection and chatting and cooing happily (Photos A.7 and A.8). He also enjoys sitting in the ball pool, playing with the pop up toys and activity cubes. He can concentrate on activities and can spend a long time examining objects.

In relation to learning and development, Linda described how she *plays an important role in providing a scaffold for his developing skills*. I observed this during a play situation where Cathal was shaking a cube activity box and lost his grip on the toy. It landed near to him but not within easy reach. Cathal expressed his displeasure at this and Linda lifted the toy and placed it a little nearer to him. In order to reach the toy Cathal had to move onto all fours and reach forward whilst balancing himself with the other hand. Linda demonstrated her knowledge of Cathal's individual stage of development by not simply handing Cathal the toy but by challenging him just enough to motivate him to reach for the toy himself.

Now that Cathal is learning to crawl, Linda ensures that he has adequate space to support this developing skill and that she is there to steady and encourage him when necessary. She also uses the fact that Cathal is a sociable baby, in order to develop his language skills by talking to him, singing songs and rhymes and playing games with him.

Photos A.9 and A.10: Cathal spending time outdoors

Cathal appears to enjoy spending time outdoors (Photos A.9 and A.10) where he explores his surroundings and watches and listens to everything that is going on. The setting has a fenced play area to the front of the building. This area is covered by safety matting and has a slide, a climbing structure, a playhouse, ride on toys and a selection of equipment for games and activities. There is also a large grassy area to the side of the building where children are taken to play circle games and to run around. The babies are taken outside when the weather is good and the younger babies sit in a buggy or propped up with cushions beside a member of staff on a blanket.

## Conclusion

As Cathal is an only child, his parents feel that *the key benefits of attending the nursery are being able to mix and interact with other children and adults, develop social skills and assist his speech and language development.* They also like the layout of the baby and toddler room whereby toddlers are encouraged to interact with the younger babies and the babies enjoy watching the older children especially during music and movement activities.

They notice things which Cathal is picking up at nursery and are happy in the knowledge that trained staff are aware of developmental milestones and share this information with them through verbal exchanges and the daily Record of Care document. Cathal's parents particularly like the information about what Cathal actually did during his day in the nursery and look forward to reading the Record of Care document every evening. A recent comment in the document described how Cathal pulled himself up on the ball pool for the first time. Cathal's parents used this information to provide for and extend this experience at home as well. They believe they have a good relationship with staff and find them a good source of information regarding appropriate toys and activities and progress in learning and development. Overall they feel happy and at ease that Cathal seems content in the nursery and his needs are being met.



## Jayne

Jayne (Photo B.1) is seventeen months old and is a quiet, contented little girl who likes her own space. She lives with her Mum and Dad and her brother Jack who is four years old. At home she spends time playing and exploring in the back garden with Jack and going for walks with her family. During the week, Jayne attends a home based childminding service in the north-west of Ireland.

Photo B.1: Jayne

## Lisa's Childminding Service - Background and context

Lisa's Childminding Service was established in 1999 and is situated in a quiet residential area on the outside of a seaside town. The service is notified to the Health Services Executive and is subject to annual inspection under the requirements of the Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations 1996 and Child Care (Pre-School Services) (Amendment) Regulations 1997.

Lisa's Childminding Service is mainly used by children living in the local area although one child travels from a nearby town to avail of the service of a notified childminder<sup>14</sup>. On reaching school age, most children attending the service attend the local national school approximately one mile away.

Lisa has developed close links with the local County Childcare Committee and receives ongoing support and advice from the Childminders' Advisory Officer. She has also accessed training and plays an active role in developing local networks for Childminders. She has participated in Quality Awareness Training for Childminders, First Aid, HACCP (Hazard Analysis of Critical Control Point: a quality management system for food preparation required under the childcare and food safety regulations) and Fire Safety Training and is currently working on a FETAC (Further Education and training Awards Council) Level 5 Award in Childcare.

Lisa's Childminding Service is based in a large two storey detached home. The children have access to two rooms, the kitchen and a living room, and a fenced outdoor play area. A connecting conservatory area doubles up as a sleep area for the younger children during the day and there is a toilet and changing area off the back hallway of the house. Six children, three boys and three girls, currently attend the service in the morning and their ages range from 14 months to four years. A number of school age children also use the service in the afternoons. Lisa is supported by Marion, who helps look after the children during the day as well as preparing snacks and joining in play activities.

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<sup>14</sup> A childminder can opt to notify to the Health Services Executive in a voluntary capacity and in doing so his/her childcare service is subject to annual inspection.

## Curriculum and assessment

Lisa believes that for young children like Jayne, there are many benefits of home based childcare. She offers a play based daily routine which aims to make the environment a *home from home for the children*. Domestic chores like emptying the dishwasher, cooking and doing the washing are part of the daily routine, which Lisa believes give children *a sense of home*.

Lisa remarked that she looks upon herself as being a *mother figure* to the children, but at the same time being aware of their stages of development and trying to enhance these through play activities. Children's care routines such as food, sleep and nappy changes are recorded in a Daily Record Book and shared with parents at the end of the day. There are currently no systems in place for recording children's learning and development, although Lisa commented that this is something she would very much like to have training to do in the future.

## Jayne's experiences in Lisa's Childminding Service

**Table 5: A day at the childminders for Jayne**

Arrival 9.00 a.m.	Jayne's Mum drops her off at Lisa's home at around 9.00 a.m. Some mornings Lisa has to distract Jayne until her Mum leaves but she usually settles down quickly.
Breakfast 9.15 a.m.	Jayne enjoys a breakfast of cereal and toast shortly after she arrives.
Morning activities 9.45 a.m.	Jayne potters around the kitchen area and plays with a range of toys such as blocks, doll and prams.
Snack 10.30 a.m.	Jayne has a light snack such as a drink and crackers or toast.
Change	Lisa or Marion change Jayne's nappy in the nappy changing area located off the rear hallway.
Sleep	Jayne takes her dummy and is settled in the conservatory area for a nap.
Lunch 12.30 p.m.	Jayne has lunch of sandwiches, fruit, yogurt and a drink.
Change	Lisa or Marion change Jayne's nappy in the nappy changing area located off the rear hallway.
Activities 1.25 p.m.	Jayne enjoys participating in planned creative activities such as painting or drawing.

Sleep	Jayne is settled for her second sleep in the conservatory area of the childminders home.
Afternoon activities	Now that the afterschool children have joined the service, Jayne joins in fun activities with her older brother Jack such as music and movement and dancing.
Dinner 4.00 p.m.	All the children have dinner at 4.00 p.m. and Jayne enjoys dinners like potatoes and beans or stew.
Activities	After dinner children beginning to depart from the service at different times and Jayne potters about choosing activities to keep her amused.
Departure 5.00 p.m.	Jayne's Mum or Dad or sometimes both parents come to collect Jayne and Jack from the setting. Lisa provides a verbal overview of the children's day.

## Well-being

Jayne joined Lisa's Childminding Service when she was nine months old. She attends for five days per week between 9.00 a.m. and 5.00 p.m. Lisa commented that when Jayne joined the setting initially, *she found it difficult to settle* as she had been at home full time with her Mum until this time. However with consistent care and attention, she developed a relationship with Lisa and learned to trust and feel secure in Lisa's home. Lisa recalled that this change in behaviour occurred around the time that Jayne learned to walk and she feels that the added independence that this gave Jayne helped her a lot. Jayne's Mum and Lisa agree that Jayne seems more content and although some mornings she needs to be distracted until Mum leaves, she generally settles quickly. Jayne's Mum commented that there was no getting away from the fact that *Jayne's first preference would be to stay at home with her Mum, Dad and Jack*. However, they appreciate the benefits of attending the childminding service for Jayne. Her parents remarked that she has *more opportunity to socialise and develop independence* to do things for herself in the busier environment of the childminder setting.

When indoors Jayne spends most of her time in the kitchen area – and usually stays quite close to Lisa. Lisa nurtures Jayne's physical well-being by providing physical activities which help her to gain increasing control and co-ordination of her body movements (Photo B. 2). By using a small slide positioned in the kitchen, I observed Lisa encouraging Jayne to climb the ladder, position herself at the top of the slide and slide down whilst Lisa held her hand. The activity was used to encourage Jayne to take turns and learn about the importance of sharing. I observed Lisa offering plenty of praise and encouragement throughout the activity and Jayne responded by smiling, clapping her hands and running to the back of the slide eager to repeat the activity.

Photo B.2. Jayne practising using the slide

## Identity and Belonging

Jayne's parents commented that one of the main benefits of attending the childminding service for them was the fact that Jayne could interact and have fun with her older brother when he came home from school in the afternoon (Photo B.3). Jack attends the afterschool service provided by Lisa and she commented that *Jayne's eyes light up every day when she sees him coming and she welcomes him in with a hug and a smile*. This childcare arrangement nurtures a fundamental sibling relationship and helps affirm Jayne's sense of security and belonging. For Jayne's and Jack's parents, this was an important factor in choosing the type of childcare setting for the children as common practice within some crèche settings is to separate children according to age.

### Photo B.3. Having fun with brother Jack

My observations of Jayne in the childminder's home showed that she could play contentedly alone for long periods of time but frequently sought places for herself near either Lisa or her brother Jack. Lisa described Jayne as a very *chilled out baby* and commented that Jayne likes her own space and occasionally has to be enticed to get involved in activities. She said that Jayne tends to *sit back and look on* but once she gets started she can play co-operatively alongside other children participating in activities like floor puzzles and building blocks. I observed Jayne playing alongside Michael on the floor for a period of ten minutes or so with some plastic blocks (Photo B4). Whilst she did not communicate verbally with Michael, or he with Jayne, there was a quiet co-operative harmony about their play.

### Photo B.4: Playing in harmony with Michael

## Communicating

Jayne listens and responds to spoken communication and appears to understand much more than she can say. She understands simple requests like *can you find your shoes?* and points to objects when she wants something. For example, when Lisa asked, *who wants a drink?* Jayne walked over to the cupboard and pointed to her cup and reiterated, *drink, me drink*.

Lisa is very aware that Jayne doesn't like being crowded or having too many children around her. When the older children come in from school they like to play with the younger children by singing and dancing with them. Jayne has developed the communication skills to express her dislike if the children crowd her space too much by holding up her hands, squealing and pushing them away. Lisa supports this individual choice and understands that there are times when Jayne wants to be quiet and reflective and opt out of the busy environment. Jayne has found a favourite place (Photos B.5 and B.6) in Lisa's home in the form of a low level recliner chair positioned by one of the walls in the kitchen. She frequently retreats to this chair with her bottle to observe what's going on and sometimes falls asleep.

#### Photos B.5 and B.6: Jayne's favourite place

Lisa promotes language in a fun, creative and playful way through activities like dancing to music and songs and rhymes, to support Jayne's learning and development in this area. Jayne particularly responds to the song, *Is this the way to Amarillo* and when Lisa plays this song during a music and movement activity, Jayne starts dancing in the middle of the floor, waving her arms, clapping her hands and bending her knees in time to the music (Photo B.7).

Photo B. 7: Jayne dancing to *Is this the way to Amarillo?*

Jayne demonstrates a preference for books and in particular books with stickers which she can peel off and move to other pages. Jayne's Mum says that she *can spend ages transferring small stickers from one page to another at home and points to pictures she recognises*. She also likes to look at the pictures in board books and using her senses to explore touch and feel books and pop up books. Lisa commented that she supports Jayne's language development by exploring picture books, identifying pictures which are meaningful to her like shoes, cat, house and encouraging Jayne to pronounce different words and sounds. Lisa usually carries out this type of activity with Jayne on her knee or with one or two other children to encourage her communication skills.

## Exploring and Thinking

Photo B.8. Jayne relaxing with Jack



Jayne gets excited when Lisa mentions going outside to play and she demonstrates this by clapping her hands and running towards the back door. Lisa pointed out that *Jayne seems to prefer outdoors more than indoors* and this is clearly seen as Jayne becomes much more animated whilst playing outdoors. Lisa's back garden is spacious with plenty of room for Jayne to run and explore. The garden is divided into a grass area and a safety surface area where even the youngest children can play on the small swings and slides. A range of different equipment is readily available such as bats, balls and hoops, a playhouse and a selection of push along toys and prams. Sometimes Jayne likes to sit beside Jack on the small swing, relaxing and observing what's going on (Photo B.8) and other times she goes exploring or pushes a pram.

Jayne's Mum reiterated her love of outdoors and commented that an enjoyable day for Jayne at home would involve her being outside as much as possible where she *likes to wander in and out of the garden, pottering about and picking up daisies*. She exhibits this preference for the outdoors to her parents by putting up her arms and saying, *walk, walk*. Jayne plays in the garden with her brother Jack on the slide, swings and see-saw. As she is getting older she has begun to spend long periods contentedly playing with Jack who is very protective and looks after her. At the moment she is going through a climbing stage and her Mum commented that *she wants to climb on everything and anything*. This gives Jayne an opportunity to explore and satisfies her growing curiosity by allowing her to see things from a different level and perspective.

#### Photos B.9 and B.10: Jayne drawing

In addition to music and movement activities and outdoor play, Lisa supports Jayne's capacity to learn through her senses by using creative activities like drawing, painting

and block play. I observed Jayne experimenting with media such as crayons (Photos B.9 and B.10) and paint. Jayne demonstrates frequent repetitive actions in her play as she is investigating how things work. She likes to put things into boxes and containers and take them back out again, repeatedly opens and closes doors and is generally very inquisitive. She can play for up to five minutes with blocks—putting them into a box and taking them out again, stacking them in towers and exploring them with her mouth.

During a busy play session in Lisa's kitchen, I observed Jayne listening to a tune on a small sit-and-ride toy and moving her arms and body to the music (Photo B. 11). She appeared to be able to process out the background noise in the busy kitchen and concentrate on the music. Jayne repeated this process a number of times by waiting until the tune ended and pressing the button again.

Photo B. 11: Jayne listens to a tune

## Conclusion

The childminding environment provides Jayne with lots of opportunities to interact with a range of children of different age groups. Jayne's parents feel that this socialisation aspect of attending the service alongside the fact that she has daily contact with her brother in the afternoons is very important for Jayne.

Lisa said that *Jayne is a great baby* and that she and her brother Jack make a *lovely addition to the group of children*. She commented that because she has had Jayne in her home since she was a baby, *it is rewarding seeing her coming on and learning new things as she gets older*.

## Toddlers: 18 months to three years

# Amy

## Photo C.1: Amy

Amy (Photo C.1) is two and a half years old. She is an only child and lives with her parents in the south-east of Ireland. Amy is a mature and articulate little girl and she attends a childcare centre called An Leabh Óg Crèche agus Naíonra every weekday, from 7.30 a.m. until around 5.00 p.m. while her Mum and Dad are at work.

## An Leanbh Óg Crèche agus Naíonra – Background and Context

In 1997 a community naíonra, an Irish medium pre-school for three to five year olds, was set up in the village. In 1999, with funding from the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform through the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme a childcare centre called An Leanbh Óg Crèche agus Naíonra was built. The centre continues to promote the use of Irish and is open from 7.30 a.m. to 5.30 p.m. Monday to Friday. There are 68 children on the role ranging in age from four months to eight years. Two children with special needs attend the centre. A good relationship is maintained with the local primary school (an English-medium school) which has approximately 70 children and three teachers. There are three rooms in An Leanbh Óg Crèche agus Naíonra including a baby room, a toddler room and a naíonra. Both a sessional and full-time service are offered in the naíonra. Amy is one of nine children in the toddler room. There are two staff members with Amy in the toddler room at all times. Anne, the room leader, has completed a BA in Early Childhood Studies, while the assistant, Margaret, has FETAC (Further Education and Training Awards Council) Level Five Childcare Training.

## Curriculum and assessment

The Manager of An Leanbh Óg Crèche agus Naíonra told me that the aim of the staff is to provide the best possible care and education for the children who attend the centre. The centre's mission statement is:

*to provide a quality, child-centred, welcoming, language-rich environment where Irish is absorbed by the child naturally through games, songs, fun, where equality and diversity are embraced, and where the health, safety, welfare, needs and rights of all children in our care is of paramount importance.*

(An Leanbh Óg Crèche agus Naíonra Parent Handbook, no date)

The Manager, who recently completed FETAC Level 6 Supervision in Childcare Training, said that parents of the children who attended were very aware of the ethos of the centre. Overall staff try to help the children to be caring people who respect themselves, each other and the environment. In each of the individual rooms the room

leader interprets this in her own particular way. Anne, the room leader in Amy's room explained that she aimed to provide a broad curriculum for the children and that she endeavoured to ensure that the eight areas of development (emotional, social, cognitive, physical, linguistic, creative, moral and spiritual) were supported. There are a variety of child-initiated and adult-led activities throughout the day in the toddler room and a fairly predictable routine is followed. Anne observes the children regularly to ensure they are progressing and she keeps a file of each child's work which is sent home at the end of each term. She also chats regularly to parents informally about their children's progress and around the time of their second birthday she also uses a Developmental Milestone Checklist to assess the children's development. The checklist focuses on their physical, linguistic, cognitive, social and emotional development.

**Table 6: A day in the centre for Amy**

Arrival 7.30 a.m.	When Amy arrives at the centre with her Mum in the morning she is often the first child there. Ellen, a staff member welcomes her and Amy often brings in her bowl of cereal from home because she doesn't feel like eating it when she gets up.
Breakfast 8.30 a.m.	Only a small number of children arrive before 9.00 a.m. so Ellen and the children play together and at 8.30 a.m. they have toast and a drink.
Activities 9.00 a.m.	Anne and Margaret arrive just before 9.00 a.m. and Amy and the other children help to tidy up the toddler room as this is where all the children who arrive early play together. For about 20 minutes after this, Amy plays freely with the toys often choosing to play with the dolls. At about 9.20 a.m. Amy and her friends play with the sand, the playdough, the water or the lentils. Some mornings they bake, making rice crispie buns or different types of cookies.
10.00 a.m.	Anne reads stories chosen by the children and after story-time singing, dancing and movement take place.
<sup>18</sup> Lón time (lunch) 10.30 a.m.	Amy helps the adults and the other children to tidy up. She washes her hands and gets her lón (lunch) and her drink from the fridge. She usually has a yoghurt drink and some fruit.
Nappy change 10.45 a.m.	Amy goes to the changing area with a staff member to have her nappy changed. She chats happily to Anne or Margaret while she is being changed.
Outside time 11.00 a.m.	Amy and the other children go outside to play. Amy puts on her coat and hat. She runs around, goes up and down the slide, kicks the ball, plays hide and seek, drives around on the pretend car.

<sup>18</sup> Throughout this portrait Irish words/phrases used by the practitioners and/or Amy are presented with the English translation.

Dinner 12.00 p.m.	Amy comes inside, takes off her coat, washes her hands and sits down to wait for her aunt Pauline (who is the chef in the centre) to bring in her dinner. Amy eats her dinner quickly. After dinner she has her nappy changed and brushes her teeth. She plays until Patricia comes to collect her to take her for her nap. Amy sleeps for about one and a half hours. When she is ready she has her nappy changed and has her tea, a piece of toast or a scone and a drink.
Activities 3.30 p.m.	Amy enjoys free-play with her friends. She builds with the blocks or plays with the dolls. Sometimes she threads beads or plays matching games or with the playdough.
4.00 p.m.	Amy helps tidy up and sits in a circle with her friends to listen to a story or to have a chat or sing songs.
Outside time 4.15 p.m.	Amy gets ready to go outside again. She plays outside weather permitting or if not she goes to the sensory room.
Departure 5.00 p.m.	Amy gets ready to go home. When her Mum or Dad arrives she runs to them and gives them a hug. Anne tells Amy's parent what sort of day she has had and Amy gives Anne a goodbye hug before she waves good-bye to her friends.

## Amy's experiences in An Leanbh Óg Crèche agus Naíonra

### Well-being

The room where Amy spends most of her day is a large rectangular room with direct access to child-sized toilets and to a nappy changing area. There is a door directly to the outside and windows are at the children's level and the window at the front looks on to the outdoor play area. There is bright yellow paint on the walls and the room is at an even temperature with under floor heating. There is a round table in the middle of the room with child-sized chairs around it. The room has a low level sink and a fridge for storing the children's lunches and drinks. There is a blackboard on one wall which is also at child level and there is a full-length mirror. There is a low level press with blocks, jigsaws, tea-sets, dolls and teddy bears. The sand tray is in the corner near the window. There is also a rack for drying paintings attached to the wall. Some materials are stored on high shelves but most things are accessible to the children. Aprons are hanging up in the corner at child level for use at messy play times. The daily routine and policies and procedures are displayed on the walls. The room is bright and inviting to Amy and her friends.



In the mornings Amy's Mum usually settles her in the room and they take off her coat and hang up her bag. Her Mum told me that *Amy enjoys coming to the centre but sometimes she is a bit reluctant on Monday mornings but once she is at the centre she is fine*. Every morning Amy has her breakfast in the centre. Anne commented that food was one of Amy's favourite things. The centre has a healthy eating policy and this is important for the children's well-being. Amy can feed herself and finishes everything she is given to eat. The children sit together at meal times and chat as they eat.

Amy goes for a nap every afternoon. In preparation, she cleans her teeth. Amy's Mum informed me that at home Amy was not keen on brushing her teeth but I didn't observe her showing any dislike for it in the centre. Amy brings a bottle of water with her to bed. Until recently Amy had a soother in the centre (her *dody*) but now she only uses this at bedtime at home. Patricia, a Community Employment staff member, usually stays in the sensory room while the children sleep. The children from the toddler room sleep in the sensory room (as no provision was made for a sleep area in the toddler room when the centre was being built) so before they go up every day Patricia prepares their beds and draws the curtains. Then she collects the children who are going for their nap. While children are sleeping, Patricia knits with the lights off and the curtains drawn, ready to comfort anyone who wakes up. If Patricia can't stay with them when they are asleep, the monitor is plugged in. Amy goes off happily for her nap with Patricia whom she has known since she was a baby. When Amy wakes up Patricia or another staff member brings her back to the toddler room and she likes to sit on Anne's lap or beside her for about 15 to 20 minutes before she gently makes her way back into playing with the others. Amy is up early every morning and this nap in the afternoon is important for her well-being.

Amy appears to have good relations with the adults in the toddler room. She seems very attached to Anne and Margaret (Photo C.2) and when she wants something or is upset in any way she goes directly to them. On one of the days I visited, Amy banged her head getting out of the cupboard where she had been playing and she was very upset. She ran straight to Anne who picked her up. Anne asked, *What happened Amy? I hurted my head*, Amy said. *Oh your poor head, will I rub it and give it a kiss?* Anne asked. Amy nodded in agreement. After a couple of minutes Amy was all right again and she went to join the others at the table. Owen, another child, asked, *Are you ok?* *Yep*, Amy said, *Anne made my head better.*

Amy is very familiar with the routine of the toddler room and is always given advance warning by Anne when moving on to a new activity. Transitions in the room are handled well and children are never left waiting very long as they move from one activity to another. There is a gentle flow to the day and Amy is happy knowing what is coming next.

## Identity and Belonging

Amy lives about nine miles away from An Leanbh Óg Crèche agus Naíonra but her Mum is originally from the area and Amy's aunt works as a chef in the centre so Amy's parents were anxious to have her attend this particular centre even though there were childcare centres closer to where they live. Amy started in the baby room when she was seven months old and settled very well according to her Mum. When she was one and a half she moved to the toddler room, and that is where she was when I visited the centre.

Many of the activities undertaken in the toddler room help to give Amy and her friends a sense of identity and belonging. Group time takes place every morning. This involves a variety of activities such as singing, playing with puppets and reading stories. The children sit around the table and most days they start the session by singing, *Dia dhuit (Hello)* (followed by each child's name) – *Dia dhuit Amy, Dia dhuit Ali* continuing until all the names have been called out and ending with *it's time to say Dia dhuit*. Singing each child's name allows the children to learn one another's names and makes each child feel special.

Displays of Amy's work also promote her sense of belonging in the group. There are a number of individual and group displays on the walls such as hand-prints of each child, nail brush paintings, cardboard balloons that each of the children painted themselves, a large beach display (Photo C.3) which I saw the children make, paintings and collages of pasted cut-outs from magazines. Each piece of work is identified by the child or children's name(s) on it. Displays are changed regularly. There is also a selection of children's photos at the back of the door including some of Amy.

The children's birthday display on the wall also helps to give the children a sense of belonging and identity in the room. Starting with the youngest and ending with the oldest, the dates of birth are stuck on to different animals and a little celebration is held for each child when it is his/her birthday. Amy's date of birth is attached to a lion.

C.3: Amy and friends making a beach display    C.4: Amy and Owen in a cubby hole

Some days, especially if the weather is too bad to go outside, Margaret or Anne takes the children in small groups to the sensory room. Here they blow bubbles, make jigsaws and/or listen to some soft music. Going to the sensory room gives Amy some time in a small group of two or three children and it allows for some one-to-one interaction with Margaret or Anne. Amy chats a lot when she is in the sensory room. She also loves climbing into the cupboard and hiding where no one can see her. Cubby holes appear to be something that Amy likes as she often empties out the contents of the cupboard in the toddler room and climbs in herself instead (Photo C.4).

Amy spends a considerable amount of time in the centre, about 45 hours per week. She clearly feels a sense of identity and belonging there. Her Mum told me that when she is at home Amy often talks about or pretends she is in the centre. She regularly mentions Anne and Margaret and in particular she talks about two of her friends, Lily and Caoimhe. Mum said that sometimes Amy pretends she is Anne and lines up her dolls and calls them by her two best friends' names. She tells them a story with the book pointing towards them making sure they can see the pictures just like Anne does in the centre.

## Communicating

Amy can express herself clearly, asking questions and explaining what she wants. Through being in the centre she has quite a vocabulary of Irish words. When asked about the benefits for Amy of attending the centre one of the things her Mum mentioned was Amy's use of Irish words. Mum commented that Amy often used Irish words at home, for example, Amy often says, *where are my brógaí (shoes)?* or *I want a deoch (drink)*. Amy also regularly intersperses her use of English with Irish words throughout the day in the centre. On one of my visits, Amy was listening to Anne reading a story about a little boy called Buster who was getting dressed. The story related how Buster put on his *geansaí (jumper)*, *stocaí (socks)*, *bríste (trousers)*, *brógaí (shoes)* and *hata (hat)*. In the middle of the story, Amy interjected saying, *I have my pink bríste (trousers) on today.*<sup>19</sup>

Anne and Margaret communicate with Amy in a number of ways and they use a mixture of English and Irish in the toddler room. They get down to Amy's physical level regularly and they listen when she has something to say. In the toddler room there are a number of books in both English and Irish. Story-time is part of the routine everyday and I observed Amy getting her turn pointing out things in the books such as different animals, foods, modes of transport. When looking at the book on transport Anne showed the children pictures and asked, *What are they and where do we see them?* When the picture of the tractor came up Anne asked, *Does any one have a tractor at home?* Amy responded, *My Daddy has a tarracóir (tractor)*. Amy is very familiar with the picture books about different animals, foods and fruits and can name all the

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<sup>19</sup> Like many of the other parents, Amy's parents do not use Irish in their home. The practitioners in the setting greet the parents in Irish and the parents learn words and phrases from the children.

objects. She also relates what she sees in the books to her own life. For example one day when I was in the centre she interjected, *I have those (grapes and apples) for my lón (lunch)* and when looking at a book about teeth she commented, *I wash my teeth too*. Hearing and discussing stories which are relevant and familiar help strengthen Amy's sense of identity and belonging as well as extending her vocabulary and understanding. Amy is familiar with many of the books and stories in the centre and can often predict what is going to happen next. Sometimes she and the other children just like to sit on the mat and explore the books themselves, turning the pages, pointing out things they are familiar with, and talking about what they see. (Photo C.5).

Photo C.5: Amy looking at the books

Photo C.6: Amy dancing with friends

Neither Amy's Mum nor Anne highlighted dancing as being one of Amy's favourite activities. However, from my observations I think singing and dancing are two things that Amy really loves. In the centre she is quite serious and as Anne said, *Amy is like a little mother, wanting to know everything that is going on, helping the little ones* and so on. When she dances Amy's whole expression changes and her sense of happiness and delight are clearly communicated (Photo C.6). She particularly enjoys *Heads, shoulders, knees and toes; I'm a dingle dangle scarecrow* and *Istigh sa sú (In the Zoo)*. She also clearly enjoys it when Margaret or Anne takes out the musical instruments and she loves marching around the room making lots of music and noise. Expressing herself in a variety of ways is important for Amy. Though her mastery of language is excellent she is quite reserved but through music and dance she seems to enjoy the freedom to express herself through a different medium.

## Exploring and Thinking

Painting, playing with sand (Photo C.7), water, lentils and playdough give Amy lots of opportunities to be creative and to explore and think. Anne said that one of the many things that Amy enjoyed was messy play: finger painting, sand, water and so on. Her Mum also confirmed this, noting that Amy's favourite things in the toddler room were water and sand. Amy often likes to play with the sand near Anne and on one of my visits Anne and Amy played together making cakes. Amy filled a plastic saucer with sand and asked Anne, *Would you like some cake?* Anne responded, *Yes, have you any cream?* Amy said, *Yes* and put more sand in the saucer and offered it to Anne. Anne said, *Thank you*, and proceeded to eat the cake with her fingers. Amy said, *You must use a spoon when you are eating your cake*, and then Amy handed a spoon to Anne. Anne said, *O.K. thanks* and then proceeded to "eat" the cake that Amy had given her.

Amy often moves from the sand to play with the baby bath that has lentils in it. On one of the occasions I was in the room Amy felt the lentils running through her fingers. She held an empty plastic water bottle and carefully poured the lentils into it with a spoon and then emptied it out, repeating the activity over and over again. Anne talked to Amy about filling and emptying, about heavy and light. Amy had a full bottle while Anne's bottle was empty. Anne asked Amy, *Which is empty? Which is full? Which is heavy? Which is light?* Lily came over and wanted to take Amy's bottle. Amy started to cry and complained to Anne that Lily was trying to take her bottle. Anne asked how they could solve the problem and Amy found an empty bottle and handed it to Lily and they began to play together (Photo C.8).

Photo C.7: Amy at sand play

Photo C.8: Amy and Lily at with the lentils

On another visit, I observed Amy chatting to Lily during playdough time. She told Lily, *I'm going to make a dog*. She asked Anne, *Will you make a dog for me?* Anne said, *I won't make it for you but I will help*, and she came over and they all worked together making different things, sharing the rollers, plastic knives and shapes. Amy often hums some of the songs that they sing in the centre when she is playing with the playdough. Another activity that Amy does on most days is colouring on blank pages with large chunky crayons. She colours with her right hand. (Photo C.9). Anne sits beside Amy sometimes when she is colouring and she often asks Amy to tell her about her picture.

Photo C.9: Amy drawing

Photo C.10: Amy doing jigsaws

Amy is able to complete the jigsaws that are available to her in the centre and she concentrates really hard when she is doing them, moving the pieces around until she finds the correct places to put them (Photo C.10). Sometimes she asks Anne or Margaret for assistance. I heard them advising her to move the piece around or to try another piece but generally she could complete them herself. Some days Amy plays the *Abracadabra* game. I saw this game on a few of the occasions when I visited and Amy enjoyed taking her turns at trying to remember what had disappeared. During the game, Anne got a tray and placed three or four items on it such as a toy phone, a hairbrush, a teacup, a book. Anne then covered it with a tea towel, waved her hand over it, said *Abracadabra*, and picked up the tea towel hiding one item inside. Amy and her friends each had a turn at trying to identify what had disappeared. Anne continued to do it until all four items were gone and repeated the game to ensure everyone got a chance to play.

Outdoors at the centre Amy has lots of opportunities to explore. Children usually spend from lón (lunch time) to dinnertime outside (weather permitting). Her Mum said that Amy loved playing outside at the centre and she enjoyed spending time outside at home too, sitting on the ride-on lawn mower with her Dad when it was not moving and going to the local lake to feed the ducks. Anne said that outside Amy liked the slide and playing with the other children. The staff prioritise outside time every day and the Manager often lets staff know the weather forecast so that the routine can be changed around to make sure the children go outside early if it is going to rain.

The outside play area is at the front of the building as the site is very small with no space at the back. It is safely secured by a wall and a gate. The floor surface is cushioned and there is a large caterpillar which children can climb through. There is a play house and a large slide which is supervised at all times. There are different sized balls available to the children as well as two seesaws and some ride-on cars. The children are really disappointed when they can't go outside. One day when I visited Anne said, *It is raining, we may not be able to go outside today.* Amy asked Anne to check several times to see if the rain had stopped. When the rain did eventually stop, the children and staff ran out and used towels to dry all the equipment so that they could enjoy their time outdoors.

Outside I observed Amy spending lots of time on the slide developing the skills of climbing and sliding. I watched Anne encourage Amy to take turns with the other children helping her to learn to share. Amy is still a bit nervous and I heard her say on a few occasions, *Anne, hold me won't you?* Anne encouraged Amy to master the task on her own but was always close by which provided Amy with the confidence and security to try it herself, knowing Anne could help if she was scared.

Amy also regularly plays hide and seek with Anne and two or three other children. Anne told me that Amy thoroughly enjoyed this game. I was able to witness this game on one of my visits and would agree that it was something Amy really enjoys. The children ran off and hid. Anne stood at the door with eyes covered counting to ten. Then she ran off to find the children. They squealed with delight when she found them. Then Anne hid while they stood at the door with eyes covered, though I caught them cheating by taking a peep once or twice (Photo C.11). After a few seconds of waiting



the children ran off trying to discover where Anne was and they squealed with excitement when they found her hiding behind the play house.

Photo C.11: Amy and Caoimhe playing hide and seek

## Conclusion

Amy is usually collected by her Mum and gives her a big hug when she arrives. When she gets home in the evening Amy enjoys playing with her dolls. She also enjoys books, colouring and playing with water. She listens to a story downstairs before she goes to bed with her *dody* (soother). At weekends helping her Mum wash the dishes, shopping, visiting her small cousins and going off with her Dad who is a part-time farmer are some of her favourite activities. Mum said, *the centre is a big part of Amy's life and I feel she is very well cared for while she is there and that she benefits from being there, especially socially.*

## Seán and Patrick

Seán is nineteen months old. His brother Patrick is four years and nine months old. They also have a brother called Gerard who is six. Seán is an outgoing, sociable little boy and Patrick is a confident and talkative child (Photo D.1). Their Dad, Eamonn, is a farmer and their Mum, Sineád, is a Public Health Nurse. The family lives on a farm on the outskirts of a village in the south-east. Mum job-shares and works three days one week and two the next. Dad works full-time on the farm. A childminder called Brenda comes into the boys' own home to look after them while their Mum and Dad are at work. This portrait looks at Seán and Patrick in the context of their home experiences.<sup>18</sup>

Photo D.1: Seán and Patrick with Mum

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<sup>18</sup> The boys' Dad was very involved in their early learning and development as illustrated through the portrait. Much of the information from the parents' perspective was given by the Mum, as the Dad was not available to chat to me during my visits to the boys' home.

**Table 7: A day for Seán and Patrick at home**

Wake up 7.30 a.m. to 8.00 a.m.	Seán wakes around 7.30 a.m. and his Mum gives him a bottle of milk to drink in his cot. At around 8.00 a.m. she gets him changed and dressed and he comes downstairs to have his breakfast. Patrick usually wakes around 8.00 a.m. and gets dressed himself and comes downstairs to have his breakfast.
9.00 a.m.	Three mornings a week Patrick goes to playschool. On the other two mornings he goes off to the farm with his Dad. Seán spends time with his Mum or he goes off in the jeep with his Dad when Patrick is in playschool.
11.00 a.m.	Seán has a snack with Mum.
11.00 a.m. to 1.00 p.m.	Seán plays inside or outside or he goes for a walk with his Mum and they go to collect Patrick from playschool at 12.30 p.m.
1.00 p.m.	The boys have their dinner with Mum and Dad or they have a light lunch with Dad and Brenda if Mum is at work.
2.00 p.m.	The boys and their Mum go to collect their older brother from school.
2.30 p.m.	Seán goes for a nap and the two older boys play together.
4.00 p.m.	Seán gets up, has a drink and plays with his brothers or by himself.
6.00 p.m.	The family have their tea or if Mum is working they all have their dinner together in the evenings. Dad and Mum spend some time with the boys before bed.
7.30 p.m.	The boys have a bath and a story before bed.

## Seán and Patrick's experiences at home

### Well-being

Patrick and Seán live in a two-storey house and have access to a fully secured garden with lots of equipment including a sand tray with a digger, a slide, two swings and a see-saw, a goal-post, ride-on cars and tractors. The area at the side of the house contains a large number of pots where the boys have sown a variety of seeds and plants such as lettuce, parsley, onions and strawberries. The kitchen has a homely feel to it with an Aga cooker, a big bowl of fruit on the counter and a high chair for Seán in the corner. When Mum is at work, Brenda their childminder comes into Patrick's and Seán's home to look after them. Before Seán was born, the two older boys went to another childminder's house. The childminder was moving away so Mum and Dad decided to look for someone to come and look after the boys in their own home. Mum and Dad feel that there are a lot of benefits to this. The boys' own home is secure, the

garden is fenced in and dangerous things are kept out of reach. Mum leaves food for the family so she knows what they are eating. If the boys are not going to school or playschool they don't have to get out of bed before Mum goes to work. Mum said it was especially good in the winter as the boys were at home nice and cosy by the fire when she and Dad arrived home from work. Mum told me that she was *glad that Seán gets to sleep in his own cot and gets fed in his own high chair*. She felt *the boys love being in their own house having all their own toys around them*. Mum said she and Dad felt that the current arrangement with the childminder coming to the boys' home was much better for the boys, and that they were much happier with the situation and so were the boys.

Dad calls in at home regularly during the day for meals and often takes the boys off with him in the jeep. Granny who lives next door also calls in and Seán or Patrick might go over to her house and stay there for a while. Dad and Granny are also there to provide backup for Brenda if needed. Mum commented to me that the boys liked Brenda, the childminder, and that Seán had known her since he was a baby. Sometimes Seán gets a little upset when Mum is going to work but he is fine after a couple of minutes. The days the childminder is with Seán are much the same as when Mum is at home. Brenda takes him for walks, takes him out in the garden and keeps him in his usual routine. When Brenda is there Patrick usually goes to playschool in the mornings and then goes off with Dad after dinner or plays with his brothers. Mum commented that she and Dad *were happy knowing that the boys are being well cared for. We feel that being with the childminder increases their independence and socialisation*.

Patrick goes to a local playschool three mornings a week. There is two staff in the setting with about eight children. Gerard went there too before he started primary school and Seán will attend when he is three. Mum and Dad chose it for their children because it had a great reputation and because it was convenient and local and so the children would meet others who would be starting school with them. The curriculum is play based and the staff are very warm and friendly, Mum told me. She said they greeted the children brightly every morning and *always tell you how your child is getting on*. Mum believed that the benefits for Patrick of attending playschool included getting him used to a structured environment, mixing with his own age group and making friends independently of his big brother. She said it also allowed him to get used to

adults other than his parents and childminder. Mum said that Patrick loved playschool and ran in every morning. Secure relationships are central to children's well-being and attachment to adults other than parents is really important for young children. Through the childminder and the playschool Patrick has the benefit of close relationships with adults and children in his own community.

On being asked about the benefits for the boys of being with their parents, Mum stated that no one could love and care for them the way they did. She said that she and Dad ensured that the boys had a proper diet, that they got plenty of sleep and exercise, and that they followed a fairly consistent routine, going to bed at the same time, getting up at around the same time and so on. She said they understood the boys, knew what they needed, provided stimulation for them, were patient with them, offered them comfort especially if they fell or were upset about anything and gave them lots of hugs. She said they made a point of praising and encouraging the boys and their priorities in regard to the boys were that they were happy, healthy and doing what they should be doing for their age and stage of development.

## Identity and Belonging

Patrick and Seán live on a farm and they readily identify with this. Seán loves anything to do with farming including tractors, books about cows that you can feel and toy animals. Some mornings, especially if Patrick is at playschool, Seán goes off in the jeep with his Dad around the farm. Mum said he loves to look out from his car seat at the cows. Patrick also loves anything to do with farming. On the days he is not going to playschool he likes to go off to the farm with his Dad in the morning. I asked Patrick what he did on the farm and he told me that he *checks the cattle, walks the fields, takes the wrapping off the silage bales*. Mum said a particularly good day for Patrick was a day when he spent time with his Dad going to the farm or playing football. (Photo D.2). Mum said, *Dad is a very important part of the boys' lives and they learn from both of us*.

Photo D.2: Patrick and Gerard playing football with Dad

Patrick and Seán know their community well and have lots of connections in the area in which they are living. The boys' paternal grandparents live next door and the boys see them daily. Sometimes Granddad collects Patrick when playschool is over. (Photo D.3). Granddad is 82 and walks a bit slowly but his Mum said *Patrick always walks along with him and never runs away*. Some days, Patrick, Seán and Mum go for a walk to the local church. On the way the two boys look in at the cattle in their fields and Patrick climbs their gates as he passes them. (Photo D.4). As cars drive past, people wave. In this small village everyone knows everyone else and on the day I went for the walk with Mum and the two boys, Patrick was able to tell me exactly who passed in the cars.

Photo D.3: Patrick with his Granddad      Photo D.4: Patrick climbing a farm gate

Patrick also knows who owns the fields across the road and he made a point of telling me that *they're not ours* [the fields], *they're Brendan Mulligan's*. On the way to the

church the boys pass the local primary school. Sometimes, as they did on the day I was with them, they go by at 11.00 a.m. when the children are outside playing. Many of the children know Patrick by name and say hello to him. Sometimes his brother Gerard sees him pass and comes over to say hi and to have a race, Gerard inside the school wall, Patrick outside. At the beginning of the church wall Gerard said *Good-bye, see you later* and ran off to join his classmates. Patrick ran on to open the gate on the way into the church to make room for Seán's buggy. Inside the church Patrick pressed the button to light a candle (Photo D.5) and then sat beside his Mum to say a prayer.

Photo D.5: The boys in the church

The way their home is organised communicates a sense of belonging to the boys. There are a variety of children's toys and books scattered around. Lots of photos of the three boys hang on the walls. Coat hooks are at child level, wellingtons and shoes are stored just inside the back door on two shelves accessible to the boys and the hallway is covered in paintings by the children. Gerard the oldest boy has one wall of the hall for displaying his work while Patrick has the other. Patrick proudly showed me his wall and told me *I have more pictures than Gerard*.

With three boys in the house Mum said she and Dad prioritised spending time with each of the boys on their own to give them a sense of their own identity. While Patrick is at playschool Mum has some one-to-one time with Seán, reading a story, going for a walk or playing on the swing. Patrick also spends time on his own with Mum. Sometimes she takes him swimming or shopping or they read a book together or do some baking at home. He also helps his Mum a lot around the house. She told me that he was *a great little helper*. He puts dirty clothes in the washing machine, makes his

bed and on one of the days I visited, he had just finished vacuuming the kitchen floor. Trips enjoyed by Patrick include going shopping with Mum, going to the playground in town, visiting his maternal Granny and Granddad, visiting cousins, going swimming, going to the cinema and the seaside. He also talks a lot about big brother Gerard and he told me that he enjoyed playing hurling, hide and seek, chase and playing tractors and football with him. Dad takes each of the boys to the farm on his own during the course of the week and spends time with them in the evenings when he gets in from work. He also takes the two bigger boys, Patrick and Gerard to hurling and football training at the local primary school every Sunday morning. Clearly Patrick and Seán have a real sense of who they are and where they belong both at home and in their community.

## Communicating

Both Seán and Patrick communicate well. Patrick speaks clearly and can articulate himself very well. When asked about the playschool he attends Patrick gave me lots of information. He told me that his best friend at playschool was James. On being asked what he liked best about playschool Patrick said, *lunch time and playing outside*. I asked him if they had things to play with outside and he told me there were lots of things to play with including a playhouse, tricycles, a see saw, a scooter and a sand pit. Patrick expressed a preference for going on the scooter and going on nature walks to see the sheep. Patrick's strong connection to his experience of living on a farm is clearly evident again here. Indoors at playschool, Patrick said his favourite things were books, playdough, painting, colouring, jigsaws and tidying up. He also told me that he liked the day his Mum came into the playschool. She talked to the children about going on a visit to the doctor and about healthy eating and the kind of things to bring to playschool for lunch. Patrick told me, *We got dressed up as nurses and doctors and it was great fun*. On being asked what the grown-ups do in the playschool Patrick said, *They tell you what to do, let us paint, make the playdough, have a party if it's your birthday and they have a copy that you have to do letters in*. Patrick is a very confident child who seems to love everything about his life. When asked whether there was anything that he didn't like, he said *Nothing*, and his Mum said there was nothing either.



Mum said that Seán was a very easy-going and content little boy who was only beginning to use words but she said they (his Mum and Dad) could generally understand what he wanted and that they facilitated him expressing himself by listening to him babbling and by interpreting things for him. She explained that when she was out walking with him, she pointed things out and named them for him and that Dad did the same when he and Seán were together on the farm. Mum also commented that even though Seán didn't have many words he could make himself understood and if his brothers took something away from him he let them know that he wanted it back and that they tended to give back whatever it was they took from him fairly quickly!

Seán points a lot to get what he wants and he and Patrick get along very well together often without saying a word. On one of the occasions I visited the family the two boys played together at the sand tray (Photo D.6) digging, sharing shovels and working together without uttering a word. There was non-verbal communication going on that was interesting to watch. Seán was shovelling sand from the sand tray into the wheelbarrow. Patrick came over and Seán gave him a shovel. Patrick followed Seán's lead shovelling the sand into the wheelbarrow. When the wheelbarrow was full Patrick emptied it on to the grass. Both boys started to shovel the sand back into the wheelbarrow. Seán was having trouble doing this, he grunted as he tried to get the shovel into the sand but the toy digger was impeding him. Patrick moved the digger and Seán began shovelling the sand enthusiastically into the wheelbarrow. This was done without one word being exchanged between the boys.

Seán loves going outside and Mum said that any day Seán gets to go out was a good day for him. If the door opens he runs out or if the door is closed, he stands beside it with his coat and if the weather is dry at all, Mum lets him go out because she knows he loves it. Seán doesn't need words to tell Mum that he wants to go out. He appears to be a happy little boy and he communicates this in a number of ways, by smiling as he toddles around the house, by using positive body language and good eye contact and by interacting well with his Mum, Dad and brothers.

Photo D.6: The boys at the sand tray      Photo D.7: Reading a story with Mum

Mum communicates with the boys in a number of different ways. She talks to them, listens to them, smiles at them, gets down to their physical level and hugs them. I observed Mum and the boys communicating during a story time session (Photo D.7). Seán sat on Mum's knee and Patrick sat beside her. Both boys listened intently to the story of *That's not my kitten* which Mum said was Seán's favourite. The boys got the opportunity to feel the book and Mum asked questions along the way. She targeted her interactions to suit each boy's stage of learning. She asked Seán to show her the kitten, the bed, the chair. She asked Patrick to count the flowers and to tell her what colour the kitten was. Patrick interjected to ask questions and at one stage told Mum she was holding the book upside down, when she was holding it the right way up. For the last page you have to turn the book upside down to find the kitten! Seán pointed at the pictures and throughout the story Mum smiled and used non-verbal communication as well as language and the boys responded positively.

## Exploring and Thinking

Seán explores inside and outside at home. His Mum said he loves climbing on chairs, stairs and anything he sees. He loves his trucks and his dinky cars and flicking through his books. Seán also likes emptying drawers, taking saucepans out of the cupboard, emptying the toy box. In the utility room there is a cupboard with no safety catches where there are things that are safe for Seán to play with. His favourite is a selection of plastic pudding bowls. He takes them out, stacks them up, puts things into them and sometimes even puts them on his head (Photo D.8).

Photo D.8: Seán with the pudding bowl

Some mornings, Seán tries to help Mum empty the dishwasher or the washing machine. He also likes turning on and off the television with the remote control which is something his Mum doesn't always like! Playing peek-a-boo is another thing that Seán does regularly. He hides out in the hall and pops his head around the corner of the kitchen and Mum asks, *Where is he?* Seán runs down the hall squealing with delight and repeats the activity several times. I played this game with Seán and he absolutely loved it and didn't want it to stop. Seán's favourite trips and activities include going to the swings in the local playground, sitting in his buggy looking at the cows, being in the back of the jeep going around the farm, going to the church to light a candle, sitting on Dad's lap on the tractor or on the ride-on-lawnmower holding the steering wheel when it is not moving (Photo D.9). He also likes sitting in the shopping trolley and putting things in and taking them out.

Photo D.9: The boys with Dad on the lawnmower

Outside Seán digs with his shovel and sometimes plays with the compost if Mum is working in the garden. If his Mum is hanging out the washing he hands her the pegs. Seán often tries to kick a ball and sometimes he just stands and watches his brothers playing football. *Seán loves to play with his brothers and wants to be part of the gang*, commented his Mum. He also likes Mum to push him on the swing. He laughs as she pushes him higher and higher and he gets upset when she tries to bring him inside.

Patrick also gets lots of opportunities at home to explore and to think. He plays with the blocks and I observed him talking to himself as he was building up the blocks. I heard him say *I made a tower. This is a big tower, it would win a medal*. His Mum told him that it was a very tall tower. He built the tower higher and then knocked it down only to rebuild it and do the same thing again, constructing, deconstructing and reconstructing. Outdoors at home Patrick said he liked to play in the sandpit, on the swings, with his tractor, watering plants with the hose, using his small wheelbarrow and using his own tools to help Mum in the garden. On being asked what his favourite toy was, Patrick announced *the big red tractor Santa gave me for Christmas is just the best* (Photo D.10).

Photo D.10: Patrick on his red tractor

Photo D.11: The boys on the phone to Dad

In the sand tray Patrick pours and measures, shovels and feels different textures—wet sand, dry sand, water, stones. He moves around on his tractor going forward and reversing. Most days when Patrick comes home from playschool he rings his Dad on the phone and if he is nearby he comes to collect him to go farming. His Mum calls out the mobile number and Patrick keys the numbers in himself. Patrick talks to Dad and

then hands the phone to Seán (Photo D.11). Through using the phone Patrick has a very good understanding of the numbers one to ten. Not only can he recite them but he can also recognise them on the phone pad, on books and on car registration plates. Down on the farm he counts the animals and discovers different aspects of nature such as calves being born, crops being saved and the changing of the seasons. While helping his Mum or Granny bake, he is learning about weights and measures, about different textures and temperatures. Through reading stories with Mum Patrick gets opportunities to explore and think. Patrick's favourite book is about tractors and diggers and Mum read it for him on one of the occasions I visited the family. Patrick clearly loved it and talked about his own tractor enthusiastically during the story. He explored concepts through the story comparing the size of the wheels on his tractor with the ones in the book and I heard him say, *I think mine are wider*. Mum and Patrick looked at the picture of the digger and Mum asked Patrick, *Is it like our one?* Patrick told her, *It isn't because the bucket for scooping up is different*. The book also talked about tractors from bygone days and Mum told Patrick about Granddad's old tractor. Patrick was really interested and wanted to know how it worked and how fast it went. Mum said she was not sure and that they would have to ask Granddad the next time they saw him.

## Conclusion

At the moment Seán has just progressed from babyhood to toddlerhood. He has learned to walk, climb, feed himself and is becoming independent. Mum feels that she and his Dad help him learn and develop by talking to him, playing with him, singing, telling stories, letting him take part in tasks like brushing the floor and dusting or doing things down on the farm with Dad. In September, Patrick will be starting in the local primary school which is only a few hundred yards away from his own house. It is a two-teacher school with thirty-two pupils at present. There will be two other children starting in junior infants with Patrick and he will be in a composite classroom with junior and senior infants, first and second class. Patrick is already very familiar with the school from collecting his big brother Gerard and his Mum said *We don't expect him to have any problems starting. He just can't wait to go*. Patrick and Seán are two very happy and healthy little boys. They enjoy being at home with their family and have lots of opportunities to learn there.

## Harry

Harry (Photo E.1) is three years old and is the second youngest in a family of five children who moved to Ireland from Nigeria a number of years ago. He is a happy and good-natured child. At home Harry likes to play with his brothers and sisters and enjoys listening to music, looking at books and watching television. He likes being outdoors and enjoys going for walks with his family and playing on the swings. Harry attends a crèche in the north-east of Ireland from 9.30 a.m. until around 5.00 p.m. Monday to Friday while his Mum and Dad are at work.

Photo E1: Harry

## Poppyfields community crèche: Background and context

Poppyfields community crèche is located in a large town in the north-east region. It is a community based early years service offering full daycare and part-time/sessional care for toddlers and young children. The service provides affordable childcare for staff, adults returning to work on training schemes and people in the local area. Five children with special needs attend the setting. Poppyfields community crèche is a purpose built childcare centre which is due for renovation and expansion as demand for spaces and resources grow. Currently there are two main rooms—the Acorn Room which caters for young toddlers and the Oak Room for young children where Harry is based. Fifteen children attend this room on a part-time and full-time basis. There are two room leaders and a number of assistants so that the ratio of adult to child is always one to three. Staff members have participated in a range of childcare related courses and programmes both accredited and non-accredited. The ongoing professional development of staff is viewed as essential and training opportunities are regularly made available to the staff team.

Harry has a Key Worker, Molly, who spends two hours a day with him from 9.30 a.m. to 11.30 a.m. The rest of her time is divided between the other children with special needs. While she has received some training in this area all staff would welcome opportunities to further develop their skills in relation to special educational needs.

## Curriculum and assessment

The Manger informed me that the overall aim of Poppyfields community crèche was to *provide a caring, nurturing and stimulating environment for each child to enable them to reach their full potential*. The room leaders are familiar with the four broad themes outlined in the *Framework for Early Learning* and have recently begun to consider them when planning monthly and termly activities. Daily and weekly activities for the group are planned around topics and their main influence to date on their planning work has been the U.K.'s Qualifications and Curriculum Authority's *Early Learning Goals for under-fives*. Staff explained that they felt that this resource supported them in providing a broad and

balanced curriculum while also ensuring that the children's personal, social, communication, cognitive, physical and creative skills were catered for. The curriculum used in the crèche involves the children learning through play, practical experiences, exploration, discussion and through working individually and with others. Children participate in activities that they are interested in and activities are primarily child-led. Within this there is a predictable structure and routine to each day which the children are clearly used to and there is an air of activity and busyness in the room.

Both room leaders try to ensure that the curriculum and routine provided for the children change according to their needs, interests and the time of year. For example, during term one they find that they tend to concentrate on developing communication and independence skills and there is a strong emphasis on personal, social and health education such as washing hands, eating independently, taking care of own belongings and so on. In term two the focus shifts slightly towards developing creative and mathematical skills. The spring and summer months enable staff to further develop children's physical skills and to expand their knowledge and understanding of the world with trips, outside activities, etc. Opportunities to develop early literacy and numeracy skills occur informally in almost every activity.

As well as listening to the children, staff regularly observe and record aspects of children's learning and development. Examples of their work are collected on an ongoing basis and sent home to parents. The two room leaders get together on a weekly/monthly basis for planning meetings. This gives them an opportunity to share information about individual children's progress. Molly also contributes to discussions about Harry's progress. At the moment all information regarding children's learning and development is relayed verbally and informally to parents on a daily basis. Where a delay in development is perceived it is brought to parents' attention and guidance and suggestions are offered. Where necessary, parents are provided with additional information where access to other supports such as health services, might be beneficial for the child.



## Harry's experiences in Poppyfields Community Crèche

Harry joined the crèche 18 months ago and attends five days per week. Harry's Mum reported a relatively easy transition from home to the crèche. Either his Mum or Dad drops him off at the crèche and he usually arrives around 9.30 a.m. He stays in the crèche until he is picked up at 5.00 p.m. The crèche which would be well-known as catering for children with special needs was recommended to Harry's parents by their doctor when it was noted that his development in certain areas was delayed. Harry has been diagnosed as having autism.

**Table 8: A day in the crèche for Harry**

9.00 to 9.30 a.m.	Harry arrives at the crèche with his Mum or Dad. He is greeted by staff members and runs to an activity. Some mornings he has some breakfast.
9.30 a.m. to 11.30	Harry spends intensive one-on-one time with his Key Worker, Molly.
12.00 p.m.	Harry has dinner with the other children in the crèche and then he plays before getting ready for his nap.
12.30 p.m. to 3.00 p.m.	Harry has a nap.
3.00 p.m. to 3.30 p.m.	Harry plays before having a snack.
3.30 p.m. to 5.00 p.m.	Harry plays in the crèche before getting ready to go home. He listens to stories, looks at books, listens to music, plays with the toy animals.

### Well-being

The crèche is housed in a two-storey building with a long entrance hallway leading to a small reception office, child-sized toilet facilities and a small kitchen area where dinner is prepared each day. On the walls are welcoming notices, information boards, certificates of attainment by the staff and photographs of the children on recent outings. Off this hallway are the two main rooms which are warm, brightly painted and welcoming. Harry spends most of his day in a long rectangular room which is divided into distinct areas such as the sand/water areas, the role play/home area, the library area and the small play area. There are two round tables in the middle of the room for art and table-top activities. The walls are covered with colourful displays of the children's work.

Two large windows at the children's level at one end of the room enable all the children to look outside. The room also has a low level sink, a black board and a full-length mirror on one wall which are also at child level. Aprons are hanging up in the corner at child level for use at sand/water play and a wardrobe for dressing up is within everyone's reach in the home area. There are a wide range of activities and resources available for the children. Some are stored out of reach but most materials such as books, toys, dolls, cars, garages, doll houses, games are accessible to all.

While the crèche has some outdoor space for the children to use there is no outdoor play equipment at present. Activities outdoors usually consist of walks around the local area, trips to the local playground and water pool activities when weather permits during the summer months. However, the crèche has access to an empty prefab next door which they use for additional movement activities such as Gymboree (music and movement sessions) once a week.

If Harry arrives before 9.30 a.m. he has breakfast (Photo E.2). At 12.00 p.m. dinner is served to all the children. Harry has learned to feed himself independently this year and tries out more tastes and textures in what he eats. The crèche has a healthy eating policy and this is very important for the children's well-being.

Photo E.2: Harry at breakfast time

Although Harry's autism has only recently been confirmed it was clear to the staff from the outset that Harry would need additional adult attention in the crèche in order to meet

his learning and developmental needs. Molly, Harry's Key Worker, has been assigned to work with all of the children with special needs in the crèche so she tries to make maximum use of her daily two-hour session with Harry. During this period Molly works exclusively on a one-to-one basis with Harry (Photo E.3) ensuring that he is stimulated and engaged in a range of activities and encouraging his emerging communication skills. When Molly moves to the other room to work with the other children Harry is supported by the room leaders and assistant staff. During my visits, staff were concentrating on developing links with the Health Board's Intervention Team to ensure that the work they were doing with Harry was appropriate to his stage of development. Both Molly and the two room leaders were looking forward to receiving some additional guidance and ideas for extending Harry's learning.

Harry spends a considerable amount of time in the crèche each week and additional one-to-one attention through Key Worker hours is high on their list of priorities for the staff. As Harry has now been formally assessed as having autism, the Intervention Team will work with Harry's parents and with Harry himself. Harry has already had one or two sessions with a Speech Therapist from the Intervention Team and the use of the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) is being considered with Harry to progress his communication skills.

Photo E.3: Harry with Molly

## Identity and Belonging

Harry appears to be very content in the crèche and he runs in the door every morning and heads straight for an activity. Although he is not able to communicate verbally Harry's Mum explained that, *if Harry didn't want to be here, believe me, we would know!* Harry clearly identifies with Molly and is very attached to her. When he has difficulty finding something or needs help with a particular activity he seeks her out. She reads his individual gestures, expressions and body language and uses these to interpret and respond to his needs each day. Lack of verbal communication skills means that it is a challenge for Harry to interact with his peers. Far from wishing to play in isolation, he plays quite happily alongside and often in close proximity to the other children and they relate well to him.

Harry appears to have developed a sense of identity within the group. On several occasions he noticed me taking photographs and insisted on looking at them in the display setting. As I scrolled through the digital photos of the other children he laughed and looked around as if to try and spot the other children. Harry appears to be very comfortable with all of the adults in the group and is not disturbed by the changes as staff members relieve each other for breaks. He appears to be very aware of the setting's routine and rules and was observed pushing the boundaries from time to time to get the desired attention. For example, he knew that standing on a stool in the dressing up corner was dangerous and not allowed and when he did it he started laughing and looked around for the expected response from the adults!

## Communicating

Harry is at the pre-verbal stage of communication and relies very much on vocalisations, gestures and movements to communicate with others. His language consists mainly of babble of different tones and pitches. He takes great interest in what is going on in the room and watches adults and other children intently. He moves around the room quite independently. If he wants adult attention he uses a number of approaches. He might pull an adult towards the desired object or alternatively he babbles or shouts to attract

attention to himself. He rarely appears to be upset and generally shows displeasure by moving away.

Harry has a very close affectionate relationship with Molly. To facilitate the development of his communication skills she chats and plays games with him and includes lots of singing activities, mirror games and one-to-one activities in his daily programme. She interacts sensitively with Harry using a range of techniques and provides a responsive environment for him. During one play session I observed Molly getting down to Harry's physical level and introducing a battery operated musical game to him. She demonstrated how to use the toy and supported Harry's hand to do the same. Then she waited for him to repeat the activity. He pressed the keys which produced the expected sound and Harry laughed. She began a turn taking game with him, chatting to him and encouraging him until she sensed his interest waning. Molly removed the toy and to regain his attention she started a clapping game. Sensing his waning attention, she took his hand and began the old game, *Round and round the garden like a teddy bear*. When she tickled him he laughed and she repeated the activity and then stopped. Harry waited for a response from her and when none was forthcoming he took her hand and put it back on his for the game to begin all over again. This was a typical example of the one-to-one exchanges that Harry experienced with Molly in the setting during my visits.

Photo E.4: Harry with tape recorder

Harry loves music and enjoys playing with pop up toys, tape recorders and musical instruments. It seems as though he can't get close enough to the tape recorder as he puts his ears to the stereo output to feel the vibrations. He also clearly enjoys it when Molly or the Gymboree lady takes out the musical instruments. Sometimes he likes

marching around the room making lots of noise. Other times he is more interested in the technology itself and tries to turn the tape recorder on and off himself (Photo E.4). His Mum told me that Harry, *stands very close to the television at home which can annoy his siblings and he has also taken a shine to turning on and off his sister's laptop.*

Harry also loves picture books and spends long periods each day exploring the books in the library (Photos E.5, E.6 and E.7). When he finds a book that interests him he becomes completely absorbed. His Mum said that, *he loves nursery rhymes* and she reads him stories and nursery rhymes every night. His favourite is *Twinkle, twinkle, little star*. During one of my visits I observed Harry banging some toys on the table while vocalising and humming away to himself and the distinctive tune of *Twinkle, twinkle* could be clearly identified.

Photos E5, E6 and E7: Harry exploring books in the library

## Exploring and Thinking

Harry shows great interest in a lot of activities and likes lots of variety. When he is tired he shows only fleeting interest in games and activities but when he is alert he can become completely absorbed in his work. By mid-afternoon Harry is very tired and needs a nap. Once he is awake again he busily explores his environment. Harry is a very tactile child and will smell, squeeze and sometimes mouth new objects. He observes objects at very close range and is particularly drawn to bright colours. He notices the tiniest detail about objects, for example, logos on the cover of books or games. Aside from his interest in books, as noted earlier, Harry shows a great interest in animals, animal pictures, plastic animals and stuffed animals (Photos E.8 and E.9). Staff commented to

me that, *he thoroughly enjoyed meeting them* [the animals] *close up on a recent trip to a farm*. Harry has a box of farm and zoo animals that he plays with each day. He empties the box and begins examining them one by one in minute detail. He has a few favourites that he carries around with him including a little grey dog and a replica of the Disney character *Tigger*. This interest extends to Disney books about *Tigger* which Harry scans through quickly before zooming in on *Tigger's* picture. Harry's Mum also remarked on his interest in Disney books and Disney films. Interestingly although there was a *Tigger* outfit in the dressing up area, Harry showed no interest in wearing it himself. However, as soon as another child put it on Harry went over to him or her in a flash and began to follow the child around, touching and rubbing the costume.

#### Photos E.8 and E.9: Harry with the toy animals

Harry rarely sits down and is usually to be found leaning against the table or against an adult. However, during my visits some new chairs had arrived for the library area and Harry really seemed to enjoy sitting on these observing the other children or reading his books (Photo E.10). The only thing Harry appears to show no interest in is messy play, particularly the water play area. Surprisingly staff noted that *Harry absolutely loved the outdoor water play during the hot spell of weather*. His Mum also commented that *he loves to be outside, with the air on his face*, and he enjoys playground and outdoor activities with his siblings.

Photo E.10: Harry on one of the new chairs

The adults in the room, and in particular Molly, play an important role in extending Harry's learning and development. Molly sits close to Harry monitoring his interest and ability level, providing him with appropriate toys, encouraging him and ensuring that he is challenged and that he gets the optimum amount of attention without becoming too dependent on her.

## Conclusion

Harry's parents view his experiences in the Poppyfields community crèche in a very positive light. They explained that they feel he needs the structure and routine that attending the crèche provides. The main benefits they identified included the development of his social and communication skills. Harry's Mum is very pleased with the progress he has made to date and has great hopes for Harry's future. Staff are also pleased with Harry's achievements and can see the progress since he started in the crèche. In a year's time Harry will leave the crèche and it is not clear yet where he will go to primary school. There are a number of special schools in the area including a special school for children with autism but Harry's Mum would prefer him to attend a mainstream setting. Overall Harry's parents feel happy that Harry seems content in the crèche and that his needs are being met. His Mum sums it up by saying *the key thing for me is that Harry is happy with the people here in the crèche and that he certainly is.*



# Zachary

Zachary (Photo F.1) is four years old. He had his fourth birthday in April. He lives with his Mum, Dad and three sisters in a large town on the east coast of Ireland. His parents originally came from Nigeria. He loves playing with his toys, going to the park and watching children's programmes on television. He attends Naíonra Naoimh Pádraig from 9.15 a.m. to 12.45 p.m. every day from Monday to Friday.

Photo F.1: Zachary

## Naíonra Naoimh Pádraig – Background and context

Naíonra Naoimh Pádraig is situated in the town where Zachary lives. It was founded in 1993 by the local Gaelscoil. It is under the direction of a committee consisting of the Principal of the Gaelscoil, the school secretary, and the Director of the Naíonra. The Principal of the Gaelscoil acts as manager of the Naíonra.

The Naíonra is situated in a Sports Centre in the locality and the committee rents the facilities it uses there. These consist of a spacious room where most of the centre's activities take place, a larger carpeted area, and a large sports hall. The Naíonra is funded by a capitation grant from Forbairt Naíonraí Teoranta. This grant defrays the cost of renting the facilities, pays the salary of the Director of the centre, and meets the cost of resources needed by the centre. The other practitioners in the centre are members of employment schemes funded by FÁS (the national employment and training authority) and are remunerated through those schemes.

Zachary is one of 20 children ranging in age from three to four years who attend the Naíonra. Depending on when they enrol, the children will spend either one or two years in the centre. This Naíonra is situated in a disadvantaged area. Approximately 80% of the children live locally and the rest commute from other parts of the town. All but two of the children leaving the Naíonra this year will attend the Gaelscoil which is situated about half a mile from the Naíonra.

The staff of the Naíonra consists of the Director and three other practitioners. The Director, Siobhán, has a Diploma as a Nursery (Childcare) Nurse obtained in Northern Ireland. She has also completed a two year Diploma in Irish with the University of Ulster. One of the assistants left the centre after my first visit because her time on the FÁS course had expired. She wasn't replaced until just after my last visit. The staff of the Naíonra was, therefore, effectively three rather than four, during my visits.

## Curriculum and assessment

When the Director, Siobhán, took up her position in the Naíonra two years ago she found few resources available to support children's learning and development in the centre. She set about developing a curriculum for the children. In doing this, her principal resource was Altraim, an organisation based in Northern Ireland that supports pre-school education through the medium of Irish. Siobhán also received information and support from Forbairt Naíonraí Teoranta. Although located in the Republic of Ireland, Naíonra Naoimh Pádraig is affiliated to Altraim (one of only two in the Republic, the other being in Donegal). Siobhán and the other practitioners draw on the literature which Altraim circulates outlining approaches to early learning and how early learning can be supported through Irish. Siobhán has also accessed a resource from Altraim which outlines the basic principles of second language learning. It sets out language teaching approaches appropriate to a Naíonra and incorporates not only the basic principles of a language learning programme for children in this age group but suggests a variety of themes that can be used to facilitate language learning through the medium of Irish. Siobhán and the other practitioners use this resource in supporting Zachary's early learning and development.

Another support that Siobhán finds valuable is a series of booklets produced by Delta: Community Parenting Project Southern District, Newry (Delta: Tionscadal Tuismitheoireachta Pobail, Ceanntar an Deiscirt). These booklets, over twenty of which Siobhán uses, cover numerous topics including *Development and the Early Years*, *Early Language Development Guidance for Project Promoters*, *Early Mathematics*, *How Parents Can Help*, and *Early Years Creativity*. These booklets are presented in Irish and English. Siobhán and the other practitioners use these various resources in developing a curriculum for Zachary and the other children.

Siobhán has developed a curriculum for the children which is characterised by considerable flexibility that allows for different activities on different days. This provides the context and the structure for Zachary's experiences in the Naíonra. From 9.15 a.m. until lunch time at 11.15 a.m. Zachary follows the same routine each day, but from 11.35

a.m. until the children go home at 12.45 p.m. the activities he is involved in vary from day to day (Table 9).

**Table 9: A day in the Naíonra for Zachary**

9.15 –10.15 a.m.	Zachary enjoys free-play with the other children in the Naíonra.
10.15–10.30 a.m.	Siobhán and the other practitioners encourage Zachary and the other children to learn to be responsible for the play-things and other resources in the Naíonra, and for their own actions, by giving time for tidy-up.
10.30–10.45 a.m.	The children enjoy learning through Circle Time.
10.45– 1.00 a.m.	The children have an opportunity to use the toilets and to wash their hands following their morning activities and before they have something to eat.
11.00–11.15 a.m.	Zachary and the other children enjoy time for music and singing.
11.15–11.35 a.m.	Lunch time
11.35–12.00 p.m.	Zachary has an opportunity to learn using a range of resources. His experiences vary from day to day. The following is an outline of Zachary's experiences across a week: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Monday <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Threading</li> </ul> </li> <li>Tuesday <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Playing with blocks</li> </ul> </li> <li>Wednesday <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Playing with animals</li> </ul> </li> <li>Thursday <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Constructing with straws</li> </ul> </li> <li>Friday <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Constructing with sticky blocks</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
12.00–12.40 p.m.	The following is a further outline of Zachary's experiences across a week: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Monday <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Dathanna (colours)/Theme/Prewriting/Dough</li> </ul> </li> <li>Tuesday <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Outdoors/Upstairs/Lotto games/Prewriting</li> </ul> </li> <li>Wednesday <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Theme/Dice/Story time/Dough</li> </ul> </li> <li>Thursday <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Story time/Lotto games/Jigsaws/Sorting</li> </ul> </li> <li>Friday <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Prewriting/Matching/Theme/Halla (hall for Irish dancing)/Music</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
12.40–12.45 p.m.	Zachary and the other children have time for exploring and enjoying books before going home.

# Zachary's experiences in Naíonra Naoimh Pádraig

## Well-being

Zachary spends most of his day in the Naíonra in the *seomra (room)*<sup>21</sup>, a large, carpeted, rectangular room. It has a large table that can accommodate all the children and three smaller ones around which they can sit in groups. Each table has a sufficient number of child-sized chairs. The groups are made up of children who are at roughly the same developmental stage. The tables are covered with different shades of waterproof material that can be wiped clean easily when necessary. The groups are identified by the shade of the table covering, *an bord glas (the green table)*, *an bord dearg (the red table)*, and so on. Artificial lighting is used to supplement the natural lighting in the room. A coat stand and hooks at child level are provided for the children's coats and bags. The room has a sink, a microwave oven, and a fridge for storing the children's lunches and drinks. There are suitable toilets and washing facilities available for the children in the centre. At 10.45 a.m. along with the other children in his group, Zachary goes to the *leithreas (toilets)* and then washes his hands.

Upstairs the Naíonra has access to a large carpeted room which is used for activities involving movement. On ground level, the Naíonra has the use of a large sports hall where the children can enjoy being physically active and play a range of games including ball games. During my visits, Zachary took part enthusiastically in the activities, and very competitively in the games. On one visit, Zachary refused to participate in a ball game in the hall because he wanted to play with a hula hoop instead. He looked downcast and refused to join in for a little while until Siobhán persuaded him to run in races. He found the ideal outlet for his natural competitive spirit in this and was in high good humour after winning two races, demonstrating again his competitive nature.

At the time of my visits, the Naíonra had no outdoor play area, although negotiations were ongoing to acquire access to an outside area of the Sports Centre that would be

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<sup>21</sup> As with Amy's portrait, Irish words/phrases used by the practitioners and/or Zachary are presented with the English translation.

suitable and safe for the children to use. Siobhán and her colleagues take Zachary and the other children on nature walks outside but Siobhán informed me how challenging this was becoming due to the number of unsupervised dogs in the area. Outdoor activities were further hampered at the time of my visits due to road construction work near the Sports Centre.

Siobhán and the other practitioners arrive at the centre before 9.00 a.m. each morning. They wash all the tables with disinfectant, set up the *seomra* (room) for the day's activities, and check the toilets to ensure they are clean and safe for Zachary and the other children. When the children go home at 12.45 p.m. Siobhán and her colleagues tidy the *seomra*, clean the tables and the floor, and empty out the bins. Every Friday they sterilise all the toys. Through this daily routine, the staff ensure the provision of a clean learning environment for the children.

The staff hold a meeting in May/June with parents whose children will attend the Naíonra the following year. The routine of the day in the Naíonra, the activities the children participate in, the approaches the staff use to support the children's learning and development, the centrality of the use of Irish, the ways parents can support their children's learning and development in the setting, and the overall ethos and function of the Naíonra are outlined at this meeting. Thereafter, communication between parents and Siobhán and the other practitioners takes place on an informal basis, when children are being left at the setting or collected from it. During my interview with a group of the parents, they spoke about how satisfied they were with this arrangement. One parent said, *you can talk to them [the staff] on a one-to-one basis, and if there is anything wrong they can take you aside and talk about it.*

## Identity and Belonging

Siobhán and the other practitioners in Naíonra Naoimh Pádraig make every effort to ensure that Zachary is happy and that he feels valued and respected. Along with the other children he addresses the practitioners by their first names: *múinteoir Siobhán* (teacher Siobhán), *múinteoir Deirbhile* (teacher Deirbhile), and so on. His and the other children's work is liberally displayed around the walls. The display is continually changing as different themes/topics are explored and developed with the children. The

theme/topic work includes both individual and group work and consists of various types of paintings, collages, drawings, etc. A large coloured chart divided into the months of the year showing the children's birthdays is also displayed on a wall in the *seomra* (room). Zachary's birthday is displayed in the section for *Mí Aibreáin* (April).

Lunch time is from 11.15 a.m. until 11.35 a.m. The children take it in turns to hand out the lunch bags or boxes. If it is Zachary's turn he stands on a small stool, one of the practitioners hands him in turn the bags or boxes belonging to the other children, and he says *Cé leis an lón seo?* (whose lunch is this?) Otherwise he waits until his own bag is held up and says *Is liomsa é* (it's mine).

During my visits to the Naíonra, Zachary was involved in a group collage of *an ghrian* (the sun). Along with the other children he helped make a large cut-out of the sun decorated as a face. This was pasted onto a large board. Then he made a print of his feet using paint. These footprints were then cut out and along with those of the other children, formed the rays of the sun in the collage (Photo F.2).

Photo F.2: *An ghrian* (the sun) which includes Zachary's footprints

An activity particularly popular with Zachary and all the children is taking a large rag doll called Róisín home for the weekend. When it was Zachary's turn he took Róisín home on Friday, undressed her for bed, put her to sleep, dressed her again in the morning, brought her along with the family to do the shopping on Saturday, bought her a treat and shared it with her, and had photographs taken of himself with Róisín and the family. He brought these photographs and Róisín back to the Naíonra on Monday morning. Siobhán and her colleagues encouraged Zachary to recount Róisín's weekend with him and his family. His photographs were displayed on the wall in the Naíonra for the rest of the week. In talking with Zachary's Dad following the weekend with Róisín, he spoke to me of the value this exercise had for Zachary in inculcating a sense of responsibility and respect for others.

At the moment Naíonra Naoimh Pádraig seems to be a central part of Zachary's life. Much of what he does in the Naíonra draws on his home experiences where he likes playing with his toys and particularly likes going to the park and watching children's programmes on television.

## Communicating

Circle Time from 10.30 a.m. to 10.45 a.m. is a consistent feature of Zachary's experience in Naíonra Naoimh Pádraig. He joins his group at one of the group tables for this. The activity usually involves him recounting his experiences outside the centre, an opportunity for the staff to link Zachary's experiences in the Naíonra with his other experiences. When his turn came Siobhán said to him *An bhfuil aon scéal agat Zachary?* (*Have you a story Zachary?*) He told her, for example, about going to the park with his Dad and what he did there. She prompted him to use as many Irish words as possible and, where necessary, offered the Irish word or phrase, for example, *Ó bhí tú ag súgradh.* (*Oh, you were playing.*) It is very obvious that his comprehension of Irish exceeds his ability to use it, as might be expected at his stage of development. He hears the practitioners using words and phrases in Irish consistently, and regularly follows the various directions given to him in Irish.

Zachary is actively and enthusiastically involved in pre-writing activities, which happen at least twice a week. He can already write his name on the various pieces of work, such



as paintings, that he has completed. He joins in with the singing during song time for fifteen minutes at 11.00 a.m.

Siobhán sings songs such as *Baa, Baa, caora dubh (Baa, Baa black sheep)* and he joins in along with the other children. Siobhán has a wide range of appropriate songs and varies the selection from day to day for the children. On certain days Zachary joins the other children in playing musical instruments. These are mainly simple versions of blowing and percussion instruments. He clearly enjoys experimenting with the sounds different instruments can make and the opportunity this gives him of expressing himself. At the end of one of my visits, while Zachary was waiting for his Dad to collect him, Siobhán had a track of dance music playing on the CD player. Quite spontaneously, Zachary began an improvised dance to the music that was very rhythmic and most expressive, demonstrating his fondness for, and his ability to communicate and to express himself through music and body movement.

The examples of work the children bring home from the Naíonra every day, serve as a further link with parents. In talking to Zachary's Dad, he told me how helpful the samples of Zachary's work were to him and to Zachary's Mum in following his progress and his experiences in the Naíonra. He also said that the extent to which Zachary talked consistently about, for example, pictures he brought home provided not only a valuable link between his family life and his learning experiences in the Naíonra but an opportunity for his Mum and Dad to extend that learning at home.

## Exploring and Thinking

The Naíonra provides Zachary with a variety of facilities and resources that support his learning and development. These include a sand tray, a large dish for water activities, a CD player, a home corner that can be set up for different contexts such as *an bialann (the restaurant)* or *an t-ospaidéal (the hospital)*, a book corner, and a variety of child-size soft chairs and sofas. The Naíonra also has a wide range of resources designed to stimulate Zachary's cognitive, social, emotional, and physical learning and development, for example jigsaws, lotto and bingo games, musical instruments, dolls, paints, brushes, crayons, pencils, playdough, blocks, straws, and different materials from which he can construct things. All around the walls are brightly-coloured charts picturing the

vocabulary associated with different topics, such as *na baill beatha* (body parts), *na héadaí* (clothes), *na hainmhithe* (animals).

From 9.15 a.m. until 10.15 a.m. Zachary is involved in free-play, when he can choose from a variety of activities, including playing with pasta shells, painting, playing with water, playing in the home corner, playing with the sand tray, and doing jigsaws. Zachary is particularly fond of jigsaws, but involves himself in many other activities too. At 10.15 a.m. he helps to tidy the room and put away the different materials that he and the other children have been using. In general, he takes part in this enthusiastically, as he does in all the activities in the Naíonra.

Photo F.3: Zachary exploring with a straw at the water tray

Activities change from day to day after lunch. From 11.35 a.m. until 12.00 Zachary is involved in a variety of activities including threading, playing with blocks, playing with toy animals, constructing shapes and exploring and constructing with plastic straws (Photo F.3), and playing with sticky blocks. While involved in these activities Siobhán speaks to him, prompts him to talk about what he is doing, and encourages him to use different

Irish words. He regularly inserts an Irish word into an English sentence, for example, *I have ceathar (four) beads on.*

From 12.00 until 12.40 p.m. Zachary is involved in various activities connected to the theme being used to shape learning at that time. These themes are central to both his language learning and general development in the Naíonra. They include *ainmhithe (animals)*, *daoine (people)*, *bréagáin (toys)*, *éadaí (clothes)*, *an corp (the body)*, *an teach (the house)*, *an gáirdín (the garden)*, *an aimsir (the weather)*, *taistil (travel)*, and *bia agus deoch (food and drink)*. During my visits, having explored and learned through the theme *an aimsir (the weather)*, the children were starting to learn about *taistil (travel)*. Zachary drew pictures, coloured pictures, made collages, painted, and used playdough to illustrate different aspects of the two themes. On one visit, he played with dice whose sides showed different aspects of the theme in question. The staff encouraged Zachary to identify the picture on a particular side, for example, *ag cur fearthainne (raining)*.

Zachary particularly likes playing lotto and bingo games. These appeal to him and he tends to enjoy calling out the names of the objects on the cards when they are held up, even when he is not meant to! He also plays with different jigsaws, and when he finishes his own, he helps other children to finish theirs. Another activity he enjoys is matching and sorting a variety of materials, such as shapes, colours, or locks and keys.

Zachary's day in the Naíonra ends with book time. Siobhán reads a story to the children every day. Zachary particularly enjoys responding to the stories and Siobhán encourages him to supply words or phrases in stories he has heard before. She used to use large format books for this, but these were stolen from the centre and haven't yet been replaced.

I had the opportunity to join Zachary and the other children on a number of trips. A Teddy Bears' Picnic was to have taken place on the day of one of my visits but had to be held in the large room upstairs because of the weather! We also visited the Fire Station on another day. On a subsequent visit to the Naíonra, Zachary delighted in showing me photographs of him holding a fire hose with one of the officers as the water gushed out. Following my visits, Zachary was due to visit the local Bowling Alley. During June he will

take part in a Sports Day which he will doubtless enjoy, and he will participate in a concert before the Naíonra closes for the summer. Zachary is a very busy young man!

## Conclusion

Zachary's parents are delighted with the progress he has made since joining the Naíonra in September and are very impressed with the amount of Irish he has learned. They see this facility he has with a second language as a particular benefit he has gained from attending Naíonra Naoimh Pádraig. Despite how much he has enjoyed his time in the Naíonra, Zachary will not go to the Gaelscoil next year. His parents originally intended to send him there, but he has insisted that he wants to go to the same school as his sisters, and they have acceded to his wishes.

## Louise

Louise (Photo G. 1) is four years old and is the second youngest child in a family of five children from the Traveller community. The children's ages range from eight to two and a half years. Louise is a talkative, sweet natured little girl. At home, Louise likes to play with her baby brother and enjoys bouncing on her trampoline and playing on the swing. She likes going to the park with her Mum and visiting her neighbours in the street where she lives. Louise attends a pre-school for Traveller children called St Fiachra's Pre-School in the north-west of Ireland.

Photo G.1: Louise

## North West Travellers' Project - Background and context

The North West Travellers' Project is located near a large town in the north-west region. The service caters for both nomadic and settled Traveller children and was established in 1996. The project is defined by the childcare manager as *a partnership of both Travellers and settled people committed to improving the quality of life for Travellers in the county and in the wider north-west region*. She stated that the overall aim of the project is to *promote the social, political and cultural rights of Travellers as an ethnic group in Irish society and the regeneration of Traveller culture*.

Since its formation in 1996, the North West Travellers' Project has developed a number of strategies and initiatives designed to tackle social exclusion and disadvantage experienced by Travellers, including a childcare initiative. Since 1997 the project has provided affordable childcare for staff, trainees and members of the wider Traveller community, including nomadic families. The childcare initiative aims to meet the needs of children in a range of age groups from seven weeks to twelve years. The service includes full day care, sessional pre-school and after-school services.

### St Fiachra's Traveller Pre-School

The pre-school service is offered from 9.00 a.m. to 12.00 p.m. Monday to Friday for children aged from two years and ten months to five years. The service currently has capacity for 16 children and approximately 10-12 children attend the service each day. Children who attend the pre-school can then attend the full day care programme in the afternoon if their parents are working or participating in training.

The Department of Education and Science funds the teacher's salary<sup>21</sup> as well as 98% of the cost of a bus to collect the children from home each day and bring them back in the afternoon. The staff team consists of one teacher, one assistant and a Visiting

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<sup>21</sup> In addition to funding for a school bus, the Department of Education and Science funds a qualified teacher's wage in Pre-Schools for Traveller children. All additional funds needed to run the Pre-school are raised by the voluntary Parents' Committee through fundraising activities.

Teacher for Travellers who works closely with the Traveller project in advancing the capacity of Traveller parents to support their children's learning and in establishing good working relationships with schools.

## Curriculum and assessment

Staff stated that it is particularly important that the curriculum and routine offered to the children develops from a blend of the children's abilities, needs and interests and can be differentiated according to the time of year. For example, as the group caters for nomadic Travellers; these children could arrive in the group at any point during the year. As Nomadic Traveller children are always moving around they do not get to know people very well and it can be more difficult for the children to form relationships. Nomadic Traveller children love outdoor play so their arrival at the pre-school means that lots of outdoor activities are incorporated into the routine to ease the transition.

Children's interests develop and change at particular times of the year for example, good weather brings talk about moving and the inclusion of nomadic Travellers; different fairs take place, and there is a lot of talk about horses and *sulky racing* (using a single seat carriage with two long poles attached to the horse). These unique cultural dimensions of the Traveller pre-school require ongoing adjustment and flexibility on behalf of the staff and children over the course of the year.

As well as listening to the children, assessment practice consists of ongoing observations and a two-way process of communication between staff and parents. The childcare team including crèche and after school staff, meet on a monthly basis for planning meetings. This gives all individuals who have contact with the children in one or more of the childcare services an opportunity to share information about the children's progress in learning and development. Pre-school staff assist children in compiling folders as an ongoing activity over the year and to collect examples of their work including photographs.

At the moment all information regarding children's learning and development is relayed verbally to parents on an informal basis. It has been agreed that part of the work of the

Parents' Committee in the coming year will be to draw up a sheet which will formalise this structure and allow for the regular dissemination of written information to parents.

## Louise's experiences in St Fiachra's Pre-School

Louise joined the pre-school two years ago and attends five days per week. Louise gets up at 7.45 a.m. in the morning and the school bus comes to collect her at 8.20 a.m. She arrives in pre-school around 9.00 a.m. When the pre-school session finishes at 12.00 p.m.; the bus takes Louise to the full day care service provided by the project where she stays until her Mum finishes work at 5.00 p.m.

**Table 10: A day in pre-school for Louise**

8.20 a.m.	The school bus collects Louise from her house. Louise's Mum takes her on to the bus and makes sure she is wearing her seatbelt. Louise's Mum says that Louise is <i>always happy and excited about going to pre-school</i> .
Arrival 9.00 a.m.	Louise arrives at St Fiachra's Pre-school with her friends. She takes off her coat and hangs it in the hallway.
Activities 9.00 a.m.	Each morning Louise is usually drawn to creative activities such as paint and collage. This provides Louise with an opportunity to participate in an activity which interests her whilst at the same time catching up with all the news from her friends.
Snack 10.15 a.m.	Louise usually has a drink of orange juice and a biscuit for her snack. She chats happily with Carrie during snack. The teacher uses snack time as not only an opportunity for children to take relax for a short while but also to reinforce pro-social skills such as table manners and taking turns in conversation.
Activities 10.30 a.m.	As Louise is interested in many different things, she spontaneously moves around the playroom dipping in and out of activities that interest her.
Tidy up 11.00 a.m.	At tidy up time, Louise helps to tidy up the home corner and put all the table top activities away in the cupboards or on the shelves.
Outdoor play or music and movement 11.10 a.m.	Each day the children either go outdoors for a run around or stay indoors to participate in music and movement activities.
Storytime 11.30 a.m.	The teacher encourages the children to sit on the carpeted area in preparation for a story. Louise listens intently and is able to ask and answer questions at the end.
Preparation for	The Teacher gathers all the children together in the hallway to



departure 11.50 a.m.	prepare them for departure. Louise can put on her own coat and collects her painting and art work from the table at the top of the room. She chats happily with her friends and recognises the sound of the bus as it pulls up and parks outside the school.
Departure 12.00 p.m.	<p>The bus arrives at the pre-school and all the children form a line and file out one by one into the bus. The teacher accompanies the children into the bus and with the help of the bus driver ensures that all the children are seated properly and wearing seat belts. Louise smiles and waves to her teacher from the bus window.</p> <p>The bus takes Louise to the full day care service provided by the project at a location approximately three miles away where she stays until her Mum finishes work at 5:00 p.m.</p>

## Well-being

Louise told me she liked coming to pre-school because *it is good fun and because you have to go to school*. The pre-school itself is a bungalow style building with an entrance hallway leading to a small kitchen area and toilet facilities. Louise spends most of the pre-school session in a large rectangular playroom which is divided into distinct play areas such as the messy play area, the role play/home area, the book area and the creative area. The environment has a variety of equipment and resources and is brightly painted and inviting to children.

Louise interacts with her peers, agreeably playing with and alongside other children and taking turns in conversation. Louise commented to me that her *best friends are girls because the boys take things off you*. Louise has a particularly close friendship with Carrie and I rarely saw one without the other close by. Louise explained to me that she liked lots of things in the pre-school but her favourite area was the home corner as she *likes feeding the babies and putting them to bed*. Louise's love of babies showed many times during my visits as she brought the subject into conversation in many different contexts. To facilitate this interest, pre-school staff plan activities around caring for babies through the use of books and pictures, and by providing resources to support imaginative and role-play in the home corner area.

According to Louise's Mum, this interest was also evident at home, where Louise often played house involving Louise acting as the 'Mammy' and her younger brother as the baby. Her Mum commented that Louise's favourite place to play at home was the spare

room (there are no toys in this room, just some old furniture) which Louise has called *the secret room*. This is a special place for Louise and her brothers and sisters which her Mum said *is clearly a children only zone*.

Louise commented that she doesn't particularly like going outside to play when she is at pre-school because *the boys just run and run fast and sometimes you fall and get hurt*. The group does not have any outdoor equipment for gross motor play and activities outdoors usually consist of ball games, playing with bubbles and circle games. The teacher is very aware of Louise's reluctance around outdoor play at pre-school so she attempts to balance this by including lots of music and movement activities in the programme. She commented that on the days she announced to the children that they needed to tidy up in preparation for music and movement activities, Louise could be heard encouraging the other children to tidy up quickly so that they could get started as soon as possible. Louise said that she loved to dance and move to *all kinds of music* and that she *likes the fast ones best* (Photos G.2 and G.3). During my visits, I observed her move with confidence and control and become really absorbed in what she was doing.

Photos G. 2 and G. 3: Louise dancing to music

Louise appears to have good relationships with adults in the group and I observed her talking affectionately about her teacher. She said the best thing about her teacher was that *she dances with her and shows her what to do*. Throughout my visits, Louise

displayed high levels of independence and self confidence and seemed very interested and motivated to learn.

## Identity and Belonging

Louise seems very comfortable in the setting and she displays a real sense of belonging to the group. She demonstrates this through her self-motivation to organise her day and to participate in activities of her own choosing. By doing this, Louise is developing her own sense of identity as a learner and has the confidence to make and express choices. The teacher supports Louise's learning and development by listening to her expressed wishes and using these opinions to inform her planning of activities for Louise. For example, the teacher is aware of Louise's interest in creative art and dancing so she ensures that these activities are part of the daily routine where possible.

The pre-school staff maintain good links with Louise's parents and the routines, customs and regular events of the Traveller culture are strongly reflected in the curriculum. Using themes like horses, and finding out about different countries in Europe, staff explore different aspects of Traveller culture meaningful to the children. This is where listening to the children becomes an integral part of early years practice in the pre-school in order to be aware of what is happening at home and to capture what is meaningful and interesting to the children at a given time. To assist this process, children are encouraged to make books about themselves which involves drawing pictures of what they like or don't like; people in their family and where they live.

The emphasis on the Traveller culture within the curriculum allows Louise to explore and express her cultural identity alongside her peers through art, craft, music and dance. Various festivals and celebrations throughout the year provide accessible and relevant opportunities, particularly when adults from the Travelling community are invited to participate. Adults from the Travelling community occasionally visit the children in the pre-school to tell stories of the days gone-by, to play music and sing songs. Louise's Mum pointed out that in her experience, it was often a challenge when children transferred to primary school as aspects of the Traveller culture were little understood and not sufficiently incorporated into the curriculum. She believed that this could result in

confusion for the children when the link was not continued and the disparity between home and school could widen.

Photo G.4: Louise drawing a picture

Displays of Louise's art work also promotes a sense of belonging to the group and when the teacher draws attention to her individual contributions, a positive sense of ownership and belonging is promoted for Louise. Each day she likes to tell her Mum what she did in pre-school and regularly takes home drawings and pieces of work which she takes pride in showing to her family (Photo G.4). Communication with parents and parental involvement takes many forms in the pre-school. For Louise's Mum, this includes participating on the Parents Committee, updating herself through reading a monthly newsletter and informal meetings with Louise's teacher.

Photo G. 5: Louise reading *The Hungry Caterpillar*

## Communicating

Louise mentioned that one of her favourite places in the pre-school was *the book corner*. She can spend long periods each day exploring the books and narrating stories aloud to her friends and sometimes to the dolls (Photo G.5) During my visits her favourite book was *The Hungry Caterpillar*. She could retell the narrative in the correct sequence and draw upon the language patterns in the story. She could change her voice to reflect the different emotions in the story and laugh at parts which she found funny. She listens attentively to various stories and responds to what she has heard by making relevant comments and asking questions with confidence.

Whilst narrating *The Hungry Caterpillar*, Louise was particularly interested in the part when the caterpillar got tummy ache. She was able to relate this to her own experience of having tummy ache after a party. She said like the Hungry Caterpillar she had eaten *too much sweets and cake*. I observed Louise's teacher using verbal scaffolding to enhance Louise's knowledge and to extend her current level of understanding beyond that particular context. She used a variety of techniques such as open questioning (*Why do you think the caterpillar ate so much food?*), restating and expanding on what Louise had said (*because he was hungry ... but how did he know he was hungry?... Did he not have his breakfast?*) and helped her to relate this information to different situations (*What is your favourite thing to eat at home when you are hungry?*).

The teacher commented that Louise's interest in books and stories was one of the aspects that she found particularly rewarding when supporting Louise's learning and development. She said that Louise listened attentively during group story time which was usually the activity that ended the pre-school session each day. She recalled how Louise used the information from a story she had heard and applied it to another situation or context sometimes four or five weeks later. A good example of this was when a story called *Lucy's Quarrel* (a story about two young children falling out over who was boss!) was read to the group. A few weeks later Louise was able to say to her teacher that two children who had fallen out over a toy in the pre-school should hug and make friends like in the story.

Her teacher remarked that Louise often incorporated painting and drawing activities into most daily sessions in the pre-school. This provides a valuable outlet for her thoughts and feelings and she often communicates her own 'take' on events using this medium. She demonstrated this whilst making a card for a childcare student called Mary who was leaving the group as her placement had come to an end. Louise had developed a good relationship with Mary and commented to me, *I'll miss Mary because she helped me to draw things*. To communicate these feelings Louise drew lots of heart shapes on the card and decorated it with pictures of flowers which she said Mary liked. At the end of the session she presented the card to Mary and gave her a hug. Throughout this activity the teacher interacted sensitively with Louise and encouraged her to extend her use of language. She introduced a number of describing words to illustrate colours, patterns and textures, and then encouraged Louise to talk about her creation.

Louise's Mum commented that she would like the Traveller language Cant more actively explored and promoted within the activities of the group as this form of language is unique to the Traveller culture. Although Cant words vary in different parts of the country, there are general words like the words for tea, sugar and milk and she felt the children could play a key role in ensuring that this tradition did not completely die out.

Photos G.6 and G7: Louise playing with playdough

## Exploring and Thinking

Louise is interested in most activities and likes lots of variety. She enjoys taking time to explore activities by herself and is confident to try out new things. Louise frequently

requests an opportunity to play with playdough (Photos G.6 and G.7). She makes lots of different things with it including cakes and buns and bakes them in the oven in the home corner. A variety of equipment such as cutters, rollers and trays allows Louise to participate in this type of imaginative play. Whilst making a birthday cake Louise added glitter to the finished cake and said she wanted *the candles to sparkle*.

Louise actively participates in art and craft activities such as painting, drawing, collage work and cutting. Each day she spends some time during the session making a picture from collage materials or by cutting out pictures from cards and magazines. As most of these activities take place in a group, this provides Louise with the opportunity to develop co-operation skills. Throughout her play, she demonstrates a good ability to share resources and work co-operatively with other children in the group. Louise's Mum commented that Louise loved to bring pieces of work home to show to her family and that she responded well to praise and encouragement for her efforts.

#### Photos G.8 and G.9: Louise involved in sand and water play

Louise seems to like time to herself and can become completely absorbed in activities like water and sand play (Photos G.8 and G.9). She usually spends some time each day at the water tray repeatedly emptying and filling different sized containers. This is usually when the other children are engaged elsewhere and the teacher recognises Louise's need for time and space to herself and does not disturb her when she becomes engrossed in activities like this.

There is a small outdoor area to the front and side of the building which looks directly onto peaceful open fields where horses, sheep and cattle can be seen grazing nearby. Although this is an idealistic and visually picturesque setting for the children, the high windows of the pre-school prevent children from taking advantage of the outdoor scenery on a daily basis.

Although Louise commented to me that she preferred not to play outdoors at pre-school, in contrast her Mum told me that Louise liked to play outdoors at home and was quite confident to investigate and explore her immediate neighbourhood and to visit her friends who live nearby. Following a trip to a leisure facility last year; her Mum reflected that Louise could still recall the events of this trip in some detail and regretted that the family couldn't do things like this more often. As the family has no transport of their own; it makes regular trips and days away difficult. Louise's Mum explained that the family tried to go on a day out to the beach at least once a year.

## Conclusion

Louise's parents view the pre-school as making a very positive contribution to Louise's education. They reported the main benefits as *mixing with other children and getting a sense of what school is like*. Louise's Mum said that this pleased her especially as historically Traveller people have lower levels of education than settled people. She is adamant that her children will be able to avail of opportunities to be educated.

Louise seems happy and secure within the pre-school where she learns with and alongside others in a learning environment which affirms and respects her cultural identity. She expresses herself creatively and imaginatively and is developing her own individual ways of thinking, exploring and understanding.



# Caroline

## Photo H.1: Caroline

Caroline (Photo H.1) lives with her Mum, Dad and older sister Claire in a local authority housing estate on the outskirts of a large city. When this portrait was compiled in the summer term, Caroline was four years and six months old, and had been attending the Early Start unit attached to the local national school since the previous September. She attends five mornings a week, from 9.00 a.m. until 11.30 a.m. each morning. Her mother works part-time, and when she is working, Caroline is brought to school and collected by her childminder, who is a friend of her Mum's. At home, Caroline loves riding on her bicycle, going for walks with her Dad and their three dogs, playing soccer, listening to music and playing her keyboard, and painting. At school, she enjoys all the activities, especially drawing and painting, doing puzzles, sand and water, and story time.

## Early Start - Background and context

The pre-school class that Caroline attends is one of those set up under the Early Start Pre-School Pilot Project in 1994/1995 in forty schools in designated disadvantaged areas in Ireland. The objective of the Early Start programme, which is managed, funded and evaluated by the Department of Education and Science (DES), is to address educational disadvantage by targeting children who are at risk of not reaching their potential within the school system by giving them a year of pre-school education before they enter the junior infant class. Each Early Start class is staffed by a primary school teacher and a childcare worker with at least a Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) Level Five certificate in childcare. This Early Start class operates two sessions each day; the first from 9.00 a.m. until 11.30 a.m. and the second from 12 noon to 14.30 p.m. Thirty children aged three to four years are enrolled in all, with fifteen attending each session. Caroline attends the earlier session. Martina is her teacher, and Joanne is the childcare assistant. Both Caroline and her parents see Early Start as *school* and this is how they referred to it in conversation with me.

The school where Caroline's Early Start class is located is bright and modern, red-brick with large windows. The school was built in 1981 beside a small shopping centre, a modern church and a community school, all built around the same time to cater for the large number of people living in social housing nearby. A high fence surrounds the school grounds, but this is freshly painted green and all the gates are open as the children arrive. The Early Start unit is at the right-hand end of the school, which houses the infant classes. The office of the Home-School-Community Liaison officer, and a crèche for children of parents attending adult education classes are also at this end of the school. This section of the school has its own entrance, and a wide hall where parents can wait when collecting their children. On the walls inside the entrance are welcoming notices, information on events for parents and photographs of the children at play.

## Curriculum and assessment

A set of draft curriculum guidelines was drawn up in 1998 for use in all Early Start classes by an In-Career Development Team working in collaboration with Early Start personnel. The curriculum guidelines outline a developmental curriculum, with

particular emphasis on developing children's cognitive skills, their language, their personal, social and emotional development and their creative and aesthetic development. Play as a medium for learning is given a prominent place.

Planning and assessment are integral parts of the Early Start Curriculum. Martina, the teacher, and Joanne, the childcare assistant, together plan daily and weekly activities for the group as a whole, usually based around a central theme. Within this, they plan a variety of opportunities for the children's development in each of the key areas of language, cognition and social and personal development. The daily routine in the Early Start class is structured; the overall structure stays the same but the activities within it vary from day to day. For the first 30 to 45 minutes, there is a free-play session, where the children can choose from the materials on offer. The rest of the session is organised into small and large group activities, pair and individual work.

Martina and Joanne find the small group and pair activities particularly useful for monitoring the children's progress and identifying their interests. They regularly review and record on a summary sheet each child's progress in the key areas and adapt the overall plan according to the child's individual needs. They use these records to plan specific learning objectives for each child, and they are also used when they talk to parents, both informally and at scheduled parent-teacher meetings.

## Caroline's experiences in the Early Start class

**Table 11: A day in the Early Start class for Caroline**

9.00 a.m. Arrival	The children and their parents are greeted at the door
9.05 a.m. to 9.35 a.m. Free play	Caroline plays on the slide, and then she goes to the sand tray. She watches Brian play with blocks, and joins in.
9.35 a.m. to 10.30 a.m. Small group activities	The children are divided into groups of three or four. Caroline and her friends rotate between different table-top activities, e.g. jigsaws, painting, colouring. Caroline especially likes the water tray.
10.30 a.m. to 10.45 a.m. Lunch	All the children sit together. They talk to one another and to the teachers about their news as they get ready to eat. Caroline obviously enjoys her sandwich and sliced apple.
10.45 a.m. to 11 a.m. Outdoor play or large group activities	If it is fine, the children go outside to play ball games or to climb on the climbing

	frame and slide down.
11.05 to 11.25 a.m. Story time	This is the time for songs, stories, rhymes and finger plays. Caroline listens attentively to the story and joins in the songs.
11.30 a.m. Time to go home	Caroline puts on her coat and collects a book and a copy of this week's parent's newsletter to take home. Her Mum is waiting in the hall, and takes the opportunity to ask Martina how Caroline is getting on.

## Well-being

The Early Start classroom is spacious, bright and welcoming. The walls are decorated with posters and displays of the children's work. Some of their paintings hang from a line overhead. The main part of the room is divided into a carpeted area and an area with vinyl flooring. The children play on the floor on the carpeted area and it is also used for story time, while messier activities, including lunch, take place in the area with vinyl flooring. There are also sand and water trays, as well as a sink for adult use. On shelves around the room are books, various table top games and materials for art. More games and materials are stored on higher shelves- these are taken down in rotation. There is a home corner, with cupboards, a realistic looking sink and cooker and a full length mirror. A bed, complete with blankets and pillow, has some teddies tucked up inside. The bed is big enough for a small child. Next to this is a shop corner, with all sorts of play food and vegetables, a climbing frame and slide, a tricycle, and other large floor toys.

A low fence makes a small lobby, with doors leading to two toilets, decorated with colourful stickers. Martina and Joanne stand here to greet the children and their parents as they arrive and leave. Greeting time is used to exchange information in a relaxed way, and the parents often come into the room for a few minutes until the child is settled.

Parent and community partnership is an important principle in Early Start, and this begins even before the children start to attend, as soon as they are enrolled. Caroline's parents were invited to visit the classroom and introduced to the teachers and the programme before she began. There is on-going contact and communication both formal and informal between home and school. Martina and Joanne send home

a weekly newsletter, telling parents what stories, rhymes and other activities the children will be doing in the coming week. Outings are organised for parents and children together, and these are very popular. Links are further strengthened by the various activities organised by the Home School Community Liaison teacher, and there is a Parents' Room in the school with a crèche for younger children so that parents can attend meetings and courses.

Caroline began attending Early Start last September. She settled in very easily. Her mother told me that, *she loves coming to school – when she had chicken-pox she cried because she couldn't go to school.* Her parents reflected that they sent her to Early Start

*because she herself wanted to go to school, because it is part of the school where her sister attends and to get her used to the routine of getting up and getting ready for school in the morning.*

According to her mother, the benefits they saw from her attending at Early Start were that

*she has company, friends. She has news when she comes home, she can have a conversation, tell you how her day went, who was bold and who was good, she's learning a lot and I get the full list of what they do.*

Personal, emotional and social development is an important part of the programme. The children are encouraged to develop not only a sense of self-esteem but an ability to see situations from other points of view. Whatever Caroline is doing herself, she watches what others are doing, and when something captures her interest, she joins in. For example, Brian was playing on the floor with large wooden blocks. Caroline was playing with the sand nearby (Photo H.6), but looked up to see what Brian was doing. She went over and picked up a toy saw and started to "cut" one of the blocks. Brian objected. He was using that one to make a boat. Caroline was unwilling to give back the block. After a few minutes when they still had not arrived at a solution, Joanne, who had been supervising unobtrusively, said, *Brian says he needs that block. What are we going to do? Why don't we get some more blocks from the box for Caroline to cut so that Brian can finish his boat?* The children agreed and Joanne helped them to take out some more blocks. Brian finished his boat and stood beside it, saying *Look what I made!* The children are encouraged to try to solve problems like this by themselves, with the adults intervening only when they fail to find a solution.

Caroline likes to be a leader in the games she plays. In the Christmas play *Mouse's Christmas*, she played the role of Mouse. According to Martina,

*She was the centre of attention, which she absolutely loved, she even gave the directions to the other children. If they were in the wrong place or at the wrong time, she'd stop her own role and she'd tell them what to do and she'd say "No, you're supposed to be over there while I'm here".*

She is gradually learning to share the role of leader, and to listen more to others, but her strong personality makes her a natural organiser.

As one of the aims of the Early Start is to prepare children for school, they are encouraged to develop independence in their everyday activities and their self-care. Over the year, they gradually learn to tidy up after themselves, to wash their hands after activities and before meals, and to put on and take off aprons and coats themselves. The daily routine includes time for all these activities, and they can be important times for learning social skills. Lunch time is a particularly social time- the children chat to one another and to the teachers as they eat. The school has a Healthy Eating policy, so sandwiches, fruit juice and sliced fruit is supplied for lunch. Children can bring their own, provided it is healthy (e.g. yogurt) but most of them, including Caroline, opt for the sandwiches and fruit provided by the school. The children help to tidy up afterwards, and they put the fruit peelings into a bucket to be composted and the crusts of bread into a box for recycling. Sometimes, Martina or Joanne reminds them to tidy up, but by and large, they do it themselves. Through these everyday activities, Caroline is learning to care for her immediate surroundings and for the wider environment.

When the weather is fine, the children go outdoors to play after lunch. There are large windows on two sides of the room which look out on a fenced outdoor play area with a safety surface, shared with the infant classes. It has climbing and scrambling apparatus and a slide. Caroline and her friends like to climb up the netting and take turns to go down the slide on the other side (Photo H.2). They do this again and again until it is time to go inside.

### Photo H.2: Children on the climbing frame

The other windows look out on a hard surfaced play area used by the older children in the school and a large green area, with trees at the far side. Caroline likes to look out and see the older children at play. Sometimes birds come and land outside- one day at lunchtime there were two hooded crows. *Look, pigeons!* said Jack.

## Identity and Belonging

Caroline has a strong sense of belonging to a family. Some of her favourite outings are going to visit her granduncle or her cousins—she has a large extended family all living within the locality or a short distance away, and she sees them regularly. At home, Caroline plays a lot with her older sister, and learns a lot from her. Her sister reads her a story every night, and her Mum takes them both to the library to choose their books. A favourite game at home is “school” with her sister Clare as teacher. According to Caroline, teachers *tell you what to do*. Her parents encourage Caroline and her sister to be active, and they go to a lot of activities outside of school - music, soccer and so on. Both of them got keyboards for Christmas, and they enjoy playing with them. Her sister is learning the notes, and Caroline in turn is learning from her.

Children's own names are very important to them, and are one of the first words they learn to recognise. When Caroline comes to Early Start each day, she is greeted by name at the door by one of the teachers. She takes off her coat and hangs it on the

hook with her name on it. Each hook has a symbol - birds, a train, a shoe, flowers- and a child's name written beside it. The same symbol and name appears on the back of one of the chairs and on one of the hooks where the children hang finished strings of beads. Caroline's symbol is a glass of juice, but she can recognise some of the letters of her own name now and tries to write them on her paintings and drawings. *That's a C, and an O...* she told me. The children also recognise one another's symbols, and know if someone is sitting in another child's chair or using another child's hook. Sometimes the children try to trick the adults by deliberately putting their work in the wrong place and then finding it again.

Making friends is another important element of belonging. Over the course of my visits, Caroline played with most of the other children at one time or another. The children are organised into small groups for part of the morning but are free to choose their playmates for much of the time. Her mother told me that the friends she talked about most at home were Michelle and Sarah, and she also spent a lot of time with Rory, whom she named as her friend when asked. Rory lives near her and she also plays with him at home. Rory is almost a year younger than her, and I noticed that he often seemed to follow her and join in whatever activity she was doing (Photos H.7 and H.8).

When Caroline goes on to junior infants, she will already know many of the children in her class. She also knows some of the older children in the school. Some are neighbours or friends of her older sister. Some of the older children visit the Early Start classroom every day to deliver lunches and collect the recycling containers, and they always say hello and wave to any of the younger children they know. This helps to build the children's sense of belonging to the wider school community.

## Communicating

Caroline's time in Early Start gives her many opportunities to experience language and other forms of communication. The children are encouraged to express themselves through speaking and listening, through role play, listening to stories and joining in songs and rhymes, making marks, art and many more activities. The emphasis is on the development of oral language, but the children also do pre-reading and pre-writing activities, looking at picture books, talking about them, taking a line for a walk from left to right. Martina and Joanne listen attentively to the children



and pick up and expand on topics that they are interested in. The children are also encouraged to recall and talk about their experiences. The children especially enjoy looking at photographs of themselves taken at school and on outings, and this can act as a starting point for conversation and the exchange of ideas.

On most days, the children bring their chairs into a circle on the carpeted area for language and story activities (Photos H.3, H.4) Martina and Joanne plan activities each week around a central theme (although some themes last longer) and introduce stories and songs to complement this. They send home a sheet with the words of the songs and the names of the book they will be using, along with suggestions for activities that parents might do at home to fit in with the theme. The theme when I visited was Animals and it had been going on for a few weeks. The children had been doing animal jigsaws and matching games, painting animal patterns like stripes and spots. A favourite game was the box of furry animal tails- especially the stripy tiger one. The children tucked these into their waistbands, and pretended to be a tiger, an elephant or a monkey. They were also learning the names of the different baby animals and finding out how tadpoles turn into frogs and caterpillars into butterflies. One of Caroline's favourite puzzles was one showing the different stages from egg to caterpillar to butterfly. The children and their parents were also looking forward to going on a trip to a farm where they could pet the animals.

Photo H.3: Caroline listening to a story

At story time, the teacher brought out the box of plastic wild animals and talked to the children about them, following this with a story about a noisy tiger cub who creeps up on the other animals and frightens them. Caroline and her friend Sarah watched

attentively—they love story time (Photo H.3). Caroline, Sarah, Rory and Brian joined in with the tiger's "ROARS" whenever the story called for it. The children knew the story well, and Martina asked them to predict *what happened next?* or *what did the animals think then?* before she turned over the page. Martina pointed out the expressions on the animals' faces and asked the children what the animals were feeling. Then she asked them to make a surprised face or a scared face themselves. Rory and Sean joined in enthusiastically, as the others watched (Photo H.3). Later, Caroline would get a chance to borrow the book; the children take home a book each day to read at home with their parents and siblings.

## Exploring and Thinking

The teachers in the Early Start class plan many different structured activities to introduce the children to concepts like number and colour, but also use the opportunities to reinforce this learning that arise through unstructured activities using sand, water and playdough.

Photo H.4: Caroline getting ready to slide a boat down the slide  
Photo H.5: Caroline and David at the sand tray

At free-play time during my visits, Caroline often chose the sand (Photo H.5), but she also seemed to really like climbing up and sliding down the slide and hiding underneath it. She brought a boat on wheels with her from the sand area and launched it down the slide (Photo H.4). She did this again and again, watching to see how far it travelled and how fast it went. When I asked her to show me her favourite place, she went straight to the slide, slid down it and then hid in the cubby hole underneath it.

After the free-play session that begins the morning, the children are directed to one of the small group activities that have been planned for the morning- three or four children to each group. One or two of these activities will be messy such as painting, using chalk or playing at the water tray (Photos H.7, H.8, H.9). The children put on aprons with long sleeves in preparation for this. Caroline can manage to put on her apron by herself and sometimes helps another child to fasten the Velcro strips at the back. Caroline especially enjoys messy play at home as well as at school. Her Mum recalled

*She loves anything messy- playdough, paint, sand, anything that takes a lot of cleaning up ... but as my Mum always used to say, it's clean dirt, they're enjoying themselves.*

Caroline is given lots of opportunities to do what she enjoys both at home and at school.

Photo H.6: Caroline and Michelle cutting out playdough

The activity Caroline herself picked out as her favourite is playing with márla (playdough). I watched as Caroline helped Martina to mix the flour, water and food colouring to make a big bowl of yellow playdough, and then to divide it between the children at the table. Caroline and Michelle shared the cutters and rollers, and make shapes. Caroline showed great concentration as she manipulated the dough (Photo H.6).

At small group time, the groups rotate between the activities so that they all get a chance at each one. One morning, a table was set up for sponge painting. There were sponges in different shapes - square, circle, star. The paint was yellow, and the large sheets of paper had been ruled into squares, three rows of four. The children were encouraged to stamp a shape in each one, from left to right and each row in order- Joanne explained to me that this was a preparation for writing and reading left to right and top to bottom. Caroline finished hers quickly; some of the other children took longer or stamped the shapes in a different order. As each group finished, they washed their hands in a basin nearby and moved on to another activity, perhaps jigsaws, pegboards or playing a game where they have to find matching pairs of cards.

Photos H.7 and H.8: Caroline, Rory and David at the water tray

Caroline particularly likes the sand and the water trays and often chooses them. One morning, she, Rory and David were standing around the water tray (Photo H.7). They filled and emptied containers, poured water into the waterwheels and watched them turn. There were balls floating in the water. Caroline picked up an orange ball and put it on top of the waterwheel. Rory watched intently as she poured water from a colourful teapot and the ball rotated in place. They had discovered how to make the ball move using the water. Caroline poured carefully until the teapot was empty and then refilled it and began to make the ball rotate again (Photo H.8).

Caroline also likes drawing and colouring. One morning she began by joining a group that were looking at a book of animals and each picking out an animal to draw. She asked Martina, *how do you draw a tadpole?* Martina told her to draw a circle first, then to add a tail. Caroline did this and showed it to the teacher.

Photo H.9: Caroline drawing a house and a babba

Then she got more paper and drew a stick figure (Photo H.9) and showed it to Martina. *That's a babba*, she said. *It's a baby, is it?* enquired Martina. *No, a babba!* responded Caroline emphatically. Caroline carried on drawing, and attempted to write her name at the top of one page - a series of circles and lines, one with a dot on the top. Then she started a new drawing. I asked her to tell me what she was drawing. *A house*, she said pointing to a large oblong shape. *What are these?* I asked referring to small, almost square shapes within the larger one. *Bed, dressing table*, she informed me. A minute later, she took a black pencil and filled in the interior of the large shape. *It's a tent, a black tent*, she said. The black colour covered over the earlier shapes so that they could not be seen in the final drawing. Some of the others finished and moved on to other activities while Caroline stayed at the drawing table on her own until she was called to get ready for story-time.

## Conclusion

Early Start is an important part of Caroline's life. Her parents are very involved in helping Caroline and her sister to learn, but they feel that she also needs the

structure and routine that attending the pre-school class provides. It also gives her an opportunity to meet and make friends with the children who will be her classmates when she goes into the junior infant class in September. Caroline enjoys her time in Early Start, and her teachers can see the progress she has made since she started.

# Alan

Alan (Photo I.1) is nearly five years old. He lives with his brother Edward who is nine months old, and his Mum and Dad near a small village in the south-west of the country. Alan attends the Sunshine Montessori Community pre-school in the village five days a week from 9.00 a.m. to 2.00 p.m. although some days he goes home at 12.30 p.m. When this portrait was compiled, he had been attending the pre-school for almost two years; for the first year he attended three days a week.

Photo I.1: Alan

## Sunshine Montessori Community Pre-school- Background and context

The pre-school is in a 140 year old building which once housed the Christian Brothers Boys School. The building was renovated in Summer 2005 thanks to a 100% grant received from the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP) and is now a clean, bright, spacious and colourful space for the children. The building houses an art room, a playroom and a Montessori room along with a large multi-purpose hall which is mainly used for indoor physical activity and play.

This year, the pre-school has 53 children enrolled ranging in age from three to five years. The main session runs from 9.00 a.m. to 12.30 p.m. and many of the children go home at that time. Some, like Alan, remain on for an afternoon session. Generally, there are ten children in the room where Alan spends his day. Alan spends most of his morning time with Mrs Ruane in the Montessori room but one or two days a week he works in the art room with another practitioner Moira. In the afternoon, he spends time in the playroom before and after eating lunch. Weather permitting, the children often go outside at this time. All of the pre-school staff have at least a Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) level 5 training in childcare and they have all completed special needs childcare courses. The manager of the setting, who works with Alan in the Montessori classroom, has a diploma in Montessori teaching. Moira, who works with Alan in the art room, has a B.A. H. Dip in Art.

## Curriculum and assessment

The Montessori philosophy of education guides the work of the setting. Overall the setting aims:

*to support the learning and development of each child by providing an integrated, balanced, broad, stimulating and differentiated curriculum; to achieve this work in partnership with parents, carers and children as a team and to provide an environment where children are*

- *respectful of themselves and others*
- *happy and confident*
- *independent and interdependent*
- *compassionate and caring*
- *tolerant and patient*
- *curious and creative*

(School Policies and Procedures, no date)



The starting point for planning is the Montessori Curriculum. Mrs Ruane told me that a guideline booklet for Montessori pre-schools, funded by EOCP and developed in association with the St. Nicholas Montessori Society, was *a bible*. Other key guiding texts for developing curriculum plans are the books written by Dr. Montessori. However, she stressed that while the Montessori curriculum provided the framework for planning, the children and their needs guided the day to day work. While the daily routine is displayed on the wall of the Montessori classroom, the practitioner is flexible in her approach, giving more or less time to activities on different days, thus responding to the needs of the children on any given day.

Assessment practices in the setting, which include regular observation of and note-taking about each child, reflect this desire to be guided by the child in planning learning experiences. Regular observation allows staff to build a picture of each child's learning needs which in turn guides planning for his/her learning experiences.

## Alan's experiences in the Sunshine Montessori Community Pre-school

**Table 12: A day in the Montessori pre-school for Alan**

9.00 a.m.	Child-initiated activity with the Montessori materials
9.30 a.m.	Roll/prayers/news
9.35 a.m.	Number/letter work
10.00 a.m.	Child-initiated activity with the Montessori materials/presentation of Montessori materials to individual children
11.00 a.m.	Lunch
11.20 a.m.	Physical activity in multi-purpose room or in outside play area
12.00 p.m.	Circle work (e.g. story, poems, rhymes, singing, discussion, matching e.g. words and pictures))
12.30 p.m.	Home time for some children, free play in playroom followed by lunch for those who remain for the afternoon session
1.15 p.m.	Free play in multi-purpose room or in outside play area
2.00.-2.30 p.m.	Prepare for home time

## Well being

The Montessori room, where Alan spends most of his time is a spacious, bright and colourful rectangular room with access to nearby toilets and a door that provides easy access to the adjoining art room. The floor is covered in blue marmoleum with light yellow paint covering the walls. There are two tables in the middle of the room, both with child-sized chairs around them. On the floor also there are often soft bright rugs for the children to sit on when they are doing floor work. There is also a large sheet of non-slip green waterproof material which is used to cover the floor/table areas when the children are working with messy materials.

All around the walls of the room is wooden shelving where an attractive array of Montessori manipulative materials is kept within easy reach of the children. In keeping with the Montessori philosophy, the Montessori materials are arranged from left to right around the room according to the following subject areas: Practical life, Sensorial, Mathematics, Language and Cultural. The materials are also presented on each shelf from left to right moving from simpler materials to the more complex. At this stage of the year, much of the material has been presented to the children according as they have demonstrated readiness for it. In the far right hand corner of the room there is a book corner with a range of books displayed attractively on the shelves and a soft comfortable child-sized couch to sit on. The layout of the room and the Montessori materials contributes to the children's sense of well-being. It helps them feel safe and secure by giving them a sense of order.

Alan's parents first decided to send him to the pre-school when he was three because, at the time, he was an only child and they felt that going to the pre-school would build his confidence around other children. His Mum talked to me about how it took a long time for him to build confidence but this year she felt that he had *totally changed at home, from here ... the child is completely different, at home, when we go out, when we go anywhere, he is confident, he is sociable, he is a joy now*. She clearly attributed his developing sense of confidence to the nurturing and secure environment which the setting provided.

Alan comes into the pre-school with his Mum every weekday morning at about 9.00 a.m. Mrs Ruane spoke to me about the importance she placed on welcoming each individual child to the setting every single day and Alan's Mum echoed this: *it is the kids she would greet more than the parents (in the morning), which is right*. Alan

loves coming to the setting this year and runs happily inside. Alan clearly has a close, warm relationship with the staff in the setting, particularly with Mrs Ruane and Moira with whom he spends most of his time here. This warm nurturing relationship has contributed to his growing confidence and sense of well-being. He told me that he loved all the staff and that *they teach us to do numbers, colouring, join the dots* and that Moira who works with him in the art room *does all the sticking and painting* with him.

Alan seemed extremely attentive, motivated and engaged in all of the activities I observed in the setting, an indication of how adjusted he was to the learning environment. Even when engaged in active, independent tasks such as making a collage, or painting, he broke off from what he was doing to listen to the practitioner if she called the children's attention or showed them how to do something. While working with Montessori materials, such as practical life, sensorial materials or early mathematics materials, he was absorbed in each activity he chose to undertake and completed each task before moving on to the next activity. Learning to master and complete each activity before moving on to the next and to return the material to its correct place on the shelf for use by others is an important factor in contributing to Alan's sense of well-being.

The setting has a healthy eating policy and this is reflected both in the lunchtime meal which is provided for the children who stay on for the afternoon and in the lunch children bring in for themselves for the morning break. The lunch provided varies, but usually there is juice to drink and crusty bread together with beans, chicken, ham, cheese, and a variety of different fruits. Thus healthy eating, an important part of children's well-being, is encouraged and nurtured and the children are also encouraged to adopt correct table manners such as washing hands before eating and handling food appropriately. During lunch they chat with each other (Photos I.2 and I.3) and afterwards Alan brings back his plate and cup to the kitchen or puts his lunch box and bottle into his bag. Along with the other children, he recycles packaging and feeds scraps of leftover food to the birds outside. This promotes Alan's respect and care for living things and for the environment.

Photos I.2 and I.3: Lunchtime for Alan and his friends

## Identity and Belonging

Alan has lots of friends in the setting. The children here all come from the local area and often visit each others homes or play with each other outside the setting. The close relationship he has with his friends contributes to his sense of identity and belonging to the group. Alan's special friend in the setting is a little boy called Bill and I noticed that when the children were engaged in child-initiated activity during the day, Alan often chose to work with and chose similar activities to Bill such as puzzles and jigsaws or trays for spooning and pouring. On one occasion I observed them working closely together fitting triangles together to fill circular shapes (Photo I.4).

Photo I.4: Alan and Bill working together

Photo I.5: Small group making a collage

Photo I.6: Alan's own photo of his favourite place indoors

While he spends a lot of time with Bill he clearly gets on with and mixes well with all the children in the setting. Mrs Ruane encourages him to work with other children by changing around groups (Photo I.5)

*We try to avoid having them pitched with the same people every day, because they need a broader view, and when they go on to school, that particular child might not be their friend in big school, so we always try to*

*have the space that they get a chance to be everywhere and they will also be with different groups.*

The walls of the Montessori room are covered with attractive displays of the children's work and this also promotes Alan's sense of identity and belonging. The displays are regularly updated as work is sent home to parents, and more recent work displayed. Alan is clearly proud of this work and loves to see it displayed on the walls. On my second visit, when I asked him to show me his favourite place in the Montessori room and take a picture of it (Photo 1.6), he took me over to the display of animals the children had made. When I asked him why this was his favourite place he told me, *I love animals and I love the rhyme about them.* He also loves bringing his work home to show his Mum and Dad. When I asked him why he comes to the pre-school he told me that it is *because I need to come here to make stuff for my Mom. I need to go to school. My Dad wants to see how much colouring I do.*

The setting also promotes Alan's sense of identity and belonging by being aware of and creating links with the kinds of activities Alan shows interest in at home. For example, Alan loves to play at home with his toy farm and tractor. He sets up gates and makes sure the animals have water. This play mirrors the real-life things he loves to do when he visits his Granny's house. His Mum told me that *he would stay out on the farm all day with his Uncle Martin and go away doing jobs and things.* When I asked him what he would change about the setting it's hardly surprising then that he would move the bunk beds for dolls in the playroom to make more room for *tractors!* There are, however, toy tractors in an area of the playroom, along with a farm set with toy animals and gates and Alan often chose to play with these during the afternoon session.

Equally there is a construction area with blocks and bricks and tools in the playroom, which allows Alan to engage in another interest he also demonstrates at home. His Mum told me that he loved doing jobs outside with his Dad at the weekend and his Dad Tom gave him real-life practical materials to work with:

*Tom would often give him a bit of wood and a nail and a light hammer, but Tom says it is good to let him do his own thing and he will hammer away and try to make something and he is happy out.*

The setting maintains these strong links with Alan's home life by promoting active involvement of parents in the setting. Parents indicate that they feel very much

involved, informed and part of the setting's work. There is a real sense of being part of a community here, a factor they attribute to the pre-school belonging to a wider local community. Some of the ways the setting communicates with and involves parents include having an open door policy so that parents know they are welcome to come to staff at any time to chat or talk about concerns or worries, holding open days and having formal meetings with individual parents during the year.

## Communicating

The children's oral language communication skills are developed and nurtured in many different ways in the pre-school. For example, at the beginning of each day all of the children who attend the setting come together for roll call and have the opportunity to discuss their news. One Monday morning while I was there, the big news was about a new baby born in one of the children's family over the weekend and that was a cause of great excitement in the setting with lots of questions asked about the new arrival. Alan took his turn to relate his own news, *I was at my Granny's yesterday*, and also listened eagerly to the contributions of the other children. On another visit, during circle work Mrs Ruane introduced picture cards of animals such as a polar bear, a kangaroo, a penguin and so on. The children talked about the animals and Mrs Ruane prompted them by asking questions such as *Where does a polar bear live? Why is it good that he is white living in the snow?* Later, the children matched the animal names on cards to picture/word cards (Photo I.7). I noted how observant Alan was when he pointed out to Mrs Ruane that there were two ostrich picture cards on the floor but only one word card to match.

Photo I.7: Alan matching words and pictures

Photo I.8: Action rhymes

Alan is an inquisitive and articulate child who asks questions regularly throughout the day. At prayer time one day, Mrs Ruane talked to them about their guardian angel, telling them he was always beside them keeping them safe and secure. I watched Alan looking around him with a puzzled expression on his face and he then asked, *Mrs Ruane, what side is he on?* Alan also shows interest in what the other children are doing and asks questions about their work. One day when the children were working on collage pictures I watched him chatting with the other children about their pictures asking, for example, *What are **you** making, Eleanor?*

Alan appears to love story time. The children sit together in a circle and Mrs. Ruane supports the children's emergent literacy by making sure that all the children can see the pictures and often pointing to the text or asking questions as she goes along. Alan becomes completely absorbed in the story and joins in telling it using actions and words. During one story time I observed, Mrs Ruane was reading them a book called *Up Up Up*. Alan responded eagerly to Mrs Ruane's questions about the pictures, for example, when she asked, *what do you see in the park?* He answered, *a swing, a seesaw*. Later she asked, *what's Monkey doing?* He was the only child to answer her question. *He's running*, he replied. Sometimes he made observations about the story, such as when he said, *and monkey is puffing*, modelling language Mrs Ruane had used earlier. It was a story where key words and phrases were repeated and Alan was quick in identifying them having heard them occurring once or twice.

Alan appears to be very interested in books and stories and demonstrates a developing understanding of the way books work during story time and in independent reading. He sometimes wanders over to the book corner with his friend Bill and they share books, for example, talking about the pictures together. I also noticed them picking out letters from the letter chart that hung on the wall overhead and telling each other words that began with the letter sound.

The children often sing favourite songs and chant action and number rhymes such as *Five fat sausages* or *Three little monkeys*. Alan joins in the rhymes, enthusiastically using actions to illustrate the words (Photo 1.8). One day, Alan and his friend Bill volunteered to say *Three yummy buns* together. Alan started off confidently but, when he realised Bill had not, showed signs of shyness and stopped up until Bill joined in again. Once or twice he corrected the others if they recited the rhyme

differently than the way he had learned it. *No it's yummy buns*, he said, when someone said *yummy cakes* instead.

Some of the work I observed in the setting involved developing the children's awareness of and ability to use language in symbolic form. Alan told me that numbers are the thing he likes best about coming to the pre-school and when he took me on a tour of the playroom, he took a picture of the number chart on the wall because *I like numbers*. The number work I observed involved counting and sorting, drawing dots or sticking pictures next to the numeral in his individual number book. Alan moved on to the next number at his own pace.

On other days when I visited, the children were working with letters. Mrs Ruane uses *Letterland*<sup>23</sup> and the children learn the sounds associated with the different letters. Alan was really enthusiastic about thinking up and offering new words that start with the different letter sounds and I noticed that he often picked out words beginning with the letters when reading storybooks or in print in the environment. One day when Mrs. Ruane was reading a story about the sunflower he called out, *sunflower starts with Sammy Snake*. At the end of session, Alan worked with his individual book of letters and colours and stuck in pictures of objects beginning with a particular letter sound, traced with his fingers over sandpaper letters and formed the letter in his letter book. At an earlier stage of the year, Alan had been prepared indirectly for holding a pencil through the sensorial exercises and also often chose to make insets for design, all of which prepared him for the work he would do later in forming letters.

## Exploring and Thinking

Alan has many opportunities for actively exploring the environment while in the pre-school. Alan seems to really enjoy working with his hands. He told me that he loved *colouring and cutting and sticking*. His Mum and Mrs Ruane also told me that *he loves painting and he loves scissors and glue and making a combination of bits on the paper and different things*. I observed Alan creatively exploring different media to make pictures on two of my visits to the setting. One day, the children were making collages using coloured paper, feathers and other such media. Alan's picture was of a rocket taking off with a fence all around it. He made it using different coloured and textured paper and laid his picture out the way he wanted it before taking the glue to

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<sup>23</sup> Letterland is a commercially available scheme used in some early years settings to support the child in developing emergent reading and emergent writing skills.



stick it in place (Photos I.1 and I.9). On another day he worked with a straw, blowing and mixing different coloured paint over half a page before folding the other side on top to make a multicoloured butterfly.

Photo I.9: Alan making a collage  
Photo I.10: Alan kicking a football at a target  
Photo I.11: Alan on the trampoline

Every day after lunch, the children line up and go to the hall or outside where they have opportunities to use a range of equipment (such as trampolines, climbing frames, slides, balls, beanbags, bicycles and tricycles) to develop and enhance their physical skills. In the hall, Alan usually chose the bikes first of all; he liked to ride on the two-wheeler bike and was careful not to crash into other children. He then moved around the activities, spending time on the climbing frame and jumping on the trampoline (Photo I.11).

The outdoor play area, like the indoor multi-purpose room, is often used by two groups at the one time, giving the children a chance to mix with siblings and younger children. On the far right of the play area, the floor surface is cushioned and has attractive green and red chequered squares. Children are free to choose their own activities and on the day I observed outdoor play, they played hopscotch, ran around coloured cones and played chase, played with balls and beanbags and hoops and took turns using the tricycles and bicycles. Their practitioners joined in and encouraged the children's activities while ensuring their safe exploration of equipment. Alan told me that he loved being outside and that his favourite things to do outside were *playing with the balls and the bikes*. I watched him one day kicking a ball at a target, retrieving it and lining the ball up to kick at the same target again. He was absorbed for more than ten minutes in the activity, clearly repeating and revisiting the same activity in an attempt to perfect his aiming skills (Photo I.10).

My visits to the setting ran through spring and the early summer. I observed Alan and the children engaging in activities which helped them actively explore new life in the

plant and animal world and learn about life-cycles, a key aspect of the cultural subjects in the Montessori curriculum. One such activity, on my third visit, involved planting sunflower seeds. Mrs. Ruane first read them a story about the sunflower which drew the children's attention to the various stages the flower passes through in growing from a seed to a sunflower. Alan was engrossed in the story and when the time came to plant his seed was gentle and careful in handling the various materials.

While a spoon was provided to fill the tiny pots with compost, Alan asked to use a proper gardening tool and was clearly used to handling real materials, in keeping with the Montessori philosophy of education. He then carefully poured water from a jug to give the thirsty seed something to drink. Over the next few weeks the children observed and cared for their seed on the nature table (Photos I.12 and I.13).

Photos I.12 and I.13: Planting seeds and bulbs  
Photo I.14: Alan's favourite place out of doors.

Alan's interest in observing and caring for growing flowers is reflected in the picture he chose to take of his favourite place outside (Photo I.14). He chose a pot of daffodils growing at the entrance to the pre-school because he liked *the petals*.

## Conclusion

Alan appears very happy and well adjusted in the pre-school. He is a well-rounded child who has a broad range of interests and who enjoys a variety of learning experiences in the setting. He loves coming to the setting every day. His mum said, *I used to be worried that he would never like school (but) he would be the only one on the holidays that would say to the kids "I can't wait to go back to school"*. She feels that he is ready to go to junior infants in September and his practitioner agrees. *He is a child we wouldn't have any worries at all about moving on now*, she says.

# Andrew

## Photo J.1: Andrew

Andrew (Photo J.1) lives with his mother, father and three sisters, two older and one younger, on the outskirts of a town in Munster. He attends the junior infant class in a small rural school two miles from the town. His Mum describes him as *a very lively and bright little boy*. He loves learning new things, especially in maths and science, and he likes to learn new words, especially in Irish. He is very creative and enjoys using his hands. He likes to take his time and finish whatever he has started. His favourite outing is when all the family take their bicycles to the forest park. This portrait was compiled near the end of his first year at school, when Andrew was almost six years old.

## Rathbeg National School - Background and context

Andrew started in the junior infant class in Rathbeg National School last September, and he has now almost completed his first year in school. Rathbeg is a rural school, catering for 90 children in total. The original school building dates from the 1930s, when it was a two-teacher school, and prefab units have been added as the number of children grew. There are now four class teachers, each teaching a mixed group of two classes. The school also has a resource teacher, a part-time special needs assistant and a school secretary. A new school building has been approved but building has not yet commenced. Andrew's junior infant class shares a prefabricated classroom with the senior infant class with twenty-three children in all. The school is located on a narrow country road, about two miles from the nearest town, surrounded by fields and rolling hills.

Andrews' teacher, Mrs O'Neill, originally trained as a post-primary teacher and has recently completed a post-graduate diploma in primary teaching. The special needs assistant shares her time between this class and the first and second class in the adjoining classroom.

## Curriculum and assessment

The curriculum used in Rathbeg NS is the *Primary School Curriculum* (1999). The curriculum for the infant classes emphasises active learning experiences, guided activity and discovery, the development of language skills and numeracy, integration between the different curriculum areas and the importance of the environment.

The timetable is a busy one, and it changes over the course of the year. As the class approaches the end of their first year in school, there is more structured work, more writing, because as Mrs O'Neill noted, *they are ready for it*. While Mrs O'Neill plans learning activities for the class as a whole, she is also conscious of individual learning needs. Her interactions with the children help her to be aware of how they are progressing. Mrs O'Neill teaches two class groups responding to the wide range of abilities within the classes. The children's workbooks which are marked and dated each day, help Mrs O'Neill to keep a record of their progress. Andrew is usually one

of the last to finish written work or colouring because he is so careful and likes to take his time. Mrs O'Neill shares information like this about the children with the parents, both informally and at parent-teacher meetings and in the end-of year report.

The school identifies and caters for any additional needs the children may have as early as possible. The school has a resource teacher who not only works with the children who need it in her own classroom but who also helps the class teachers to adapt the curriculum and teaching materials to meet individual needs. Andrew's friend Stephen has learning difficulties. As he is very interested in tractors and machinery, the teachers have developed special reading and mathematics workbooks for him with lots of pictures of these machines. The principal and the teachers also act as a resource for one another. As they each take a turn on playground duty and are involved in whole-school activities, they quickly come to know all of the children and the children build up a relationship with them.

Parents are invited for an open day before the children start school where they meet the principal and the infant teacher. They are given a Parents' Handbook compiled by the teachers, telling them what to expect when their child starts school. Parents are made aware of the school's policies and procedures- on healthy eating, for example. There is a very active Parents' Association, and parents are always ready to help when needed, for example, organising the school Sports Day.

Both teachers and parents spoke to me about a sense of ownership of the school by the local community, which supported the teachers in their work. There are also close links with the life of the parish, as the children, the majority of whom are Roman Catholic, are prepared to receive the sacraments. The school year ends with a Mass celebrated in the school yard to which parents are invited.

## Andrew's experiences in junior infants at Rathbeg NS

### Well-being

Andrew's school is on a narrow country road well outside the town where he lives, so in common with most of the other children, he is driven to school by his mother, who then goes on to take his little sister to her playgroup. His older sisters attend a school

in the town. Andrew's mother has a lot of informal contact with Mrs O'Neill, Andrew's teacher, since the infant classes are escorted to the school gate by their teacher, and any parents who are delayed come into the classroom to collect their children.

Andrew's classroom is in a prefabricated building, across the yard from the main school. While there are only 23 children in the combined junior and senior infant classes, the size of the room means that there is not much scope for flexibility in arranging the furniture. The tables and chairs for the sixteen junior infants are arranged in a U shape, with more tables in the centre where the seven senior infant children sit. Andrew's chair is towards the back of the room. He shares a table with his friend Robert.

The walls are covered with colourful posters and displays of the children's work. Below these are open shelves where books, games, art and craft material and other resources are stored. On top of the shelves to one side is an altar with a picture and a statue of Our Lady—the children bring flowers to put on the altar and all turn to face this several times a day when saying their prayers (Photo J.2).

#### Photo J.2: The May altar

The windows on one side look out on the tarmaced school yard, and those at the back of the room look out over the lower yard to a landscape of rolling hills and green fields. On the table in front of the window is the bowl where Nemo the goldfish lives, sitting on an undersea landscape with seaweed, crabs and fish painted by the

children (Photo J.3). Andrew sits beside Nemo. When Andrew's teacher announced that Nemo was getting a new bowl, Andrew turned round to Nemo and said, *did you hear that? You're getting a new bowl!*

Photo J.3: Nemo the goldfish and his undersea world

Andrew has almost completed his first year in the school. He took a while to adjust to primary school. He was very happy at the pre-school he had attended for the previous two years. As a toddler, he experienced difficulties with his hearing due to continuous ear infections and this affected his speech and his ability to concentrate. His mother noticed that he was missing certain sounds, and his pre-school teacher confirmed this and suggested getting his hearing tested. As a result, he had an operation to have grommets fitted in both ears and this made a big difference once he had recovered from the operation. According to Andrew's Mum,

*The experience of sound again was difficult for him. He was constantly covering his ears with his hands, as he had been deaf for a quite a long time. After the operation, he was like a different child, he was happy, was calmer (after he got over the initial trauma of the operation), he could sing in tune, his school work took off. I always knew that a lot of the hyperactivity was related to his hearing, he was getting frustrated and wasn't able to participate because he wasn't hearing things right. Now as long as he likes the setting, as long as there's lots of interesting information coming into him, he will sit as quiet as a lamb.*

The class he is in now has a very different gender balance to Andrew's home or his pre-school. There are only two girls in the junior infant class along with fourteen boys.

*They are quite a boisterous class and I think he found the playing in the yard difficult to begin with,* according to his teacher. The organisation of the class is different also. There is more whole-class activity and less freedom to move around the room or to choose an activity than in pre-school. He found the social aspect of finding his place in a new group quite difficult, but at the same time, he was ready to move on from pre-school and was anxious to learn new things. His Mum commented,

*He just loved his pre-school teacher, and he was the boss in there, and when he came in here, he wasn't and he found it very hard to find his place in the class and adjust. Also, as the first child from his family to attend this particular school, he had to find his way, and as the third child, he's not used to doing that at home.*

Both his mother and his teacher noted, *the class has gelled as a group* and Andrew is really enjoying school. Mrs O'Neill said that Andrew was well prepared for school:

*He had all the basic self-care skills, it makes a big difference if they are comfortable and independent and able to do things like taking off coats and taking out his books and his lunchbox. There is so much else that's new for them to take in.*

Now Andrew knows all the other children in his class and the one above it, and he has friends to play with at break times.

Andrew's Mum can empathise with him in this process of adjustment. She said that she herself had to adjust her parenting style to suit the needs of an active little boy when Andrew came along, and that it was very different to the way she parented her two older girls. She tries to find time to spend with each of her children on a one-to-one basis each day, and she thinks that this is particularly important when they are young.

## Identity and Belonging

The children in Andrew's classroom are very aware of their group and class identity. They are organised into four groups, Blue Sharks, Yellow Tigers, Red Racers and Green Dragons (Photo J.4), and the groups vie with one another to be the first to put away their books for example, and gain a star for their group. His teacher, Mrs O'Neill, has noticed that *Andrew is very competitive, and likes to be a winner.* She



often uses games to teach Irish vocabulary. *Andrew's exceptionally good at Irish, and if he didn't win, he would be very upset, but he's learning that he can't win every time.*

The children are also very aware of their identity as members of either the junior or senior infant class. Some activities are done as a whole group, with all the children participating. Others begin as a whole group activity, and then one of the classes is given some work to do quietly while Mrs. O'Neill works directly with the other class.

#### Photo J4: Group star chart

It was Andrew's sixth birthday on the week following my last visit to his class, and this was a major topic of discussion with all the children in the class. All the junior infants had been invited to his party, plus Kevin from the senior infant class. *He's a senior, but he's going because he lives near Andrew,* the children told me. Andrew's Mum was surprised to hear that the children were so aware of who had been invited and why. Andrew was very proud that his oldest sister was going to make a cake for his birthday. *She's an excellent cooker,* he told me.

Andrew's best friend Robert sits beside him in class and his other particular friends are Megan, Keith, Connor and Jamie. He usually chooses to play with this group at break times. They have a repertoire of games that they like to play. A favourite spot is the narrow gap between the classroom and the boundary wall. The entrance to this is easily blocked by one child. On one day it might be a cinema, and everyone who wants to go in has to give Megan a ticket. Later on, it might become a jail or whatever the current game demands.

Some playground games have elaborate rules. In the summer term, Andrew and his friends often played “Dip”, a chasing game. First, the children played a counting game to select the person who is to be *It*. They crouched in a circle, with one shoe of each child touching (Photo J.5). Then Andrew touched each shoe in turn, reciting *Dipidipidation, My operation, How many trains are at the station?* Then he picked a number, *Five*, and counted it out, *one, two, three, four, five, and you are it!* The child on whose shoe the final number fell was ‘It’ and has to chase and catch the others. On one occasion during my visits, Keith was ‘It’. The low ledge beside the wall was the den; anyone who reached it was safe from capture. Andrew and the others ran for the den, and then darted forward while Keith was chasing someone else (Photo J.6). The sorties became increasingly daring until Robert was caught, then Robert became ‘It’ for a while.

Photo J.5: Andrew and friends playing a counting game

Photo J.6: A chasing game in the school yard

Andrew’s Mum told me that in general *he doesn’t tend to like the rough and tumble of games like football*, although he will kick a football around at home. Mrs O’Neill has noticed this also, but said that, *now he has the skills to find someone else to play with, if the boys are playing something and he’s not interested in it*. At home, he likes to play on the trampoline in the garden. He loves riding his bike and his Mum has always tried to encourage this. He likes to go to the nearby forest park with his Dad. She told me that

*His dad works long hours and doesn’t have much time during the week to play with him then but they all go to the Park and take the bikes out and that’s a time they all have together. Andrew likes all the family to be together, that’s when he is happiest.*



## Communicating

In class, whenever Mrs O'Neill asked a question, I noticed that Andrew's hand was invariably one of the first to go up. He liked to be called on to answer but when someone else was chosen, he listened to hear if they got it right. It was obvious also that he loves stories and reading. His parents have done a lot of reading with him at home, and he loves getting a new book to read or to have read to him. When Mrs O'Neill brought out a new Big Book, he craned forward in his seat to see and followed the story intently. *He loves Irish, he soaks it up like a sponge, he has a good ear,* said Mrs O'Neill.

Andrew also loves performing, especially singing. The January before he started school, his parents decided to send him to a speech and drama class. He met some of the boys that would be going to school with him, which his parents felt would ease the transition for him. He loved the games, the nursery rhymes, singing and acting. His Mum told me, *that's his thing, and we found it early. He picks up the words very, very quickly, loves performing,* especially since his hearing has improved. Mrs O'Neill is also conscious that Andrew likes to perform and tries to give him opportunities to do so. On the morning after the speech and drama class had given a concert, Mrs O'Neill invited Andrew and three of his friends to sing one of their songs, *If all the raindrops were lemon drops and gumdrops* for the class. Andrew seemed to enjoy being the centre of attention, as the four boys sang and did the actions. The other children joined in the chorus.

When his Mum collects him from school, Andrew wants to share everything he has done today, and it is often ten or fifteen minutes later before they set off for home. On the way home, he tells her the new Irish words he has learned today and the other things he has done. He likes learning new things and she thinks this is why one of his favourite subjects is Irish.

## Exploring and Thinking

An important part of the school morning is News Time, when the children share news from home. They take turns to bring in an item for Show and Tell. On one of my visits, Megan brought in her favourite toy, a spotted dog, to show to the other children. Andrew and his friend Robert volunteered to be the reporter and camera man interviewing her. Andrew obviously enjoyed being the reporter, relaying the

other children's questions and asking questions of his own. Andrew asked Megan, *where did you get your toy dog?* Megan replied, *in Wales*. No-one, including Megan, was quite sure where Wales was or how you got there! *It was dark*, said Megan, so the teacher took down the globe and showed them. This led to an extended discussion, bringing in science and geography as well as language. The teacher recorded the news headlines on the board, and during the day the children often looked to see their own names there and to read what it said about them.

Andrew is especially interested in geography. He has posters and charts of the different countries and their flags on his bedroom wall at home. His Mum told me that he was thirsty for information:

*He's into dinosaurs, he's into geography, the planets, he has studied the charts and he knows the flags of different countries, he reads them all from the charts, it's in his room, he looks at it when he's going to sleep and takes it all in.*

She thinks that this is why he likes television--he sees it as a source of information, though she tries to limit the amount of television that he watches.

Andrew himself says that his favourite subjects are maths and *doing experiments*. The class was learning about floating and sinking during one of my visits. Mrs O'Neill brought in a new goldfish bowl for Nemo (Photo J.3), but said that before the fish was installed, they would use the bowl for an experiment. This announcement was greeted with much excitement. Andrew clapped his hands and smiled. The children were shown a variety of objects—a pencil, a feather, keys, scissors, a leaf. Mrs O'Neill invited them to predict which of them would float and which would sink in the bowl of water. Almost everyone got the keys, the scissors and the feather right. There was a difference of opinion about the pencil. Some of the children thought it would sink because it was heavier than the feather or the leaf. Then the children tested the different objects. The pencil floated, and Andrew expressed his satisfaction, *Yes! That's what I predicted!*

When it was Andrew's turn, he chose a leaf, and predicted that it would float. Mrs O'Neill told him to try it; the leaf floated and Andrew went back to his place with a smile on his face. The children took out their work-books and opened a page showing pictures of the different objects they had just tested. They recorded their

findings by circling the objects that floated. Andrew carefully circled the pencil, the leaf and the feather.

Andrew also likes to work with his hands. The class had been talking about different kinds of fruit on another of my visits. Their teacher read them a story from a big book called *Handa's Surprise* about a little girl called Handa who lived in Africa and tried to carry a basket of fruit to give to her friend. Along the way, a series of animals helped themselves to the different fruits. Mrs O'Neill brought in a selection of the exotic fruit from the story for the children to see, smell, handle, taste and talk about. Then they each made their own basket of fruit from modelling clay. Andrew took great care to be as accurate as he could with the colour and shape of each fruit—yellow banana, green avocado, pink mango (Photo J.7). He looked up occasionally at the basket of fruit to check the details. *He has the shapes and the proportions right, he's very observant*, commented Mrs O'Neill.

Photo J.7: Andrew's art work: a bowl of fruit

During the modelling activity, Connor was having problems and asked Andrew for help. Robert looked at Connor's finished basket and said indignantly, *Andrew helped you with that! You must do it all by yourself!* Robert knew that Andrew was good at making things and thought that it was unfair of Connor to ask him for help.

Andrew also loves doing art at home, and his parents have always encouraged Andrew and his sisters to paint and draw. His Mum reflected

*He would happily spend all day on that. He seems to have a very good eye for drawing in particular, it's only started to come out in the last three or four months, but I always encouraged him, it was something I found it easy to get him interested in, to paint, to colour, while I was doing bits and pieces, to put all the stuff out on the table, and they'd paint and colour, I didn't care, it kept them happy and it was good for them to experience mixing colours, making new colours.*

Andrew is often the last to finish a piece of work. *He's very methodical, very meticulous*, noted his teacher, and he sometimes finds that *at school he cannot spend as long as he would like on an activity*. At the beginning of the year, this would sometimes upset him. Now he can cope better with this, and his teacher sometimes suggests that he take his work home to finish it.

## Conclusion

School is an important part of Andrews' life, especially at the moment. He has made a successful transition from home and pre-school and learned to cope with the larger numbers and the different setting and expectations. He is enjoying learning about new things every day. He likes his teacher and has made new friends. He has a wide range of learning experiences outside of school also: at home, at his speech and drama class, with his family and his friends. His teacher finds him very responsive and rewarding to teach. *He seems very contented and well able in class, he's a good reader and will be very ready for senior infants. I enjoy teaching him*, she said. Andrew's Mum sums him up as *a very interesting little chap. He's well beyond his years*.

# Matt

## Photo K.1: Matt

Matt (Photo K.1) is five years and nine months old. He is a happy, motivated and self-confident young boy. He lives with his Mum, Dad and older sister in the east of the country. At school, he loves constructing with Lego and blocks, playing with the toy cars, painting and playing chase. At home, he enjoys playing on the trampoline, going to the park and to the cinema. Matt is in junior infants in St. Kiernan's primary school. He goes to school from 8.50 a.m. to 1.30 p.m. Monday to Friday. His sister goes to the same school.



## St. Kiernan's Primary School - background and context

St. Kiernan's Primary School is a large junior school in south-west Dublin. The school has more than 700 children and a staff of 36 teachers. The children range in age from four to nine years. There are six junior infant classes, six senior infant classes, six first classes and six second classes.

The school is located next door to a large senior school. The junior school sits between a main road and a modern shopping complex with a number of established housing estates close by. A well-kept green area serves as an important learning resource for the school, being used in a number of ways such as a sports ground, a science ground and a Teddy Bears' picnic area.

The main part of the school is a single-storey fairly modern building. The junior infant classes are located in a prefab block that is more than 20 years old. The block contains six junior infant classrooms, three on each side of a bright and spacious corridor which is awash with large, colourful, eye-catching artwork created by the junior infants, including Matt. The busyness of the children and teachers is obvious in the chatting, laughing, and singing heard through the corridor.

There are 29 children (15 girls, 14 boys) in Matt's class. Ms. Molloy who holds a B.Ed. (Bachelor of Education) degree, is their teacher.

## Curriculum and assessment

Guided by the Primary School Curriculum, St. Kiernan's aims to support each child *to live a full life as a child and to develop his natural endowments that he may go on to live a full, useful life as an adult in society* (School's Introductory Information Sheet, no date).

Ms. Molloy uses the Primary School Curriculum to guide Matt's early learning and development. Matt enjoys lots of opportunities to learn through play, to make things and to talk with his teacher as well as his classmates. He experiences great variety in what he learns and how he learns. Ms. Molloy plans daily and weekly experiences for Matt and his classmates, often based around a theme which emerges from the

children—garden animals, spirals and my favourite toys being amongst those I observed during my visits.

Ms. Molloy gathers information about how and what the children are learning by listening to them, observing them and by using teacher-designed tasks. She shares assessment information with Matt's parents. Sometimes, she chats to his parents in the morning or in the afternoon. Throughout the year, she sends samples of Matt's work home so that his parents can support what he is learning in school. For example, Matt takes home his emergent reading activities so that his parents can support him in these. His parents sign the activity sheets and return them to Ms. Molloy.

The junior infant teachers hold a meeting at the end of September to share with parents what *junior infants is all about and what we want them to do and that we are working in tandem with each other and our expectations for them and for their kids* (another infant teacher). In January, Ms. Molloy meets Matt's parents by themselves to share information about how well Matt is doing at school. At the end of junior infants, she sends them a report which summarises how well Matt has coped and learned during the year.

## Matt's experiences in junior infants in St. Kiernan's

Matt's junior infant classroom is a sea of colour with the children's drawings, paintings and early writing, and Ms. Molloy's posters, pictures and language charts and cards. The classroom has five groups of desks and chairs, each group colour coded. Matt is in the yellow group.

Matt's classroom is well resourced. A mobile library displays a range of inviting books. Most days, groups of children including Matt, enjoy sitting at the library and reading their own choice of books. There are also lots of paired reading books which the children take home to enjoy with their parents. There are language charts based on the days of the week, the weather, the months and the seasons. Other resources include water and sand trays, a range of toys, games and jigsaws, a computer, television, video, DVD player and radio/CD player.

**Table 13: A day in junior infants for Matt**

Arrival 8.50-9.10 a.m.	Matt arrives. He plays with his classmates at his table. On Friday, this play session is a little longer when Matt chooses from among all his classmates, who he would like to play with. While the children are playing, Ms. Molloy invites them, table by table, to exchange their paired reading books which they take home to enjoy with their parents.
9.10-9.30 a.m.	Matt and his classmates have an opportunity to develop their oral communication skills. They chat about the days of the week, the months of the year, the weather and relevant points of news. The children use English and Irish at this time.
9.30 a.m.-1.30 p.m.	Throughout the day, Matt and his classmates have opportunities to learn through Social, Environmental and Scientific Education (SESE: History, Geography and Science), Physical Education (PE), Religious Education (RE), Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE), music, visual arts, drama and mathematics, as well as through English and Irish. Ms. Molloy plans the children's experiences as 20 minute sessions building in lots of variety including listening activities, early writing, construction and play-based activities. Matt and his classmates enjoy one structured activity time each day which is mathematics and/or English based.
10.45-11.00 a.m.	Matt and his classmates enjoy a snack and have opportunities to chat and to read books.
12.10-12.45 p.m. 12.45-1.00 p.m.	Matt and his classmates play in the infant yard. The children eat lunch and enjoy a story read aloud by Ms. Molloy.
1.30 p.m.	Matt and his classmates go home at the end of the school day in junior infants.

## Well-being

Transitions to new settings can be unsettling for children. Not so for Matt. Prior to school he attended a Montessori pre-school for a year, and before that he went to a Mothers and Toddlers Group with his Mum. Reflecting on how pre-school might have helped Matt settle in school, his Mum recalled, *he really enjoyed the structure of it. They would take a break and he had to sit and have the break ... there were rules and regulations. He is a great child for rules and regulations so he loved it.*

Matt settled into infants quickly and easily. Indeed, his Mum found the move more upsetting than Matt did! His Mum reflected,

*The first day he went in, I cried ... There wasn't a bother on him! He looked at me as if to say what's wrong with you, sat at his desk and said goodbye. He never ever looked back; he was delighted and really excited about going.*

Ms. Molloy recalled how the whole school routine came very naturally and easily to Matt, *he was able to play and share very well ... he had the confidence to let his needs be known, the whole school routine really wasn't brand new to him.* Ms. Molloy prioritises making

*the children feel secure and happy, feel that they will be listened to, feel that they can voice their opinion ... where their self-esteem is boosted and there is an atmosphere of self-respect, that I would respect them and vice versa.*

She sets boundaries with the children *within which respectful, warm and loving relationships are nurtured ... if they know there is structure and rules and routines, they are happy with that and they know where they are.* Ms Molloy finds that Matt like the other children appreciates having these boundaries.

As Ms. Molloy changes the composition of the colour groups every six weeks, Matt gets to know and develop friendships with different classmates. Through daily group activities he has many opportunities to interact with his peers and with Ms. Molloy.

Ms. Molloy purposefully varies Matt's learning experiences daily. She explained that

*we do all the subjects. Generally they would be 20 minute sessions. That's at this stage of year [May], obviously in September it is about 5/10 minute sessions. I try to alternate listening activities with more writing or cutting or doing or playing and then we have one structured activity time during the day, which is Maths and English based.*

Within the structured activity sessions, Matt often enjoys a different activity each day as his group moves through a circus of activities over the five week days.

Matt seems to love being physically active. He enjoys Physical Education (PE). He also likes yard-time when he and 180 other junior infants play. He explained to me that yard was great fun because, *you can run around and play chasing.* His favourite place in the yard was the high wall because as he pointed out to me, *it's the den where the boys play chasing.* Ms. Molloy too commented that Matt *loves playing chasing and things like that.* But Matt informed me that it's only the boys who play this game, ... *boys play with boys and girls play with girls, and that's it, we don't play together!*

A mature tree outside Matt's classroom serves as a great learning resource. Ms. Molloy explained that she and the children *take little trips out to see the tree that is near us as the various seasons change, we look at the tree*. Ms. Molloy observed that Matt really enjoyed this experience.

Matt has a tremendous sense of justice and fairness as well as empathy. He regularly helps classmates with games such as BINGO (Photo K.2). On one of my visits, he challenged a friend when he thought cheating might have entered the game! Matt was undeterred in his quest for justice when his friend insisted that he had not cheated!

Photo K.2: Matt playing BINGO with his friends

Matt's Mum recalled another situation when Matt demonstrated his sense of fairness and empathy:

*Mammy, when I was out in yard today, Simon was all on his own ... I said, "Simon, have you nobody to play with?" and Simon said, "No". And he said, "Well, you can play with me". And he turned around to his friend Patrick and said, "Patrick, won't you play with Simon as well?" and so we played with Simon because he was all on his own.*

Friends and friendship seem important to Matt. When I asked him who he liked spending time with in school, he responded, *we [his classmates] are all one big set of friends*.

## Identity and Belonging

Matt delights in talking about family members. He told me about his Dad working in different countries: *My dad went to Italy because that's where he worked.* His Mum recalled

*last week, he got all his Lego and he built a shopping centre, but he had different shops in the shopping centre. He had a B&Q for his daddy because that is his daddy's favourite shop; he had a Butlers for me so that I could go and have my coffee. He had a Marks and Spencers, he had a Dunnes and Penneys and he would be able to tell you all the names of the little shops he had, so that we were all happy.*

On another visit, Matt informed me that he had an uncle in Australia: *My uncle has parrots, a dog and a cat in his back garden.* [He laughs aloud] *It's like a pet shop! He [the uncle] had to put a bell on the cat's tail to tell the birds the cat was coming.* Matt told me about his uncle with great excitement and expression highlighting further how important he was to him. This same uncle featured again in other chats I had with Matt.

Ms. Molloy places great importance on making the children feel confident to express themselves and feel they are respected as individuals. This is evident in how she talks to the children, responds to their questions, suggestions and ideas. She also displays art, models and early writing by all the children around the classroom. This helps the children develop a sense of identity as young learners. During my visits, Matt loved showing his work to me which included a drawing and early writing (Photo K.3). On one occasion, he proudly told me that he could write all the letters and numbers.

Photo K.3: Matt's drawings and early writing

Matt's sense of belonging within the classroom seems important to him—when asked what his favourite place in the classroom was, he identified the 'fish art' where his name was displayed beside the hook for his coat (Photo K.4).

#### Photo K.4: Matt's favourite place in the classroom

Ms. Molloy prioritises time for sharing and exploring stories with the children everyday. While eating and drinking after yard-time, she reads a story aloud as the children relax and enjoy the story-time. Ms. Molloy positions herself so that all the children can see the pictures as she reads with vocal and facial expression. At various points in the story, on Ms. Molloy's invitation through questioning, and through the children's own initiative, Matt and the other children recount their own experiences linked to the story. Ms. Molloy listens often encouraging the children to think/recall in more detail. This enjoyment in sharing personal experiences again shows the importance of the children's sense of identity and belonging to them. On my last visit, one of Matt's classmates shared a scrapbook of her trip to Australia with the class. She spoke about things she had seen and places she had been. This sharing of trips and experiences which interest the children, was actively encouraged by Ms. Molloy during my visits to Matt's classroom.

## Communicating

Ms. Molloy varies her teaching approaches and methodologies to provide Matt and his classmates with rich communication and language experiences. Matt enjoys many opportunities to communicate in different ways: through speaking and listening (in English and Irish), through visual arts, drama, movement and music.

On one of my visits, Matt participated in role-play through Irish: he was the customer and his friend Connor was the *siopadóir* (*shopkeeper*). Ms. Molloy prompted the children at appropriate times to support their emerging communicative skills in Irish. The following is the transcript of the role-play.

Ms. Molloy: *Tá Matt ag dul go dtí an siopa (Matt is going to the shop).*

Matt: *Dia dhuit. (Hello).*

Connor: *Dia 's Muire dhuit. Conas atá tú? (Hello. How are you?)*

Matt: *Tá mé go maith. Ba mhaith liom carr. (I am fine. I would like a car).*

Connor: *Seo dhuit carr. (Here is a car).*

Matt: *Go raibh maith agat. Seo dhuit airgead. (Thank you. Here is money).*

Connor: *Go raibh maith agat. Slán. (Thank you. Goodbye).*

Ms. Molloy created a shop for the role-play which had various items for purchase. Matt chose a car demonstrating again his love of cars. To extend the children's thinking, Ms. Molloy posed a problem for them about how they might pay for items in the shop (see Exploring and thinking).

Matt and his classmates regularly learn through songs, rhymes and poems. They have an extensive repertoire of these reflecting the different topics they have been learning about such as animals, fish, summer or *an siopa* (*the shop*). Ms. Molloy encourages the children to express themselves using vocal and facial gestures as well as actions with their songs and poems.

Emergent reading and oral work are key parts of the English Curriculum for infants. During my visits, Matt was always ready and willing to participate in these activities. He took great pride in identifying sight words such as LIKE, HE, PIZZA, SAUSAGES, BIRTHDAY..., and in naming the first letter as well as making its sound. He also enjoyed thinking of words which began with a particular sound. He and his classmates found 28 words beginning with the letter h on one of my visits. Ms. Molloy responded, *I am so proud of you*. In thinking about some of the words, Ms. Molloy suggested that *a hose is used to put out a fire*. Matt quickly added, *or to wash a car*. Matt's Mum spoke about how he enjoyed exploring words and sounds with her. *I would ask him on the way home [from school], "what letter did you learn today?" If it*



*was D we would think of words that begin with D between the two of us. He would love that,* she recalled.

The carpeted floor in Matt's classroom is an ideal story/discussion area. Ms. Molloy regularly helps Matt and the other children to move their desks to create a cosy area where the children can sit comfortably and listen to and discuss a story or a topic. Matt loves this floor time as he listens attentively and is an eager contributor to the discussions. *He likes stories and enjoys them ... and contributing to class discussions,* commented Ms. Molloy. Matt was also a regular contributor to the *morning news* during my visits. During this time, Ms. Molloy invited the children to talk about what day, month and season it was and what the weather was like (in English or in Irish). However, when asked to photograph what he didn't like doing in school, Matt focused on the language charts used for daily oral work and the flashcards for the sight words (Photo K.5). When I asked him why, he chose not to offer a reason.

Photo K5: Matt's photo of what he didn't like doing in school

Matt and his classmates have many opportunities to create their own interest books. During my visits, they worked on *Our book of I love* (class book) and *My toys book* (Matt created his own book). Ms. Molloy and the children both read the books. Matt included cars in his book as his favourite toy, again emphasising how much he loved playing with cars.

Through physical education and drama, Matt has opportunities to communicate through movement. He enjoys expressing feelings through facial gestures, vocal tones and movements. Through music and visual arts, he expresses himself through percussion instruments (Photo K.6), voice, clay/márta, paint, collage and drawing and is encouraged to talk about his experiences. On one of my visits, Matt broke into

song and dance as Ms. Molloy played music while he waited along with some of his classmates, to wash their hands at the sink.

Photo K6: Matt playing with percussion instruments

## Exploring and Thinking

Much of Matt's learning across the Primary School Curriculum is highly integrated. On one visit, Matt was learning about spirals—this stemmed from the children bringing snails to school. Matt and his classmates observed and talked about the spirals on the snails' shells and learned from Ms. Molloy as she described spirals on the walls in Newgrange. Ms. Molloy guided the children in exploring how to make spirals and to use spiralling to mix colours. The children made snails with spiral shells using márla. Matt created a family of snails, some having small shells and others, larger ones. He made food too in case the snails were hungry! The children's enjoyment in learning in this integrated way was evident in the fun and curiosity they showed in their expressions, conversations and questions.

On another visit, linked to the children's role-play in *an siopa (the shop)*, Ms. Molloy posed a problem, *I wonder what different ways we could use to pay for the teddy in the shop*. With each child handling, observing and exploring real coins (1c, 2c and 5c), she encouraged the children including Matt to explore combinations they could use to pay for the teddy costing 5c. When invited to share his solution, Ms. Molloy encouraged Matt to handle the coins as he informed his classmates that he would pay with two 2c coins and one 1c coin. His classmates agreed this would work which pleased Matt greatly.

During the daily structured play session, Matt and his friends explore and learn at activity stations. Matt learns at a different station each day—the stations include sand and water trays, the library, jigsaws, maths games, role-play area (shop, kitchen and restaurant on my visits), construction toys and the computer. The stations change each week. Matt informed me that he especially loved his time at the water tray. In playing at it one day, he explained to me that

*I am big enough to slide on a big slide on my holidays in Donegal when I am six. Only people who are six or seven or more than six can slide on it! I couldn't slide on it other times because I wasn't big enough.*

Re-focusing on his water play, he explored a range of objects and containers to see if they would sink or float (Photos K.7 and K.8). On discovering that some floated, he suggested that they did this because they were light. After chatting about why heavy ships float, I added, *I wonder how we could make them [containers] sink*. Observing a small boat capsize and sink, Matt and a friend explored the effect of putting stones and water into the containers.

Photos K.7 and K.8: Matt exploring the concepts of floating and sinking

The theme of water emerged in Matt's thinking again during a subsequent visit. While eating his lunch, Matt and two friends discussed the effect of suction in juice bottles! One friend, Robert upturned his juice bottle with the lift-up top open and held it over Matt's head. To his amazement, the juice did not spill out. Robert and the other friend Connor were convinced the bottle top was actually closed. Matt was unconvinced. He proposed that the top was indeed open but that something else was stopping the juice from spilling out, developing his own theory. The boys chatted but weren't able to reach a shared conclusion.

Being active in his learning seems to be really important to Matt. When I asked *why* he came to school every day, he responded, *to do things*. During my visits, he enjoyed many opportunities to play maths games (Photo K.9), build with lego and/or other blocks (Photo K.10), explore objects in the water and sand trays, play musical instruments, be physically active in PE, to work on the computer and so on.

Photos K.9 and K.10: Matt playing a maths game, and building with Lego

During these activities, Matt chats to his classmates and often giggles depending on how the conversations develop. He likes to describe what he is doing and what is happening in his explorations. When asked to photograph what he liked doing best in school, Matt chose the toy cars and the construction toys which he used to build roads: *I love playing with the Lego and the cars*. Ms. Molloy noted that *usually Matt and two or three boys would make a big building or city or something out of bricks or Lego ... He likes constructing and making things...* His Mum too commented that he loved playing with his cars:

*he has a fantastic imagination ... he will play with his cars ... There might be a big crash and he will have the ambulances at the side and the fire brigade and he will be able to tell you the whole layout of the whole thing.*

Another activity Matt told me he enjoyed was painting, *because you can paint anything you want*, he explained with delight.

Matt regularly reflects quietly before contributing to discussions/activities. Another teacher visits his classroom every Wednesday morning for Circle Time. On one of my visits, the children were playing language games. The teacher invited the children to think of words which came to mind when she said 'trees'. Some children suggested *leaves, nests, apples ...* After thinking for a moment, Matt responded with *breeze because it rhymes with trees*. The children then played a memory game whereby

they added to a list—*Áine went to the shop and she bought .....* Being tenth in the circle, Matt appeared to devise a thinking strategy to help him remember what each classmate added. On his turn, he looked at each classmate recalling what each said, and then proudly added *cheetah* to the list miming the animal's prowling actions as he did so.

## Conclusion

Matt's time in junior infants is an important part of his life. He appears to thoroughly enjoy school. He loves being active in his learning and enjoys opportunities to explore and to find out new things. He is also a quiet and reflective young boy and confident to make his own ideas and thoughts known. His Mum described how he often *stands back and sizes up a situation ... he makes the decision himself*. Ms. Molloy, his teacher, finds him *a pleasure to teach. He is so receptive to what you are doing*. Matt's enjoyment of school was captured succinctly in his own words when he told me, *I love everything in school*.

## Section 3: Conclusion

Cathal, Jayne, Seán, Patrick, Amy, Harry, Zachary, Louise, Caroline, Alan, Andrew and Matt have shared their early learning experiences with the NCCA Early Childhood Team. Through listening to the children and sharing in their routines and activities, the NCCA has gained a greater understanding of what life is like for these children in their particular settings.

Collectively, the portraits reinforce many messages from the literature on children's early learning and development. (Many of these messages are highlighted in the NCCA's background paper, *Children's early learning and development*). These messages include

- the role of relationships including the Key Worker system
- the importance of play, and in particular outdoor play
- the influence and role of parents
- the power of communication through media such as movement
- the importance of identity and belonging in children's lives
- the role of culture and diversity
- observing and listening to children.

This concluding section draws on the descriptions of the children's experiences as captured in the different portraits to illustrate these messages 'in action'.



### Relationships

Relationships are a critical context for early learning and the child's learning and development is enhanced by warm and supportive relationships. Attachments through which the baby's needs are met consistently and in a caring and respectful way provide the foundation for the child's well-being and help him/her develop a sense of self and an identity making learning more rewarding, enjoyable and successful. Children are social beings and have a fundamental need to be with familiar, loving adults as well as being with other children during early childhood as they learn from and with others.

***(See also Amy, Harry and Jayne's portraits).***

*When the adult picked him up, Cathal initiated a 'kissing' game with some lovely reciprocal exchanges, including laughing, giggling and delighted squeals. This one to one exchange within a trusting and secure relationship is important for Cathal's emotional safety and positive self image (extracted from portrait of Cathal, age 9 months).*

### Outdoor play

The outdoor environment provides young children with a rich learning environment. By being active, less inhibited and free, children learn with an enthusiasm and motivation outdoors that they do not always display indoors.

*The outdoor play area has a cushioned surface with attractive green and red chequered squares. Children are free to choose their own activities and play hopscotch, run around coloured cones and play chase, play with balls and beanbags and hoops and take turns using the tricycles and bicycles. The practitioners join in and encourage the children's activities while ensuring their safe exploration of equipment. Alan says he loves being outside. He says that his favourite things to do outside are playing with the balls and the bikes. He kicks a ball at a target, retrieving it and lining the ball up to kick at the same target again. He is absorbed for more than ten minutes in the activity, clearly repeating and revisiting the same activity in an attempt to perfect his aiming skills (extracted from portrait of Alan, age 5).*

***(See also Amy, Caroline, Seán and Patrick, and Jayne's portraits).***



### Holistic learning and development

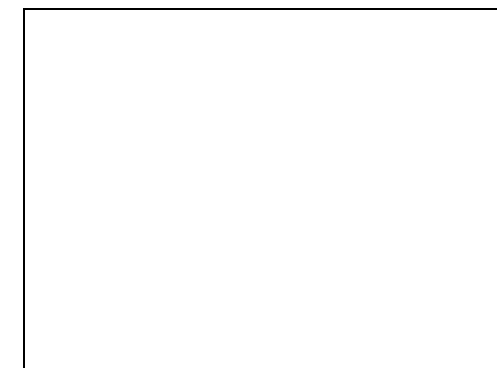
Learning and development in early childhood is profoundly integrated where all aspects are interconnected and interdependent, occurring in a variety of different contexts. The interconnected themes of the early childhood curriculum should be used as a framework to interlace the child's prior experience and learning in the context of supportive relationships rather than emphasising the acquisition of discrete skills in isolation. Learning and development occurs across domains that are mutually supportive and interactive.

**(See also Caroline and Alan's portraits).**

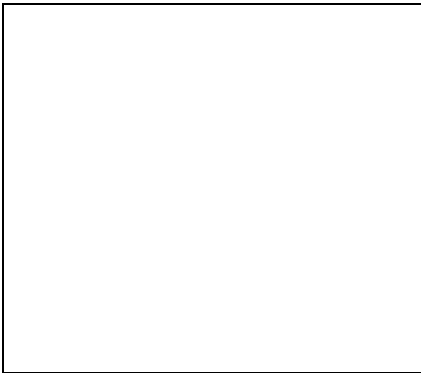

*Much of Matt's learning is highly integrated. Matt was learning about spirals—this stemmed from the children bringing snails to school. Matt and his classmates observed and talked about the spirals on the snails' shells and learned from Ms. Molloy as she described spirals on the walls in Newgrange. Ms. Molloy guided the children in exploring how to make spirals and to use spiralling to mix colours. The children made snails with spiral shells using márla. Matt created a family of snails, some having small shells and others, larger ones. He made food too in case the snails were hungry! The children's enjoyment in learning in this integrated way was evident in the fun and curiosity they showed in their expressions, conversations and questions (extracted from portrait of Matt, age 5 years and 9 months).*

### The role of parents in children's learning

Parents are the primary educators of their children and have a vital role in promoting children's well-being, learning and development. The parent child relationship is qualitatively different from relationships children have with other adults. Parents play a key role in supporting children's learning and do so through relationships, conversations, activities and routines and they support their children's learning in a manner which is informal, fun, appealing and relevant. **(See also Caroline, Cathal and Louise's portraits).**



*Patrick and Seán's mum and dad say that no one can love and care for the boys the way they do. Their priorities in regard to them are that they are happy, healthy and doing what they should be doing for their age and stage of development. They make a priority of spending time with each of the boys on their own. They also play with, reads to, listens to and talks to them. Dad takes the boys to the farm and also plays football with them in the evenings (extracted from portrait of Patrick, age 4 years and Seán, age 19 months).*

 <p><i>When Amy dances, her whole expression changes and her sense of happiness and delight are clearly communicated. She particularly enjoys Heads, shoulders, knees and toes, I'm a dingle dangle scarecrow and Istigh sa sú (In the Zoo). Expressing herself in a variety of ways is important for Amy. Though her mastery of language is excellent she is quite reserved but through music and dance she gets the freedom to express herself through a different medium (extracted from portrait of Amy, age 2½).</i></p>	<p><b>Communication</b></p> <p>The ability to communicate is at the very heart of early learning and development. Most children are naturally disposed to communicate and this enables them to establish and maintain social relations with others, to express and to share their thoughts and feelings, to represent and to understand the world around them. Communication embraces many different ways of giving and receiving information. While most children will use all forms, eventually developing sophisticated verbal skills, some children will rely more heavily on others forms, particularly children with special educational needs. Also some children with good verbal skills will continue to use other forms of non-verbal communication as an important means of expression. <b>(See also Zachary, Harry, Alan, Louise and Matt's portraits).</b></p>	 <p><i>Patrick and Seán also know their community well and have lots of connections in the area they are living. The boys' paternal grandparents live next door and the boys see them daily. Some days, Patrick and Seán and mum go for a walk to the local church. On the way the two boys look in at the cattle in their fields and Patrick climbs their gates as he passes them. As cars drive past, people wave. In this small village everyone knows everyone else and Patrick can tell you who passes in the cars. Clearly these boys have a real sense of who they are and where they belong – at home and in their community (extracted from portrait of Patrick, age 4 years and Seán, age 19 months ).</i></p>	<p><b>The importance of identity and belonging in children's lives</b></p> <p>A sense of belonging and identity is important for children. Belonging to a community is about having a sense of connection to a particular group. It is good for children to develop a healthy and positive sense of their own identity and their place in society. Positive messages about their family, culture, faith and language help children to feel valued and respected in society. <b>(See also Caroline, Louise and Amy's portraits).</b></p>
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**Culture and diversity**

Young children of every cultural or ethnic background need to develop a secure and positive sense of their own identity. Children's family life will be the most significant source of that identity. The early childhood curriculum should emphasise developing young children's own sense of identity and a positive sense of pride in their own family origins. Starting with themselves, young children can develop a sense of belonging to their local community and begin to understand and respect other cultures and traditions. Experiences outside the family for example, within the early childhood setting, can provide opportunities to significantly broaden young children's understanding and learn respect for ways of life with which they are less familiar. It is important that children can see themselves and their family reflected in play resources, visual images and books (**See also Zachary, Amy, Alan and Caroline's portraits**).

*The pre-school staff maintain good links with Louise's parents and the routines, customs and regular events of the Traveller culture is strongly reflected in the curriculum programme. Using themes like horses, and finding out about different countries in Europe, staff explore different aspects of traveller culture meaningful to the children. The emphasis on the Traveller culture within the curriculum allows Louise to explore and express her cultural identity alongside her peers through art, craft, music and dance. Various festivals and celebrations throughout the year provide accessible and relevant opportunities; particularly when adults from the travelling community are invited to participate. Adults from the travelling community occasionally visit the children in the pre-school to tell stories of the 'olden days', to play music and sing songs (extracted from portrait of Louise, age 4).*

**Learning through play**

Play is a natural and universal medium for young children's thinking, learning and development and is central to their well-being. All children need and have a right to play. Children can play on their own or with others and play occurs in a social and cultural context and is a powerful context for learning.

For young children, play is a way of strengthening meaningful learning and co-operation with others and it touches on many dimensions of development and provides an integrating mechanism for all aspects of a child's development.

While children learn much through unassisted play, learning is enriched and extended when the adult is involved. The adult is central in the play process, emphasising the link between relationships and play as key contexts for learning. Play occurs in relationships between co-players, their actions and the meanings they co-construct in a particular context.

**(Integral in all portraits).**

*Andrew loves all kinds of oral work, especially singing and performing. There is a regular News Time, when Andrew's teacher chooses two children to act as reporter and cameraman. They take a toy microphone and camera and interview whichever child has brought in something to talk about and show the class. Andrew loves being picked to be the reporter, relaying the other children's questions and asking questions of his own. Andrew asks Megan Where did you get your toy dog? Megan says In Wales. No-one, including Megan, is quite sure where Wales is or how you get there, (it was dark, says Megan) so the teacher takes down the globe and shows them. This leads to an extended discussion, bringing in science and geography as well as language.*

**(extracted from portrait of Andrew, age 5 years 11 months).**

<p><i>Harry has a very close affectionate relationship with Molly, his key worker who works with him on a one-to-one basis for two hours everyday. To facilitate the development of his communication skills Molly chats and plays games with him and includes lots of singing activities, mirror games and one-to-one activities in his daily programme. During one play session Molly gets down to his level and introduces a battery operated musical game to him. She demonstrates how to use the toy and supports his hand to do the same. Then she sits back and waits for him to begin. He presses the keys which produce the expected sound and laughs. She begins a turn taking game with him, chatting away to him and encouraging him until she senses his interest waning. The toy is removed and to regain his attention she starts a clapping game (extracted from portrait of Harry, age 3, who has recently been diagnosed with autism).</i></p>	<p><b>The Key Worker system</b></p> <p>The key worker system provides an opportunity to establish warm and reciprocal relationships with significant adults involved in children's daily lives and promotes a sense of security and consistency for the child. The key worker system contributes to the young child's emotional comfort and provides pattern and consistency for both the child and his/her parents. The child is more likely to 'risk' new things if they have adult support and a sense of how a familiar adult will respond to their ventures. The system is also very important to parents, as they need to know who to talk to and share information with, about their child. <b>(See also Amy and Cathal's portraits).</b></p>	<p><b>Observing and listening to babies and young children</b></p> <p>The child is not the sole learner in the play situation. The adult too is a learner. He/she is an observer of children's play and a listener of their playscripts and discussions. These strategies help the adult to understand the play – its context, it's 'story', the children's thinking and ideas, their command and range of language, as well as interests and emotions. This information enables the adult to enter the play at opportune points, with sensitivity. But it also allows him/her to extend and enrich the play in the most appropriate way for each child. <b>(See Cathal's portrait for the importance of responsive care for babies and young children. See also Matt and Louise's portraits).</b></p> <p><i>In addition to daily verbal exchanges between Cathal's key worker and his parent's morning and evening, a record of care sheet is completed daily for all babies and toddlers. Ongoing observation allows the key worker to tune into Cathal's learning and development needs and this information is used to inform the planning of further experiences and activities. The daily record of care document includes details of feeds, sleeps and changes as well as comments on his form/mood, toys he played with and things he did. Key learning or development moments for example, pulling himself up on a piece of furniture are recorded so that the experience can be replicated at home. At the end of each day, the completed record of care is put into Cathal's changing bag for his parents to read at home and a copy is retained on his personal file in the nursery (extracted from portrait of Cathal, age 9 months).</i></p>
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## Using the portraits

The portraits have enlivened and enlightened the NCCA's work in developing the *Framework for Early Learning*. They have enabled the NCCA Team to represent the voices of children in the development process, and to connect the Framework with the everyday experiences and realities of children and practitioners in a range of early childhood settings in Ireland. Together with the findings from the consultation with the early childhood sector in 2004, the background papers currently being developed and an ongoing review of the literature on children's early learning and development, the portraits will feed into the development of the Framework. The Early Childhood Team supported by the wider Early Childhood and Primary Team will use these varied sources to help to ensure the *Framework for Early Learning* can support all children's learning and development throughout early childhood.

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