OLLSCOIL NA hÉIREANN MÁ NUAD

THE NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF IRELAND MAYNOOTH

Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education

M.Ed. (Research in Practice) 2020-2021

How can I, as an early childhood educational leader, cultivate a Community of Practice in my setting?

Eimear Mooney

A Research Dissertation submitted to the Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education, Maynooth University, in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Education (Research in Practice)

Date: September 2021

Supervised by: Mrs Annette J. Kearns.

Declaration of Authenticity

"Plagiarism involves an attempt to use an element of another person's work, without appropriate acknowledgement in order to gain academic credit. It may include the unacknowledged verbatim reproduction of material, unsanctioned collusion, but is not limited to these matters; it may also include the unacknowledged adoption of an argumentative structure, or the unacknowledged use of a source or of research materials, including computer code or elements of mathematical formulae in an inappropriate manner." Maynooth University Plagiarism Policy

I hereby declare that this project, which I now submit in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Education (Research in Practice) is entirely my own work; that I have exercised reasonable care to ensure that the work is original and does not to the best of my knowledge breach any law of copyright, and has not been taken from the work of others save to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

Signed: _____

Date: _____

Ainm / *Name*:	Eimear Mooney.
Bliain / *Year group*:	Second year.
Uimhir mhic léinn / *Student number*:	16747069
Ábhar / *Subject*: **(Module title & code)**	EDF 689.
Léachtóir / Teagascóir: *Lecturer / Tutor*:	Dr Bernadette Wrynn and Annette J. Kearns.
Sprioclá / *Due date:*	24th of September 2021.
Líon na bhfocal / *Word Count:*	21,389.
Líon leathanach / *Number of pages*:	152.

Aon ábhar eile sa tionscadal / *Any other material in the assignment*:

Dearbhaím gur <u>mise amháin / mise mar bhall grúpa</u> (cuir ciorcal timpeall na rogha a bhaineann leis an tionscadal thuas) a rinne an saothar seo. Aithním go soiléir aon chabhair a fuair mé ó aon duine eile, baill fhoirne nó gaol clainne san áireamh. Mo chuid scríbhneoireachta féin atá sa tionscadal seo ach amháin nuair a úsáidtear ábhar ar bith as foinsí eile. Tugtar aitheantas do na foinsí seo sna fo-nótaí nó sna tagairtí. Dearbhaím go bhfuil treoirlínte an choláiste do thionscadail léite agam agus go dtuigim iad. Tá cóip den tionscadal coinnithe agam dom féin.

I confirm that <u>I alone</u> produced this project. I clearly acknowledge any help I received from any other person, staff members or relatives included. This project is my own composition except for material of any kind taken from other sources. These sources are acknowledged in the footnotes or references.
I confirm that I have read and understand the Department assignment guidelines. I have also retained a copy of the assignment for myself.

Síniú / *Signature*: *Eimear Mooney*.
Dáta / *Date*: *23rd September 2021.*

<u>Abstract</u>

'How can I, as an early childhood educational leader cultivate a community of practice in my setting?'

The aim of this research was to explore means in which I could enhance my leadership skills by aligning my practice to my values. I value a colleigal environment and socially constructing knowledge with my colleagues. However, I was aware that my values were not reflected in my practice. Through engaging in self-study action research, I could examine my practice, identify methods in which I could enhance it and align my practice with my values.

As this is a self-study action research project, it occurred within my place of work, an early childhood education and care facility. I enlisted the support of a critical friend with nine colleagues from my setting agreeing to participant in the research. The research methodology I used included questionnaires, interviews, focus groups and my reflective journal. These qualitative research tools would enable me to gain the perspective of the participants while including my own learning as a researcher. All ethical considerations were adhered to during this research, these included gaining informed consent from the participants, and the collection and storage of data.

There were three action research cycles within this self-study, all of which focussed on enhancing my communication skills and providing opportunities for the co-construction of knowledge among the team. The data gathered and analysed from these research cycles indicated that the participants wished to engage in communities of practice to enhance their learning, practice, and sense of connection as a team. The data also found that the cultivation of a community of practice must be a deliberate and considerate act to support the involvement of all participants.

However, it also identified the following concerns, my communication skills and sense of identity as a new leader influenced the level of engagement from the participants and at times acted a barrier to engagement among the participants. This emerged from unexpected data and my engagement in meta-reflection. These findings have led me to deeply consider my practice, identity, and values as an early childhood educational leader. Furthermore, they have also supported me in constructing a living theory of my practice by providing a rationale and awareness as to why I had previously engaged in such practice.

<u>Acknowledgements</u>

Table of contents

List of Figures

<u>List of Appendices</u>

Appendix 1: Letter to the Board of Management.

Appendix 2: Letter and information sheet for my colleagues.

Appendix 3: Participants Consent Form.

Appendix 4: Baseline Questionnaire.

Appendix 5: Timetable to meet with participants one-to-one.

Appendix 6: Transcript on one-to-one meetings with participants.

Appendix 7: Focussed Interview Questions, (Post one-to-one intervention)

Appendix 8: Post one-to-one intervention focus interviews discussions.
Appendix 9: Debriefing Sessions Schedule.

Appendix 10: Transcript of extracts from debriefing sessions.

Appendix 11: Semi-structured focus group transcript after debriefing session (Questions and Answers).

Appendix 12: Team Meeting Agenda (5th of May 2021).

Appendix 13: Transcript from Team Meeting (5th of May 2021).

Appendix 14: Post Team Meeting Online Questionnaire.

<u>List of Abbreviations</u>

AR	Action Research
CC	Community Coordinator
CE	Community Employment
CoP	Communities of Practice
DCYA	Department of Children and Youth Affairs
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
ECCE Scheme	Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme

Chapter One:
1. Introduction

This thesis represents the self-study action research and reflective journey which I embarked upon. The purpose of this journey was to enhance my leadership practice by cultivating a community of practice in my setting. This chapter will focus on describing the aims and rational of this research journey by exploring and reflecting upon the context and background of this research. I will also discuss my values and provide a brief summary of the interventions and the ethical considerations of this research. I will then provide a synopsis on each chapter within this thesis.

1.1 The context of the research:

This self-study action research was conducted in a community based early childhood education and care facility. This facility is based in the midlands of Ireland and is attached to a community centre. Within this community centre, service users also have access to adult education and counselling services. We are also affiliated with two emergency accommodation services, which supports victims of domestic violence or those experiencing homelessness.

We educate and care for children aged from two to twelve years old and have a daily occupancy of seventy children. Many of the families whom we work with have been referred to us by different agencies, such as the forementioned emergency accommodation services, the Early Intervention Team or TUSLA. Therefore, many of the children require additional support due to either environmental and developmental needs, or in some cases a combination of both. Within the early childhood education and care department, there are nineteen members on the team. This team is made up of educators, cleaners, a cook, an administrator, and management, nine members of the team agreed to become participants of the study. My role within this setting, is as manager of early childhood education and care.

1.2 Background of the research journey:

My journey within my current setting was quite unexpected. I began in May 2019, covering the supervisor position during maternity leave. By January 2020, I had progressed to assistant manager while still covering the supervisory duties. In March 2020, I officially began my role as assistant manager, as the supervisor returned from maternity leave. However, four days later there was a nationwide closure of all educational settings due to the COVID-19 pandemic. I worked remotely for six months,

while attempting to transition into my new role. In late August 2020, the setting reopened and collectively, the team and families attempted to navigate our way through the unchartered waters of working through a pandemic. It was during this time, I was preparing to take my new role as manager, again covering a maternity leave position which would begin in October that same year.

While my journey progressed relatively quickly and during challenging times, I was acutely aware that I had to find my place as the leader in this well-established team. Many members of the team had worked within this early childhood education and care facility for over a decade. Some of whom began as Community Employment participants and were later employed, climbing the ladder to room leaders. My training for my new role as manager coincided with the beginning of my research. It was during this time I began reflecting on my values and areas of my practice which I wanted to enhance.

1.3 My values:

I firstly began by reflecting on my journey to leadership and then on my leadership practice. Through engaging in this practice and reading educational literature, I could identify my values (Glenn, 2020). I could then articulate my ontological values, those being how one sees themselves in relation to others (Roche, 2020), and my epistemological values, which relates to knowledge and how it is acquired (ibid). I found that I value active participation and collaboration among the team. I value respectful relationships with the team and promoting a collegial environment whereby individuals of the team have a sense of identity and worth within the setting. I value the co-construction of knowledge through sharing expertise and experiences. However, through articulating and reflecting on my values, I could recognise that I was not living them, my practice was in contradiction to my values (Whitehead, 1989). This realisation led to the formation of my research question.

1.4 Aim of the study:

Self-study action research addresses both the processes of action and research, which supports the researcher to recognise why and how they have enhanced their practice (McNiff, 2017). In my practice, I was not creating ample opportunities to engage with my colleagues nor was I facilitating collective meetings among my colleagues. Therefore, the aim of this study was to address this challenge and enhance my practice. Through self-study action research I would attempt to answer my research question of

'How can I as an early childhood educational leader cultivate a community of practice in my setting?'

A community of practice is defined as a group of people who have a shared interest, problem, or passion regarding a topic. To enhance their knowledge and skills in this area, they meet and interact regularly (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Therefore, communication plays a fundamental role in a community of practice (Wenger et al., 2002), this link is evident throughout my research. However, through my research I discovered that my communication skills and leader identity impacted the engagement of participants within the community of practice. The research also highlighted the unpredictability and messiness of self-study action research and its creation of new learning.

1.5 Interventions:

As part of this research process, I conducted three interventions which occurred within my setting between January and May 2021. The objective of these interventions was to enhance my communication skills while cultivating a community of practice among my colleagues by using a self-study action research approach. During the first action research cycle the focus was on creating a space for effective communication to occur and removing any barriers to effective communication. The second cycle focused on creating a small community of practice to ensure COVID-19 safety precautions were complied with while supporting participants in becoming comfortable in engaging with a group. The final intervention took the community of practice to a larger scale and included not only the participants, but all members of the team. These action research cycles and interventions will be discussed in greater detail later in the thesis.

1.6 Ethical Considerations:

Ethics within self-study action research must be at the forefront of the researcher's mind, as while this is a self-study project, action research always involves other people. The rights, wishes and needs of these people must be considered at all times (McNiff, 2017). Ethical considerations must be implemented at all times, these include but are not limited to gaining informed consent, data collection, data storage and analysis, and ensuring participants are aware of their right to withdraw from the research at any time (Ryan, 2015). It should be noted that all data gathered in this research was anonymised to ensure confidentiality (Cohen et al., 2018). These considerations will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Three of this thesis.

1.7 Overview of the chapters:

This thesis consists of five chapters. Chapter Two, the Literature Review, will focus on my examination and critical analysis of a variety of literature relating to early childhood educational leadership, communication, and communities of practice. It discusses other topics associated with this research question such as the Irish landscape of early childhood education, the role of an early educational leader, the characterises of an effective leader, and the implications of a leader's confidence and identity. In addition to this, elements of communication are also discussed such as leadership and communication, barriers to effective communication and the role of emotional intelligence. Literature pertaining to communities of practice is also analysed and discussed in areas of their components, functions, and the role of the leader in cultivating a community of practice.

Chapter Three, Methodology, will discuss the research methodology and methods I implemented during this research process. The rational for choosing self-study action research is discussed while I reflect on both my epistemological and ontological values. This chapter also includes the reflective models and the action research cycle which I implemented in this research. I discuss the interventions and data collection methods used to enhance my practice and answer my research question. I also discuss the ethical considerations and the limitations of this research.

Chapter Four, Findings and Discussion, presents the data gathering methods implemented during the self-study action research process. It also discusses the data analysis process, while critically reflecting on the data findings. Finally, Chapter Five, Conclusion and Recommendations, the final chapter of this thesis provides a summary of the main findings of the research. It also describes the impact this research has had on my values and practice as an early childhood educational leader. It concludes with a discussion on the limitations of this research and how I will disseminate this research locally and within the wider early educational sector.

1.8 Conclusion:

The objective of this chapter was to a discuss the rational for embarking upon this chosen research topic through discussing the background, context and aim of this research. I also discussed my own values which played a pivotal role in not only selecting this research topic, but the methods utilised in order to answer my research

question. Finally, this chapter provided an overview of each chapter to support ones' navigation through the document.

I was excited to embark upon this self-study action research journey and explore new strategies that might improve my practice as an early childhood educational leader. I hope this journey will not only improve my practice but also increase my understanding of why I need to change and how best to do it. Ultimately, I aspire to cultivating an enriching and supportive work environment for my colleagues.

Chapter Two: Literature Review:

2. Introduction:

In this chapter, I will review the current and seminal literature relating to theories of leadership, the Irish early childhood education and care landscape, the role of the leader and the attributions of an effective leader. I will then discuss a leader's confidence and identity and the link between leadership and communication, barriers to effective communication, emotional intelligence. Finally, I will discuss the literature relating to communities of practice, their components, their functions cultivating a community of practice and the role of leader in cultivating a community of practice.

2.1 Theories of leadership:

There has yet to be an agreed definition of leadership within Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), with literature regarding leadership in ECEC having been plagued by the dichotomy of leadership/management (Rodd, 2013; Cafferky, 2013). Similarly, there are many theories relating to leadership and its attainment. Are leaders born or can someone develop the skills acquired to become an effective leader? A conclusive answer to this question has yet to emerge (Di Giulio, 2014). However, many theories have been developed in an attempt to answer this question. These relevant theories will be discussed in greater detail below.

2.1.1 Behavioural Theory:

This theory of leadership focuses on the behaviour of the leader rather than their traits. As behaviour is not innate, it is observed and learned, this theory believes that people can learn specific traits to become leaders (Rodd, 2013). Lewin et al., (1939, p. 273) developed the renowned three leadership styles model which focusses on the behaviours and efficiency of such leaders. Their theory consists of three types of leaders. Authoritarian, this leader dictates the work to be completed by each team member, there is no collaboration only delegation. The Democratic leader values collaboration, therefore, they ask team members for their input which promotes a sense of value and identity for the team within the organisation. The final leadership style which Lewin et al., (1939, p.274) devised was the Laissez-Faire, this leader is very much hands off and offers complete autonomy to the team during activities.

2.1.2 Situational Leadership theory:

The situational leadership theory is founded on the belief that there is no single approach to leadership as context and circumstances change, therefore leader's need to

alter their style accordingly (Benmira, 2021). Although, this theory is similar to that of the contingency leadership theory, it is more flexible, in that a leader can alter their style depending on the circumstances (Cafferky, 2013). To alter their style, the leader must also consider the maturity and level of development of their team. Hersey et al., (1969) developed a model which consists of four parts, which supports the leader in recognising the level of support and direction required to motivate the team depending on the team member's maturity (Childer, 2015). For members of the team who are very immature or lacking in skills, greater motivation and direction is required. The levels decrease as ones' motivation, skills, and maturity increase (Felicien et al., 2013). However, Northouse (2016) states that this model does not consider the fluctuation of motivation or competencies among the team. Nonetheless, reports state that the situational leadership style was prevalent within educational settings during the COVID-19 pandemic (Beauchamp et al., 2021).

2.1.3 Transformative Theory:

Bass (1997) developed the transformative leadership theory, which views leadership as the motivation of team members beyond their own personal agendas and working for the benefit of the group, setting or society. They move beyond the organisation's traditions to transform practice. Leaders can achieve this by employing flexible thinking, using their ethics, values, and vision to inspire others (Rodd, 2013; Piccolo and Colquitt, 2006).

In order to accomplish the forementioned attributions of transformational leadership, Bass and Gesler (2021) advise ECEC leaders to step back and reflect on their communication techniques. ECEC leaders must also reflect and consider if they and their colleagues are in working in collaboration or in silos. ECEC leaders should consult with honest and trusted team members to discuss their communication skills and how they are perceived. ECEC leaders must practice clear and concise communication through different methods such as regular meetings, discussions, and newsletters (ibid). However, the culture of the setting may influence not only the sustainability of change but the introduction of change by the leader (Grin et al., 2018).

2.1.4 Collaborative Leadership Theory:

The previously discussed theories are based on the traditional hierarchy of leadership. However, they fail to acknowledge that leadership is not an individual act. By its very nature it is an interpersonal and relational process between leaders and their colleagues

(Leavy Shankman et al., 2015). Leaders must accept the paradox of leadership, that their success is intrinsically linked to the effort of others (Chatman and Kennedy, 2010). In recognition of this, a new theory of leadership was developed, which identifies the forementioned enigma. This has led to the emergence of new terminology used described this form of leadership, such as distributed or shared. While these terms may describe different leadership approaches, they all suggest a concept of collaboration among the team (Vijayadevar, 2020).

Jäppinen (2014, p. 82) defines collaborative leadership as '*encompassing an emerging process when the stakeholders in an educational organisation create synergy by means of shared and collective endeavours.*' This definition of collaborative leadership incorporates the complexity theory, as the complexity theory considers the intricate nature of eco-systems and organisations. As they contain multiple agents and components which are constantly connecting and interacting with one another on different levels. These components can be people, organisations, or institutions, but it is the interaction and connections between these components that lead to change (Mason, 2008). Jäppinen (2014) recognises the complex ecosystem of educational settings and the adaptive nature of practice through the collaboration of multiple agents, thereby creating links to complexity theory and collaborative leadership.

Collaborative leadership recognises that knowledge is not located within the leader's office and that leader's must recognise that their knowledge has limitations (Morrison, 2010). However, Piercey (2010) states that one challenge of implementing this leadership style is the attitude and actions of the leader. Leaders can often take control of situations and shut down group discussions and decision making. Therefore, the leader must relinquish their power to empower the team.

2.1.5 Value-based Leadership:
Values-based leadership is described as having four core elements. These include personal reflection, balance, genuine self-confidence, and true humility. This form of leadership extends beyond utilising strengths and meaning making. This leadership approach meaningfully engages with their team and supports them to flourish in their personal and professional life (Žyziuaite, 2018).

This form of leadership coincides with ethics of care and this approach places relationships at the core of leadership practice (Starratt, 2009). According to the

Competence Requirements for Early Childhood Education and Care (CORE) guidelines the actions of ECEC leaders must be values based. According to Urban et al., (2011) these values include democratic practice, continuous professional development and respect for diversity and inclusion. Cafferky (2013) considers these attributions to be a requirement of effective ECEC leadership. Moriarty (2019) recognises the need for leader to identify their values, as he argues that there are strong associations with ones' values, and leadership behaviour.

2.2 Irish ECEC Landscape:

The Irish ECEC landscape has grown and evolved immensely in recent times. This is primarily due to the increase in government initiatives and funding. However, this increase in government interest has led to increase demands of quality and accountability (Duignan, 2017). This has led to the ECEC profession becoming more qualified to ensure the provision of quality ECEC. However, irrespective of this, there remains a lack of professional recognition (Moloney, 2015). An increase in quality and accountability which is evident as ECEC settings are stringently regulated and inspected by a number of government departments, such as the Department of Education and Skills (DES), TUSLA, the child and family agency (Moloney et al., 2019), Pòbal and the National Childcare Scheme.

The benefit of this increased interest in ECEC is the parallel increase in new initiatives to support children, families, and educators. These include a greater level of graduate professionals within the ECEC sector (Moloney, 2015) and the Access and Inclusion Model, which offers a range of supports for children attending under the Early Childhood Care and Education scheme (free preschool scheme) (Early Childhood Ireland (ECI), 2020). This scheme also offers ECEC educators' guidance and relevant strategies to support children's development by working with AIM specialists. In addition to this scheme, the government currently funds the Leadership for Inclusion Course (LINC), which supports educators in gaining knowledge and qualifications in inclusive education and practice (ECI, 2021).

These initiatives support ECEC leaders in collaborating with other professionals to enhance the learning environment for children, while extending the educator's knowledge (Rodd, 2013). However, it could be argued that while there are obvious benefits, it also adds to the role and duties of the ECEC leader.

2.3 The role of ECEC leaders:

According to Strehmel (2016) there are many roles of the ECEC leader, from pedagogical support and human resources, to building, navigating and co-ordinating educational actions and change. There is a vast amount of literature and research which identifies the many roles of an ECEC leader, such as Hujala (2004) who states that ECEC leaders have multiple roles within their organisation. Strehmel and Ulber developed a leadership model (2014, cited in Strehmel, 2016), whereby they depict the seven components of contemporary ECEC leadership. These range from educational leadership, which includes financial management and administration duties, to strategic leadership which relates to ECEC leader's vision of the ECEC setting and the development of this vision by working collaboration with their colleagues. Similarly, Kagan and Bowman (1997) developed the five faces of ECEC leaderships which recognises the administrative, advocacy, community, conceptual and pedagogical duties of a leader among others (Kagan and Bowman, 1997; Crompton, 1997, Blank, 1997; Kagan and Neuman, 1997).

The impact of ECEC leaders having multiple identities and responsibilities within one role can result in time constraints. Many studies have found that ECEC leaders struggle with time constraints in undertaking other roles such as improving quality provision and transformative change within the ECEC setting (Sims et al., 2017; Strehmel, 2016). This coincides with a study conducted by Douglass (2019) on behalf of the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) which found that ECEC leaders reported experiencing stress due to time constraints and difficulty in managing the many demands and expectations of their roles such as compliance with external regulations. Such constraints and pressures of accountability can lead to ineffective leadership (Aubrey, 2011). These challenges endured by ECEC leaders have been further compounded by COVID-19 (Beauchamp et al., 2021).

2.3.1 Effective ECEC Leadership:

Effective ECEC leaders are much more than competent managers, as their focus is beyond the narrow operational daily duties. Their plans are based on their philosophy, vision, and values. They empower the team, families, and themselves through learning, reflection, relationships, and communication (Rodd, 2013). This statement aligns with a study conducted by Aubrey (2011), in which groups of ECEC leaders and educators were questioned about the characteristics a leader should embody. Both cohorts

believed that a caring and values-based disposition was more important than business skills. However, it is argued that effective leadership requires a balance of both leadership and management (Moriarty, 2019; Hallet, 2013).

Yet, other literature argues that effective leaders support others in leading. By offering safe and supportive opportunities for colleagues to pursue goals through the recognition of their capability and ambition (Kodden, 2019). This can often occur through mentoring. As mentoring gives educators the opportunity to participate in nurturing and supportive learning (Wong and Wanigananayke, 2013). However, it must be acknowledged that the ECEC leader is not the mentor and the remaining team the protege, it is a collaborative process which promotes reciprocal learning from both parties (Ebbeck and Wanigananayke, 2003). Therefore, mentoring should not be misinterpreted as supervision or performance appraisal. It is an opportunity for both parties to share their knowledge and experience, thereby enhancing their professional practice (Wong and Wanigananayke, 2013). However, the leader's personal qualities also play a pivotal role in their response to such collaborative learning. Cafferky (2013) conducted a study to establish the most important qualities required for effective ECEC leadership. The ECEC leader respondents identified the qualities of confidence and self-assurance.

2.3.2 Leader's confidence and identity:

 of the most important qualities required for effective leadership, is self-esteem and assurance. However, McDowall Clark (2012) conducted a research study among ECEC leaders in England, which investigated the assumptions of leadership among ECEC professionals. A majority of whom expressed that they lacked confidence in their role, particularly when adapting to or introducing change. They noted their struggle to align their role with their concept of what their role involves. He contends that this tension arises from the belief that ECEC leadership focusses on supervising others and taking charge. Furthermore, the participants identified challenges in negotiating leadership practice that does not create a feeling of inadequacy among the less qualified educators. He makes links with this internal tension and imposter syndrome (Kets de Vries, 2005, cited in McDowall Clark (2012)).

Leaders, particularly new leaders can experience imposter syndrome, as it can arise due to contextual issues such as expectations of the leader within the organisation, or omnibus factors, which are macro level or external to the organisation such as societal

expectations or top-down constraints (Oc, 2018). This is an overwhelming feeling of incompetence and fear of being uncovered as a fraud. It can also affect the team negatively, as they too feel the need to demonstrate perfection in their practice. This can ultimately lead to an increase in absenteeism or even turnover among the team and a lack of risk-taking behaviour among leaders (Aparna and Menon, 2019). Barron (2016) which reports that recently qualified early childhood leaders would demonstrate their understanding of their role and professionalism within technocratic practices. In comparison, more experienced leaders would focus on relationships and the empowerment of others. However, it could be argued that the experienced educators had a greater sense of confidence in their professional identity. With Buchanan (2015) arguing that ones' professional agency is intrinsically linked to ones' professional identity.

Waniganayake (2014) states there is a clear relationship between ones' leadership style, role-based behaviour, and role identity behaviour, which can be understood through the social identity perspective (Klevering and McNae, 2018). Social identity perspective is described as a group membership, with one acting and internalising these norms according to their group (Hogg et al., 2004). However, Gee (1990, p 142) refers to it as *Discourse,* a way of being, which includes ones' actions, values, beliefs, social identity, and manner of speaking. He describes *Discourses as an "identity kit*," which comes with clear instructions on how to act, speak and embody a certain social role in which others will recognise your membership to a particular group. However, those within the ECEC profession endure a lack of professional recognition (Moloney et al., 2019). This lack of acknowledgement would greatly impact ones' professional identity as it is said to emerge through political and societal influences, as well as ones' personal and professional experiences and values (Zembylas, 2018).

2.3.3 Leadership and Communication:
The purpose of communication is to construct, convey and explain concepts, facts, beliefs, and attitudes. It is a reciprocal and sharing process between two or more people (Radovic Markovic and Salamzadeh, 2018; Guffey and Loewy, 2015). Tobin's (2014) research found that educational leaders spend between 70%-80% of their time engaging in interpersonal communication either by face to face or telephone dialogue. However, Wood (2009) states that while people are constantly communicating, it is rarely effective.

It is argued that the basis of quality leadership is the process of communication, as it is not only imperative in the direction of the organisation itself, but in forming and maintaining relationships with the team (Strehmel, 2016; Hackman and Johnson, 2014; Ayuba, et al., 2014). With TUSLA, the child and family agency stating that ECEC leaders must engage in on-to-one support and supervision with the other members of the team, while also holding regular team meetings (Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA), 2016). However, it is argued that communication between the leader and the team can often be restricted within the domains of utilising communication as a mean to achieve certain goals (Ruben and Gigliotti, 2016).

A study conducted by Tintore, and Aris (2015) found that when a leader's communication skills are enhanced, it improves the quality of the leadership, the atmosphere and culture within the educational setting. It is for this reason, that communication is considered a sub-discipline of leadership (Bell and Muir, 2014). Rodd (2013) states that the most important communication skill is listening. With reflective and understanding responses the most under used and yet most effective and advising, analysing, and mollifying the most frequently used (ibid).

However, studies have shown that ones' leadership style can be closely linked to ones' communication style. This statement is founded on the findings of a study, based within an educational setting, which identified a human centred leadership approach, which respects others and their opinion, as strongly associated with an open communication method. In contrast, for leaders who implement a task-based approach to their role, their communication style was found to be more dominant and directive (Ali and Sherin, 2016; De Vries et al., 2010). This form of communication is perceived as linear, as no response is required from the receiver (van Ruler, 2018). However, an ECEC leader's level of confidence can influence their communication style (Luthra, 2015).

2.4 Barriers to Effective Communication:
According to Eisenberg (2010), there are four main barriers to effective communication. These are process barriers, semantic barriers, physical barriers, and psychological barriers. Process barriers relate to the process of communication, which can occur at any stage during the communication process, for instance, sender and receiver barrier, the sender may choose not to initiate communication or the receiver may not understand the message due language differences. Channel barrier relates to the method of communication, for example an email, which may not correctly or

accurately depict the significance of the sender's message. A receiver barrier may be as simple as a lack of listening to the sender. Finally, a feedback barrier is not providing an opportunity for questions or comments after communicating (Eisenberg, 2010; Ondondo, 2015).

Semantic processes barriers, also termed language barriers, occurs when the language used may be an additional language to one party within the communication process. It can also occur with the use of slang and professional or academic language, if the receiver has no prior experience to the topic being discussed or when the language used may have different meaning to different people or within different contexts. This can lead to the message being lost in translation (Kumbakonam, 2016; Kapur, 2018). Within this barrier there are strong links to one's assumptions regarding communication, the sender may assume that the receiver understands the message and therefore, will act upon it. However, it is the role of sender to ensure that they have a firm understanding of the receiver's knowledge and experience of the subject which is being communicated (Mittal, 2018).

Physical barriers within the communication process relates to the environment in which the process of communication is occurring. Examples of physical barriers include unexpected incidents, telephone calls, unplanned visitors, and environmental noise (Lundenberg, 2010). However, van Rooyen (2018) goes further stating that such issues are considered organisational barriers to effective communication, these include other barriers such as an influx of information, lack of formal channels of communication and time pressures.

Psychological barriers are devised into two categories, perceptual and emotional. Perceptual barriers relate to ones' internal thoughts that the message they wish to convey will not be heard, understood or of interest to the other party, which is directly linked to emotional barriers. These relate to ones' capacity to deliver or hear the message due to overwhelming emotions which can range from sadness, frustration, and anxiety to happiness (Smith, 2013; Lasater, 2016). These emotions act as a filter in interpretating or delivering a message. However, at times the message may not be delivered or perceived as intended, which highlights the significance and the need for an awareness of emotional intelligence within leadership communication (Nguyen et al., 2019).

2.4.1 Emotional Intelligence:

Goleman (2004) defines emotional intelligence as the effective management of ones 'self and their relationships. Based on this definition, he devised a theory of emotional intelligence which consists of four categories, self-awareness, self-management, social-awareness, and relationship management. These four domains are then further divided into subcategories which describe the elements of these areas in further detail, which are pictured below.
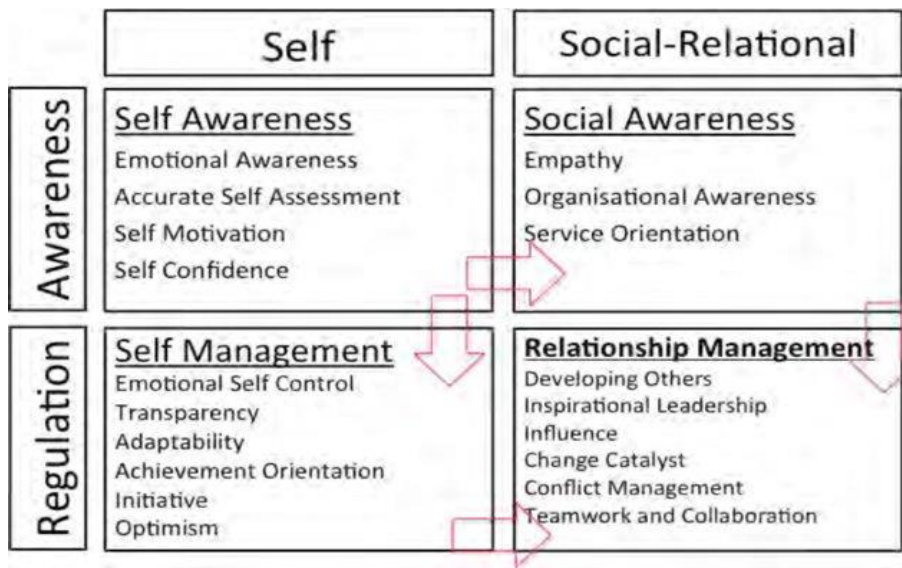
Figure 2.1 Goleman's Emotional Intelligence Theory (Goleman, 2006).

Self-awareness is described as recognising areas of ones' confidence, emotions, strengths, and weaknesses. Self-management is also included within self-control. It also relates to mirroring ones' actions to their values, managing change and challenges in a flexible and resilient manner. Social competence is the management of relationships. It is the acknowledgement of the power relationships within the organisation, active listening, empathy and the consciousness of emotions and feelings of others. Relationship management is the ability to form relationships with others, empowerment of others, supporting others through sensitivity, and communicating concepts in a concise manner (Goleman et al., 2002; Goleman, 2004; Goleman and Boyatzis, 2017; Serrat, 2017).

Tench (2016) suggests that educational leaders with considerable levels of emotional intelligence are more capable of supporting their followers through challenging times, improving learning outcomes for children, and transforming contemporary educational discourse. However, Nguyen et al., (2019) believes there is an onus on the leader to

gain a comprehensive understanding of their core values and enhance their communication skills in order to achieve such levels of emotional intelligence. This can further support relationship management with colleagues, as a leader works to build a rapport and trust, through meaningful interactions which go beyond the professional dialogue by showing a genuine interest in the lives of ones' peers. This aspects of improving ones' emotional intelligence can also be referred to as *"contextual literacy",* whereby the leader has a clear understanding of those they are attempting to lead (Siraj-Blatchford and Manni, 2007, p.12).

2.5 Communities of Practice (CoP):

The theory of Communities of Practice (CoP) emerged thirty years ago and is still considered relevant. The term was coined by Lave and Wenger (1991), as they argued that learning did not occur through the transmission of knowledge, it is a social process which occurs through increasing levels of participating within CoP. This concept correlates to that of Vygotsky (1978) who argued that learning among children was socially constructed. Participation is defined by Wenger (1998) as being both social and personal, as it is a complicated process which involves thinking, talking, acting, feeling emotions, and having a sense of belonging. The epistemological values, of CoP is that it is formed through experience, it is lived. It is both individual and social, as an individual can only truly learn through socialising. Finally, knowledge is dynamic as it resides in the understanding, experiences, and actions of people (ibid). Wenger et al., (2002), define CoP as a group of people who share an interest, problem, or passion regarding a subject. To build on their understanding, knowledge, and expertise in this subject they interact regularly.

In recent years, there has been substantial growth in both the research and theory pertaining to the participation of educators in communities of social learning, and the communities themselves. The increase in such communities within educational settings, has also led to a surge in variations of the titles given to these networks. For instance, some are referred to as professional learning communities. However, there has been little research completed and therefore little literature available to identify the differentiation of the communities.

Though, the seminal work of Blankenship and Ruona (2007) found that professional learning communities typically focus on increasing student achievement while CoP focus on the enhancement of educator's practice. Nonetheless, the ethos of these

communities is very similar in that members of professional learning communities recognise that more can be achieve collectively than as an individual. As professional learning communities are defined as educators constructing an environment that promotes mutual collaboration and is supportive of ones' emotions and professional development (Eaker et al., 2002).

2.5.1 The Components of a CoP:

There are three components which are required for an effective CoP. Firstly, the domain which relates to the subject of interest or concern. This does not compare to that of a club, while there is a shared interest within the domain it is the competence and commitment among the members which separates them from others (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2015).

Secondly, there is the community which is described as the mutual engagement among the group and the regular interaction. Within this community, members engage in mutual discussions, support each other, and share knowledge. Through these activities relationships are formed which further enable the member's learning. However, working together or sharing a profession does not equate to a community, unless there is mutual engagement and collaborative learning (ibid).

Finally, the practice, which is the subject of interest, however, as the name suggests, it is the practice not the interest which binds the community (Wenger and Lave, 2015, p.2). Therefore, members of this community are practitioners in that they develop and share resources such as knowledge and experiences, in order to extend their learning or solve a problem. This can only occur through the commitment of time and mutual interaction. Wenger (1998, p.72) states that domain has three elements, the first is joint enterprise, which is the common objective which unites the members. Secondly, there is shared repertoire, which is described as the continuous development and evolution of the CoP. It also refers to the artifacts of the community, such as documents, new practices, and concepts (ibid; Borgatti, 2004). Finally, mutual engagement refers to the pattern and frequency of the interaction among the CoP (ibid).

Wenger (1998, p55-62) states that a member's engagement in a CoP always involves a process of negotiation of meaning which occurs during the convergence of 'participation and reification'. Participation refers to ones' interaction and reification refers to producing resources or objects, such as theories, stories or documents which

organise the negotiation of meaning. Participation and reification complement each other, as each has the ability to reduce the other's limitation. For example, in a CoP a member could be struggling with the concept of an ECEC theory (reification), when another member discusses the theory (participation) by linking it to practice it supports meaning making (Smith et al., 2017).

However, Wenger et al., (2002) states that one cannot categorise knowledge as either explicit, which would refer to reification or tacit, which would refer to participation, as both forms of knowledge are always present. It is the duality of participation and reification which supports meaning making within CoP (ibid).

2.5.2 The functions of a CoP:

There are four functions of a CoP, these are social engagement, building identity, creating knowledge, and sharing knowledge, (Li et al., 2009). Social engagement is the pillar of all other functions, which will be discussed below.

The main focus of Wenger's theory (1998) of learning is social engagement or participation. Participation as previously discussed is the member's involvement in interaction which supports ones' learning (Smith et al., 2017). However, social engagement also refers to forming a connection to the other members. As relationship are formed through the regular mutual engagement (Wenger et al., 2002). This is particularly important during the current climate, as COVID-19 has led to the introduction of pods systems within ECEC settings. This greatly reduces people's sense of connection to their colleagues, with Beauchamp et al., (2021) reporting that there was a strong sense of disconnect among educational teams during the pandemic. Social engagement also supports the members of the CoP gain a sense of professional identity through gaining a sense of belonging within the CoP (Wenger, 1998; Wenger et al., 2002).

The creation of knowledge emerges from members interaction and participation in sharing knowledge. Collectively as a team new knowledge and practices are developed which give the CoP a sense of ownership and contributes to their sense of identity (Wenger et al., 2002). This professional development arises from the expansion of educator's knowledge, and enhancement of practice which will improve the provision of quality for the children (Vrieling et al., 2019). Therefore, CoP not only benefits the professional development of the members, but also the organisation through knowledge

management, as there is a greater quantity of knowledge available (Callahan, 2004). Furthermore, CoP which are effective focus on utilising the community's autonomy and strengths (Iaquinto, Ison, Faggian, 2011).

However, it is argued that CoP also support critical reflective among its members, as participants share and discuss challenges and practices, often reflection on action (Schön, 1992; Akella et al., 2021; Wenger, 1998). Collective critical reflection shares many similarities to CoP, as it avoids isolation among the members, enhances ones' practice, questions assumptions, and offers the perspective of others' (Brookfield, 2017; Bassot, 2016). This willingness to enhance ones' practice by critically reflecting on previous experiences could also be argued as action research. As AR poses methods in which we can enhance our practice while reflecting on previous practice (McNiff, 2017). Many participants engaged in reflection on action, whereby they shared their experiences in practice and considered methods of enhancing it (Akella et al., 2021). AR will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3 – Methodology.

2.5.3 Cultivating a CoP:

CoPs organically develop within the organisation. However, organisations must cultivate them in order for them to thrive. This can occur through seven principals which are discussed in figure 2.2 below (Wenger et al., 2002; Vincent et al., 2018).

Design for evolution	Design for new CoP often require fewer and simpler structures, for instance, such design can include regular interactions which may initiate interest among potential members. The design will be dependent on the level of development of the CoP.
Open dialogues	Encourage discussions and participation from members. In new organisations an outsider's perspective may support members in recognising the possibilities of a CoP. One such challenges in cultivating a CoP is the tension between novice and experienced members when participating

	(Li et al., 2009)
Encourage different levels of participation	There are four forms of participation, core which describes a small group of people who actively engage and debate. The active group refers to members who regularly attend meetings and occasionally participate. The peripheral group observe the interaction and rarely engage, as they feel their opinion is not valued and holds no authority. Finally, outsider or 'intellectual neighbours' (p. 57), who are not members of the Cop, but have an interest.
Develop both public and private community spaces	The public community spaces relate to websites, blogs, or conferences. The private community space relates to one-to-one interactions among the members, small or large meetings. These can occur through face-to-face interactions or over the phone.
Focus on value	These values should be identified collectively as the community evolves. This occurs through the creation of activities and relationships, such as one-to-ones discussions which support in solving a problem or sharing information. The value of which may not be immediately evident but emerges in practice.

Combine familiarity and excitement	Familiar discussions of daily issues can support members in feeling comfortable in participating. Exciting discussions emerge from new challenges or planned conferences. These can support the formation of connection among the members and their engagement.
Create a rhythm for community	Planned regular meetings can support the sense of connection among the members. However, too many meetings can result in members feeling overwhelmed or decrease their participation. It is recommended to implement both whole member meetings and smaller meetings to create a balance between over exposure to many ideas and the comfort of smaller groups.

2.5.4 The stages of cultivating a CoP:

As communities evolve, they move through different stages of development. These will be discussed below.

The first stage is 'Potential', the domain or subject of shared interest entices prospective members and forms the community. The element of practice supports people in recognising their learning needs. The CoP, then moves on to imagine the possibilities of learning such as sharing knowledge and challenges (Wenger et al., 2002 p. 70; Masry and Saad, 2018).

The second stage is that of 'Coalescing', during this stage members begin feel a sense of trust within the CoP. This emerges through the participation and reciprocated sharing of information and discussing and solving problems. Trust is essential during this stage as without it, members may not recognise the value of the CoP (Wenger et al., 2002, p.82).

The third stage, 'Maturing' at this stage the CoP has moved from becoming establishing to sustaining it. The CoP is beginning to expand as new members join, the focus must now be maintaining the values of the CoP. With the additional members, the boundaries of the CoP will also expand. This will see the restricting of relationships, but also the sense of identity among the members within the CoP (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 101; Masry and Saad, 2018).

The fourth stage of 'Stewardship', there are several challenges experienced during this stage. One is maintaining the motivation of the CoP members as they move through different energy cycles. This can be supported by introducing new speakers or concept. However, this can also result in a challenge as members of the CoP have developed their own knowledge and practice. By introducing new speakers or learning, it could lead to tension. Therefore, the assumptions of the CoP must be critical reflected upon (Masry and Saad, 2018).

The fifth and final stage is 'Transformation', at this stage changes are emerging within the CoP, such as a loss of members. CoP naturally end, having recognised the benefits of engaging and participating in it, members must ask if it is better to let it end or try and rejuvenate it. This discussion could inspire members to continue it or let it end (Wenger et al., 2002; Masry and Saad, 2018).

2.6 The role of the leader in cultivating a CoP:

According to Wenger et al., (2002), one element of a successful CoP, is the leadership, or as it is referred to in the literature, Community Coordinator (CC) (p.80). The CC is also a member of the CoP who has additional duties. These include identifying the significant issues of their domain, planning, and coordinating events, such as meetings, creating links between members to broker knowledge while networking with the members. Finally, they must support the construction and evolution of the CoP (ibid). However, CC must balance cultivating self-organisation and seizing control (Iaquinto et al., 2010). A CC must be knowledgeable regarding the subject of interest. However, their primary duty is to support members participation, not giving them the answers to their problems. They must also have strong communication skills as they will need to network within the CoP (Wenger et al., 2002). Particularly, when attempting to support novice or peripheral members engage, as Hargreaves and O'Connor (2018) remind us that false or artificial collegiality which forces teamwork, fails to motivate members to engage. This can occur through formal and contrived discussions among teams, in

which there is no depth and no real learning. The discussion becomes task orientated rather than relationally based (ibid).

However, the role of CC is not comparable to a team leader and many risk confusing the roles. In addition to this, there are other such challenges such as time. As a CC must have the time to take on the role and commit to their duties. They must also consider meeting members on a smaller scale, visit members, and walk the halls to facilitate participation and dialogue among the members (Gotto IV et al., 2008). CC must feel comfortable when networking with members as it can affect the member's participation. Finally, the CC must have the confidence to answer questions, but also to ask questions (ibid).

Other challenges for the CC include supporting participation among peripheral members or observers while balancing core members' engagement. This can impact the shared ownership of knowledge as some members may be more experienced or confident in participating than others and essentially hoard knowledge. Furthermore, it can damage the formation of a shared identity among the CoP (Wenger et al., 2002). Finally, the CC can encounter challenges when attempting to manage the complex issues of collaboration and change. These can lead to difficulties within the organisation when attempting to transform traditional practices (ibid).

<u>2.7 Conclusion:</u>

In this chapter, I discussed in detail the literature relating to theories of leadership, the Irish ECEC landscape, the role of ECEC leaders, effective ECEC leaders, the impact of a leader's communication skills, confidence, and identity. Following this, I then discussed barriers to effective communication, and emotional intelligence. I subsequently discussed Communities of Practice, which included the functions and components. Finally, I discussed the requirements of cultivating a Community of Practice and the role of the leader within one. This chapter highlighted the complexity of ECEC leadership and the many roles they must assume and qualities they must possess. This chapter also emphasised the critical role a leader plays within a Community of Practice. In the next chapter, I will discuss the Research Methodology of this research.

Chapter Three: Methodology

3. Introduction:

Research methodology and methods relates to the chosen approach and instruments utilised in the investigation of a research topic. These are often theoretically informed while providing a purposeful framework in which to gain as much information and knowledge as possible from the study (Ryan, 2015).

This chapter will discuss the selected research methodology and methods used in this thesis. It will discuss in detail, such topics as the research question, self-study action research, self-study action research paradigm, Kemmis and McTaggart Spiral Model of Action Research (1988), and critical reflection. Following this, I will discuss the recruitment and participation process, data collection, Action Research Cycles One, Two and Three, data analysis, ethical considerations, and the limitations of this research. This chapter will conclude with a synopsis of the items discussed.

3.1 Research question:

My research question of *'How can I, as an educational leader cultivate a Community of Practice in my setting?'* came about as I considered both my ontological and epistemological values. Ontological values relate to how one sees themselves in relation to others (McDonagh et al., 2020). Ones' epistemological values are defined as the theory, validation, and justification of knowledge (Walsh et al., 2015). I had originally planned to research my professional agency and that of my colleagues, however, after observing and reflecting on my practice I recognised that I was a *'living contradiction'* (Whitehead, 2019, p.9). I was not living my values by offering my colleagues a space and opportunity in which they could openly communicate. I therefore altered my plans in line with my values. I value respectful relationships with colleagues and cultivating a collegial environment. I also believe that knowledge is socially constructed among peers, with each person's experiences contributing to the collective learning. In order to enhance my practice by aligning it with my values I embarked upon this journey through a self-study action research project.

3.2 Self-Study Action Research Paradigms:

Paradigms, a term coined by Kuhn (1962) is used to describe ones' world views or philosophical assumptions. It is the lens in which one identifies a phenomenon and attempts to gain more knowledge in relation to it. It is also the shared attitudes or values among a community in relation to the nature of knowledge and reality (ibid; Kaushik

and Walsh, 2019). Ones' choice of paradigm will guide not only the assumptions of the researcher, but the research process in relation to choosing tools for gathering data, the cohort of participants and analysation of data (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000; Al-Saad, 2014). Ones' paradigms are strongly associated with ones' ontological, epistemological, and methodological values and assumptions, with Denzin and Lincoln (2005, p.6) describing paradigms as a *net* which hold all values and assumptions together.

As I am attempting to enhance my own practice as an educational leader, neither the positivst nor the interprevist paradigm are suitable nor are they compatable with my ontological and epsitemological values. Within the positivist paradigm the researcher values and assumes that knowledge is objective and measurable, they will detach themselves from the research by becoming an observer. (Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017; Bassey, 1990). The values and assumptions of the interpretivist paradigm recognise that knowledge is subjective and personal, they will assume a more participatory role within the research (ibid). However, this research approach does not offer a space for the researcher to enhance their practice (Roche 2020; Bassey, 1990).

Kivunja and Kuyini (2017) state that the self-study action research can be categorised as critical paradigm, as it undertakes an epistemological approach which is transactional, in that the researcher actively engages with the cohort of research participants. With regards to the ontological approach, this paradigm recognises power imbalances and often the aim of the research is to remove such incidences of oppression. However, it is argued that action research cannot be categorised within any of the named paradigms, as by its very nature it is a collaborative and self-reflective process which can be disseminated with other professionals (Cain, 2011).

3.2.1 Self-Study Action Research:
Self-study action research (AR) is the implementation of experiential learning cycles into research to improve ones' practice. Experiential learning is a structured and sequenced process of learning which can improve the efficiency of learning from experience (Gibbs, 1988). It is often conducted by practitioners, for example those working within the educational sector, such as early childhood educators. This form of research recognises the impact of ones' context on their practice. However, these contexts go beyond the physical environment and consider the macro and micro level influences such as societal, political, and historical contexts (Cohen et al., 2018; Burns 2005). The aim of self-study AR is to change three things, the researcher's practice, the

researcher's understanding of their practices and the conditions in which their practice occurs (Kemmis, 2009). The researcher is both the subject and object of the study, to enact specific change through the research process (Dickens and Watkins, 1999). It is for these reasons that self-study AR is often considered transformative, as it focusses on a change with others rather than attempting to change others (McNiff, 2014; 2017).

For educational leaders embarking upon a self-study AR project there are many benefits. For instance enhancing ones' professional practice, by becoming more aware of ones' strenghts and weaknesses, altering or implementing whole setting approaches and cultivating a culture of transformation through AR in ones' own setting (Anderson and Herr, 2009; McNiff, 2017). This form of research is particulalry relevant when examining if ones' ontological and epistemological values are reflected in their educational practice. Roche (2020) states that self-study AR plays a significant role in enhancing ones' practice, as the researcher gains more knowledge in relation to their practice and can align ones' practice with their values, as both are heavily considered in this research process. This is termed the '*Living Theory Approach*' (Whitehead, 2019 p.3) as the rationale of educational influences are produced by the researcher from their learning and that of others. This relates to the research element in AR, as one develops a theory in relation to their practice which can then be disseminated. Kemmis and McTaggart (1992) state that this can occur even within a small-scale study through the involvement of others from within the community.

As the name suggests, a core element of AR is the synchronised application of action and research. The action element consists of a predetermined intervention such as an activity in an attempt to resolve an issue or bring about change. This recognised need to change may relate to pedagogical practice or educational leadership (Burns, 2005). This occurs through the process of the AR cycle. Many different models or cycles of AR have been developed since the process first emerged, however the core components remain. These were developed by Lewin (1946) who is considered as the father of AR. He believed that there were four stages to the process; plan, act, observe and reflect (Cohen et al., 2018). Similarly, Kemmis and McTaggart (2000) developed the spiral model of AR. For the purpose of this research study, I implemented the Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) model, illustrated in figure 3.1. I have previously used this cycle and have found it to be practical and beneficial in its application. Koshy (2010) states that the Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) spiral model offers researchers the opportunity to

engage with the phenomenon at a deeper level on each cycle and so it can lead to a greater depth of understanding.
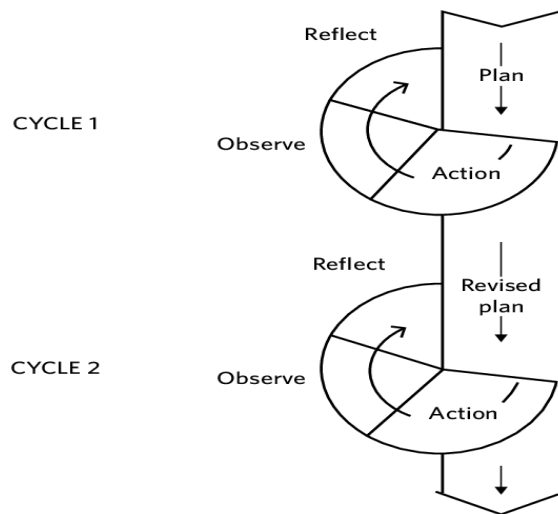
Figure 3.1 Kemmis and McTaggart Spiral Model of Action Research (1988).

3.2.2 Kemmis and McTaggart Spiral Model of Action Research (1988)

Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) described self-study AR as a means of improving ones' understanding of their practice. By actively engaging in the research as a subject, one can gain a more lived experience of the daily dynamics of the practice in order to acquire a greater depth of knowledge thereby improving their practice (Kemmis, 2012). The process of AR is to firstly identity an area of concern or interest, such as a tension between ones' values and ones' practice (Roche, 2020). The next course of action is to plan for an intervention to support the necessary change. One must them implement the intervention and observe the effects both during and afterwards. Reflection plays a fundamental role in self-study AR, not only in the development of the intervention but on oneself throughout the process. Kemmis (2012) states that educational praxis, an idea which is then transformed into action, can only occur through both reflection and action. Finally, as a consequence of the researcher's observations and reflection of the intervention and the input of the other participants, the sequence of planning begins again (Kemmis et al., 2014; McNiff, 2017).

This model of self-study AR suggests that the process of AR is linear in that the research follows the sequence of steps in order to engage in the process. However, many authors, including the forementioned theorists who developed this model state that the process of self-study AR is a notoriously messy process (Kemmis et al., 2014;

McDonagh et al., 2020). However, Cook (2009) argues that it is through the messiness of self-study AR that new knowledge and transformative practice is formed.

3.3 Critical Reflection:

The pivotal role of reflection in self-study AR has been documented by many researchers and theorists (Roche, 2020; McNiff, 2017; Conboy and Donnellann, 2015; Costello et al., 2015), as one cannot learn through experience alone. Through reflection, the potential learning can be enriched (Gibbs, 1988). However, there is clear difference between reflective practice and critical reflection. Reflective practice is the implementation of reflection within professional situations in an attempt to cope with challenging situations that are unpredictable or poorly managed (Moon, 2004). This can include reflection in action, which occurs during an activity or event and reflection on action, which is the reflective process which occurs after the event (Schön, 1992). However, critical reflection is the continued and deliberate process of recognising and examining the accuracy and legitimacy of ones' educational assumptions. Some of these assumptions are explicit in that we are aware of them, and others are implicit, in that we are unaware of them and the implications they have on ones' educational practise (Brookfield, 2017). To ensure that I engage in critical reflection I implemented two different reflective models. I used both the Borton's Development Framework (1970) and Gibb's reflective cycle (1988); both are illustrated below.

What? Examples	So, What? Examples	Now What?
What happened? What did I do? What did others do? What was the issue?	So, what was significant about the experience? So, what learning can I take from it?	Now what should I do? Now what might happen because of my actions? Now what can I do to resolve or improve the situation?

Figure 3.2 Borton's Development Framework (1970).

I found the Borton model (ibid) to be simple in its application, with the questions probing a greater level of deeper thinking. However, this model is not considered efficient when reflecting on experiences which are not specific and those that are not

complex (McClean, 2019). Therefore, I begin using the Gibb's reflective cycle (1988) for such incidences.
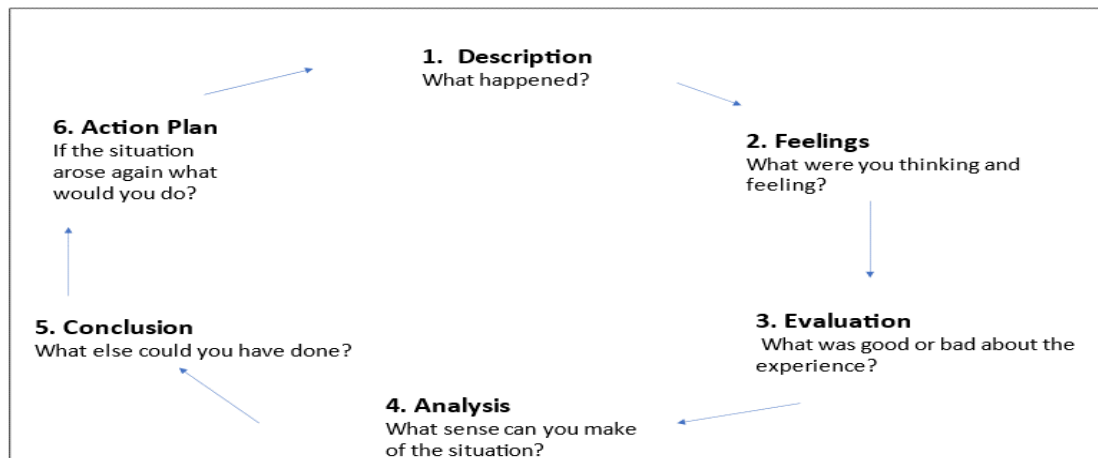
Figure 3.3 Gibb's Reflective Cycle (1988)

This reflective model is more detailed, with emphasis on ones' emotions, and the positive and negative aspects of the experience. Through the analysis step, one can gain a deeper understanding of the experience while considering the perspective of others. Brookfield (2017) states that when one considers the perspective of others if enhances their learning while challenging their educational assumptions. This model also offers more potential learning with the fifth step of conclusion, which gives the opportunity for one to consider alternative actions which could have been taken. The concluding step of action plan enhances ones' potential learning by asking what one would do if they were in this situation again (Bassot, 2016).

3.4 Sample

The selection of participants is purposeful and convenient (Cohen et al., 2018) as this study is based on cultivating a community among my peers, I asked all my colleagues to consider participating in this study. This allowed for a reduction in numbers should some choose not to participate or to opt out at a later stage. It also offered greater capacity for data and insight into my practice (ibid). The final number of participants of the study was nine, as a number of participants felt they could not commit to the study due to personal reasons. I also enlisted the help of a critical friend, (McDonagh, 2020) which is described as a colleague, through work or college, who is invited by the researcher to support them on their research journey by offering clarity and different perspectives when reflecting on experiences and data analysis (ibid). This correlates

with Brookfield's (2017) theory on critically reflecting through different lenses, one being that of colleagues, which can support the researcher in becoming aware of elements of their practice which they were previously unaware of.

3.5 Data collection

McDonagh (2020) states that the data and the collection of same, should be relevant not only for the research topic but in relation to ones' context, with ones' values at the core of the data collection. Self-study AR traditionally lends itself to qualitative data collection (Cohen et al., 2018), which is associated with the opinions and feelings of the participants of the research. In contrast, quantitative data collection typically focuses on numeric and measurable data such as surveys. (McDonagh 2020). However, I decided to use a mixed method approach to gathering data. This method complies with the above guidance and can offer rich data which can enhance the researcher's knowledge and understanding of the topic (ibid). Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) describe the mixed method approach as combining elements of both quantitative and qualitative data collection instruments. It is often termed triangulation, as the researcher implements different means of data collection (Cohen et al., 2018). The data collection tools which I used are illustrated below in Figure 3.4

Reflective Journal – used throughout the research process to document my learning and the effects of the interventions.	Questionnaire – a questionnaire was uploaded onto an online platform for the participants. This would allow me to gain a baseline into my current communication methods. Another questionnaire was used after the team meeting.
Interviews – interviews were held in order to gain greater insight into the opinions of the participants after the second intervention of the action research cycle.	Focus group – a focus group was held with the nine participants in order to gain insight after the implementation of the first intervention of the action research cycle.

My action plan is illustrated below in Figure 3.5. However, the plans were delayed due to COVID-19, as government restrictions in January 2021, led to the delay in ECCE

(Preschool) children returning after Christmas. This therefore delayed some elements of my action plan by approximately two weeks, as the setting did not fully reopen until March 2021.

Time Frame	Plan	Aim
September 2020 – December 2020	Identify and articulate values and research topic. Prepare ethics statement for university and Board of Management. Reflect on my own practice and seek participants.	Preparing for research project
Early January 2021	Online questionnaire for participants.	Gather a baseline of my practice
Mid-January 2021	Implement intervention of the first action research cycle, for four weeks, based on findings from questionnaire and reflective journal.	To provide opportunities for one-to-one communication
Mid-February 2021	Meet participants via interviews and review reflective journal.	To discuss the first intervention and gather data.
Early March 2021	Implement intervention of the second action research for a period of three weeks, based on findings from interviews and reflective journal.	To begin to cultivate a community of practice and align my values to my practice.
Mid-April 2021	Meet with participants via focus group and review reflective journal.	To discuss the second intervention and gather data.
Late April 2021	Implement intervention of final action research cycle, based on findings from focus groups and reflective journal.	To take another step in cultivating a community of practice and become closer to aligning my values and practice.
Early May 2021	Begin to analysis data findings.	To examine if I have enhanced my practice to reflect my values.

Figure 3.4 Action Plan.

3.5.1 Action Research Cycle One

Throughout both AR cycles, I used my reflective journal to document not only the research process but my own learning. To effectively document ones' learning during the reflection process, it is recommended that one uses a journal (Moon, 2004; Lindon and Trodd, 2016). Throughout the research process, from the initial task of articulating

my values, I have used a reflective journal. As previously stated, I implemented both the Borton Developmental Framework (1970) and Gibb's Reflective Cycle (1988). Many researchers and theorists describe the use of the researcher's reflective journals as a qualitative form of data (Moon, 2006; Anderson and Herr, 2009). AR is also termed as narrative research or autoethnography, which is a personal account of events which the researcher experiences. It is written in the first person, typically emotionally laden and reflective in its analysis (Cohen et al., 2018). This form of data offers key insights into my learning and practice, while ensuring I am living my values (McDonagh, 2020).

Once I received ethical approval from the Maynooth University ethics committee and the centre's board of management (Appendix 1), I set about recruiting participants of the research. I shared information regarding the research process and consent forms with my colleagues (Appendix 2 and 3). I then began implementing my initial data collection, a semi-structured questionnaire (Appendix 4) for the participants. This form of questionnaire would allow me to observe emerging themes while also including open-ended questions, which would offer rich and authentic data (Cohen et al., 2018). It would also provide a baseline, which are used in practice to acquire valid data prior to implementing a suitable intervention (Kumar, 2011). As my position within the setting is as manager, I was conscious of the power imbalance among myself as the researcher and the participants, my colleagues. Therefore, I decided to utilise an online platform in which the participants could answer the questionnaire and maintain anonymity and support authenticity (Cohen et al., 2018). It is reported that online questionnaires are more accurate, and responses are often higher (ibid).

As a result of analysing the data gathered through the questionnaire, I implemented one-to-one sessions with my peers. I designed a timetable to ensure I create an opportunity for the participants and I to discuss any challenges or positive moments experienced within their daily session. Originally, I had planned for this intervention to be in place for period of four weeks, however, this intervention ended earlier than originally planned due to data gathered from the participants and my own reflections. As we collectively felt that four weeks of this intervention was unnecessary. I also questioned the authenticity of the data.

On the third week of the intervention, I held an interview with the nine participants who had agreed to take part in the research. I decided to utilise the focussed interview

approach. This approach differs from other interview approaches as interviewees are known to have certain experiences. The interviewer implements an interview guide through the analysis of data gathered thus far, which will support the interviewer on the main areas of enquiry (Merton and Kendall, 1946). Interviews offer both the researcher and participants an opportunity to clarify opinions and explore more complex issues (Cohen et al., 2018). The data gathered from these interviews were later transcribed (Appendix 8), as transcripts are valuable forms of data (McDonagh, 2020). These along with my reflections would support me to implement the first intervention of Action Cycle Two.
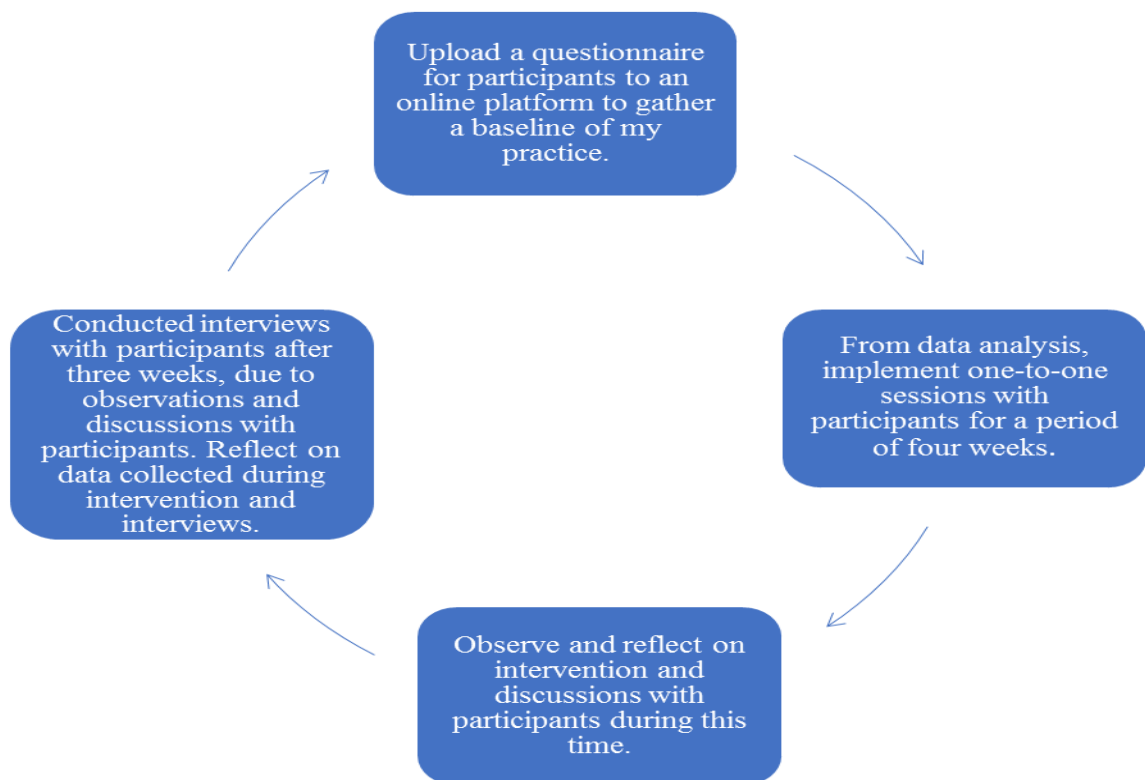
Figure 3.6 Action Research Cycle 1

3.5.2 Action Research Cycle Two

Based on the data findings of the interviews and my own reflections, I could plan an appropriate intervention for Action Research Cycle Two. These findings led to the introduction of debriefing sessions, as the data indicated that the participants would prefer to have an opportunity to engage with their peers, which they felt would enhance their learning and practice. These debriefing sessions would occur among the team of each room and I. I had again implemented a schedule of when these would occur according to the finishing times of each room (Appendix 9).

These debriefing sessions would be my second intervention which would be in place for a period of three weeks after which time I would conduct focus groups among the participants. According to Cohen et al., (2018) focus groups are described as a group interview. However, the interaction is among the participants rather than the researcher, thereby allowing themes to emerge. They are time efficient and offer key insights into the perspective of the participants (ibid). Gibbs (2012) warns that the researcher must be cognisant of ensuring the environment allows for all participants to feel comfortable to express their opinion, while not acquiring too many participants which may lead to voices not being heard or procuring too much data. Once again, I later transcribed the data obtained from these focus groups, as this data in addition to my own reflective journal would guide my intervention for my third and final action research cycle.

During this intervention, there was an unexpected emergence of data from an educator who was not involved in the research, I had to reflect on my practice and the implications it was having on the level of engagement from the participants. This along with all other steps of this AR cycle two are depicted in Figure 3.7 below.

Plan an Intervention based on the findings from the interviews with participants and reflective journal

Conduct focus groups with participants after three weeks, due to observations and discussions with participants. Reflect on data collected during intervention and focus groups.

Implement debriefing sessions with each room for a period of three weeks

Unexpected data led to metareflection of my communication skills and leadership practice and the implications this has on cultivating a CoP.

Observe intervention and discussions with participants during this time. Continue with critical reflective practice.

Adjust practice after unexpected data and meta-reflection

3.5.3 Action Research Cycle Three:

Through analysing the data findings from the focus groups with the participants, I could begin to plan my third and final intervention. The data findings showed that while the debriefing sessions did provide opportunities for group discussions and peer learning, participants wanted to experience this on a larger scale. Therefore, I planned on holding a whole team meeting. However, due to COVID-19 restrictions, I would have to discuss this plan with the co-ordinator of the setting. Once I gained permission, I could start to organise the meeting.

All members of the team were informed of the planned outdoor meeting, and collectively we agreed on a date and time to suit everyone. I shared the date, time, and agenda of the meeting with the team, ensuring they were aware they could add topics to the agenda (Appendix 12). The team were also informed that I would only record the data from the participants, which was later transcribed.

After the team meeting, an online questionnaire was distributed among the participants. I decided to use this method of data collection as I felt that this would offer the participants an outlet in which they could be wholly honest in their opinions by remaining anonymous (Cohen et al., 2018). Once I received the returned questionnaires, I could begin the process of data analysis. All steps of the third and final AR cycle are illustrated below in Figure 3.8.
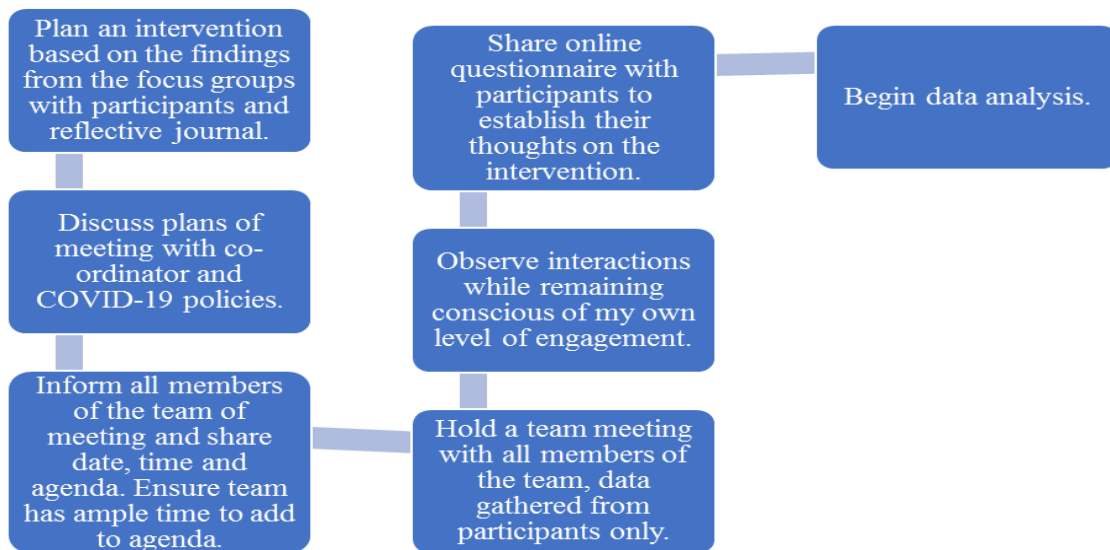
3.6 Data Analysis

The method I used within the data analysis was thematic, this form of data analysis is commonly used within qualitative data methods (Cohen et al., 2018). Braun and Clarke (2006) identified six steps of thematic data analysis. These are as follows,

1. Become familiar with the data – While engaging in the data analysis process, begin to look for themes and reread data throughout this process.

2. Form initial codes – this is the creation of codes based on the emerging themes. This occurs when one is immersed in the data and when the researcher identifies aspects of the data which are relevant to the research topic. These codes allow for the later grouping of themes.

3. Identifying themes throughout the data - This is the organisation of codes into themes. It is the recognition of the relationship between codes and themes through mind mapping or other visual aids.

4. The review of themes – This phase is the redefining of themes through reviewing them. At this stage, the researcher considers if the themes meet criteria to become singular themes.

5. Themes are defined and named – Once the researcher is satisfied with the thematic map of data findings, themes are defined and named. The researcher must then begin writing up the data analysis and relate the themes to the research question. This process will help identify any sub themes within the themes.

6. The report is produced – Once all themes and subthemes have been identified the data analysis report can be written. This document should illustrate the rigorous process of thematic data analysis by including excerpts of the data to support the argument of the emerging themes.

This process occurred through analysing the questionnaires, focus groups and interviews with the participants and including my own reflective journal. The process and documentation of the data analysis for this research is further discussed in Chapter Four – Data Analysis.

3.6.1 Data storage:

All data is stored in a locked cabinet and uploaded electronically in a folder which is password protected and backed up securely. All data will be stored in accordance with General Data Protection Regulations (2016) and Maynooth University Data Protection Procedures (Maynooth University, 2018) for a period of ten years before being shredded.

3.6.2 Validity

As previously stated, I enlisted the support of a critical friend, this colleague along with the data gathered from the research participants and the literature, or secondary data relating to my topic, would add rigour to my research and support the validation and reliability of my data through triangulation (McDonagh, 2020). Triangulation in relation to validity, is described as enlisting the support of others to validate one's data and claims of new knowledge (ibid). However, validity of ones' learning, claim to new knowledge and enhancement of ones' practice is validated through ones' values being enacted upon within practice and demonstrating how this is occurring through their data (McNiff, 2017).

3.7 Ethical considerations

As self-study AR involves the participation of others, there are many ethical considerations which were included throughout the study (McNiff, 2017). This is to ensure the primary principle of 'first do no harm' was met (Brown, 2016, p. 68). These considerations will be discussed below.

3.7.1 Informed consent

Prior to the research process beginning, all potential participants and gate keepers were given information letters. Once the participants agreed they signed the consent form. Throughout the process, all participants were reminded that they were partaking in the research within a voluntary capacity, and they could withdraw at any point. The rational, selected methodology and time frame was also discussed with the participants to ensure they were fully informed (Appendix 2) (Cohen et al., 2018).

3.7.2 Power

One of the main ethical considerations is the power imbalance, as I am the manager and researcher. Therefore, I must ensure that the participants feel they can be truthful in their responses throughout the data collection. As they may feel obliged to respond in a manner that favours the researcher (Cohen et al., 2018). This power can often exist beyond the research, as participants are considered as a data source (Sullivan, 2020) and so when the research concludes, the findings and complete research document is not shared with them. Therefore, I will share my findings and complete research document with the participants to ensure they too have an opportunity to learn (McNiff, 2017; McDonagh et al., 2020). I will comply with the ethics policy for social research carried out involving human participants of Maynooth University (Maynooth University, 2020) my setting and the Code of Ethics and Code of Professional Responsibilities outline by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) (2020).

As a researcher, I too am vulnerable to the power of others, as it is my practice which is being critiqued (McDonagh, 2020; Anderson and Herr, 2009) and therefore I must constructively manage and reflect on such incidences of vulnerability and critique by engaging with my supervisor and critical friend.

3.7.3 Authenticity

McNiff (2014, p.45) states that *exercising parrhesia* is a fundamental ethical consideration. Parrhesia is described as owning ones' responsibility and right to speak truthfully. Therefore, it is not only my responsibility to be truthful and authentic in

documenting my research journey, rather than furnishing a narrative of victory (McDonagh et al., 2020), but to encourage the participants to do the same. As previously stated, I value democracy, respectful relationships among colleagues and a collegial environment for all. I also believe that knowledge is constructed socially. Thus, in an effort to live these values in my practice, I must recognise them and embody them within my research.

3.7.4 Confidentiality and anonymity

Confidentiality and anonymity are both pivotal in protecting the participant's identity and from any harm. The researcher must ensure that both research site and participants remain confidential. The anonymity of the participant must be ensured when collecting data, particularly qualitative data, as many responses can be deeply personal. This can be achieved by ensuring questionnaires offer no space for identifying markers such as name, address, or age (Cohen et al., 2018). All participants were informed that if the research was to be disseminated these guidelines still remain, with participants being fully informed prior to engaging in the research, that it may be shared but the previous confidentiality and anonymity agreement remains (McDonagh, 2020). Furthermore, any discussions in which ones' practice pertaining to children's learning and development was discussed and later transcribed, it was anonymised to ensure confidentiality.

3.8 Limitations of the study:

Koshy (2010) states that self-study AR is typically a small-scale study conducted within the researcher's environment, such is the case with this study. Therefore, the findings of this research may not be generalised or replicated in other settings. The final limitation within this study is forementioned power dynamics as I am both the researcher and manager, thus there is a level of familiarity between myself and the participants (Cohen et al., 2018), and this may lead to the participants supplying data which they may consider to be in my favour.

3.9 Conclusion:

This chapter described in detail the research methodology and methods, used to answer my research question, '*How can I, as an educational leader, cultivate a community of practice within my setting?'*. As stated, this question came about through the identification and articulation of my values through observing and reflecting on my own practice. To gain a comprehensive view of my current practices, a baseline was gathered with three action research cycles occurring afterwards. The interventions of

which were gain through my own reflections and the use of a mixed method approach in acquiring data from the participants. The rational for choosing this approach and the selected methods of data collection were discussed as was the ethical considerations and limitations of this research. Chapter four will detail the data analysis using a thematic approach.

Chapter Four: Data Analysis
4. Introduction:

In this chapter, I will discuss the analysis of my data findings which I gathered in an attempt to answer my research question of '*How can I, as an early childhood educational leader cultivate a community of practice in my setting?'.* I will begin my discussing the findings from the baseline questionnaire which was disseminated among the participants. These findings informed the intervention for AR cycle one. The data gathered from this cycle guided the intervention for cycle two, with the same process repeated for the third cycle. For all of the AR cycles I implemented the Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) spiral model of Action Research. As previously mentioned, I used interviews, focus groups and questionnaires as a means to collect data, the findings and discussion of which will be detailed within this chapter.

The data gathered from the participants of the study did play a pivotal role in developing relevant interventions, however, my reflective journal was also utilised as a means of qualitative data throughout the research journey. As Phelps (2005) states reflective journals are not only a vital component in gathering qualitative data regarding the perspectives of others, but it also offers substantial learning for the researcher which may not be attainable from other methods of data collection. It should be noted that throughout this research process the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was evident. It led to unforeseen challenges such as the delay in implementing interventions, focus groups and interviews. Nonetheless, the research process while interrupted, and at times altered, continued.

4.1 Baseline:

Within CoP, interaction, participation, and communication among the group are all key features (Quennerstedt and Maivorsdotter, 2017). Therefore, to gain an understanding of how my current communication practices were perceived the participants, I issued a questionnaire (Appendix 4). This would act as a baseline in my research and support the development of my knowledge (Dunne, 2015). This questionnaire was semi-structured as this method of data collection can provide more detailed responses from the participants. However, it can also prove challenging when analysing the findings (Mathers et al., 2009). With seven of the nine participants having completed the questionnaire, the findings highlighted the importance of communication among the team. The reasons given included, *reducing stress, reaffirming expectations of work, supporting motivation and productivity among the team, contributing to a positive work environment, and building and maintaining relationships among colleagues.*

The participants were also asked about what communication methods were most

frequently implemented, what methods were most effective and what methods they preferred. The findings from the questionnaire are illustrated below in Figure 4.1
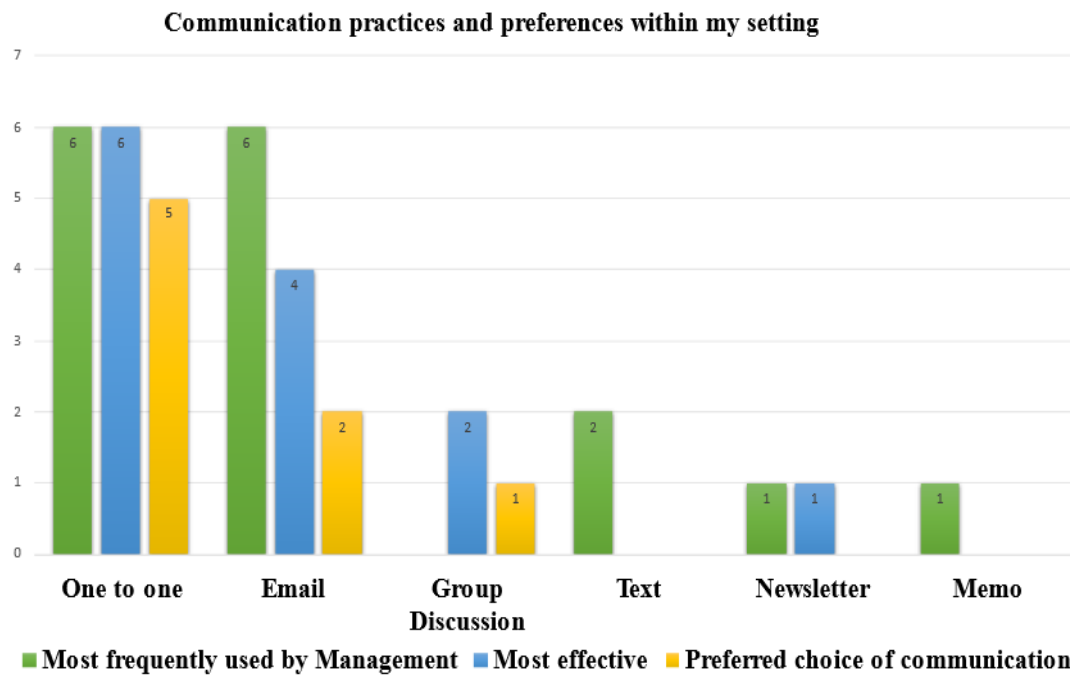
The table above illustrates that a majority of the participants stated that one-to-ones were most frequently used and were considered most effective. However, the location of such physical discussions suggests that while one-to-ones were efficient there were contextual issues which influenced their effectiveness. While all participants stated that most discussions occurred within the children's (ECCE) rooms, only two participants believed that this was a suitable location, with the remaining cohort recommending the hall or office. With regards to the barriers of effective communication, two participants stated that distractions were impeding communication, with the remaining five suggesting a lack of time. When asked for suggestions in relation to how I could improve my communication methods, responses from the participants suggested the following.

> *There should be regular communication, and one-to-one support and feedback. Holding team meetings to touch base with other rooms and exchange ideas/information that may help ones' practice. A weekly debriefing session among individual rooms, to discuss the pros and cons of the week so everyone can improve their practice going forward* was also suggested.

Through analysing the data, I could identify emerging themes relating to my current practice (McNiff, 2017). This would allow me to implement an appropriate action to support me in living my values, enhancing my communication skills, and cultivating a

CoP with my peers.

4.1.1 Emerging Themes of the Baseline Questionnaire:

Themes
Regular communication.
Create a time and space for communication, free from distractions.
One-to-ones.
Peer support.
Co-construction of knowledge.

Figure 4.2 Emerging themes of baseline questionnaire.

The most prevalent theme which emerged from the baseline questionnaire was regular communication. The findings suggest that participants are seeking scheduled opportunities for communication to support their educational practice. This highlights the areas of communication which I have neglected in my practice. When reflecting upon the findings of the baseline I needed to consider why I had failed to address these issues.

> *Was it due to a lack of time? Had my focus shifted to ensure COVID-19 procedures were maintained? Was I still adapting to my new role as manager and the duties that it entailed? Was it a combination of everything? I need to make the time to sit down with the team individually (*Reflective Journal entry 28th January 2021).

It is not uncommon for educational leaders to report time constraints as having a negative impact on interactions with their colleagues, particularly with the number of roles an ECEC leader has (Strehmel, 2016). The participants stated that a lack of time was a barrier to effective communication. Therefore, I would have to ensure that I took appropriate steps to try and remove this barrier to improve my practice and live my values. After speaking to P, my critical friend, I decided to create a timetable (Appendix 5) of when I would meet with the participants on a one-to-one basis. I decided that this concept would be the first intervention of action research cycle one and the first step to cultivating a CoP. As Wenger-Trayner (2015) states, a CoP is not determined by size, it is the interaction and reciprocal communication and learning which determines the

community's validity. Furthermore, planned regular meetings can enhance the sense of connection among the team (ibid).

4.1.2 Action Research Cycle One:

I implemented this schedule of meeting with the participants on a one-to-one basis for a period of four weeks. By using a timetable, it would support my time management in ensuring that the goals I had set could be reached (Rodd, 2013). These meetings would provide both the participants and I with an opportunity to interact while removing the barriers to our effective communication. I decided I would give the phone to the assistant manager and hold the discussion in the office, which was also suggested. All COVID-19 safety measures such as social distancing and mask wearing would be met.

The first week of the one-to-ones, highlighted the challenges occurring in the personal lives of the participants due to the pandemic. However, it would be unethical of me to share such personal information within this research. I found this intervention to be very informative in relation to how the participants were managing their rooms (Transcript Appendix 6). We spoke of topics such as changes brought about by COVID-19 regarding settling in periods for children, transitions and working with families. One participant, EF, stated: *that because of COVID-19, we are facing new challenges when supporting children settling in. We cannot invite families into the setting to support children, which is very challenging.* (2nd of February 2021). Jointly, the participant and I agreed to hold settling in periods outside until children were comfortable enough to move inside without their parents.

Similarly, participants, MN and OP, spoke of concerns relating to a child's language development regressing. At the time, due to government COVID-19 restrictions, the setting was only open for children of frontline workers or those who were deemed vulnerable due to environmental or developmental reasons. The participant noted that *A's speech has regressed since the lockdown, he isn't attempting to verbalise and is struggling to engage with his peers* (Participant MN, 4th of February 2021). In addition to implementing small group activities, I suggested contacting our Access and Inclusion mentor to discuss activities which would support the child's speech and language, as interacting with other professionals, even when not face-to-face can support the learning and practice of a CoP (Wenger et al., 2002).

Another challenge related to practice reported by a participant also included time management. Her role is as room leader, and she informed me that she was struggling in managing her time and duties.

> *When I arrive, I have to organise the day's paperwork and activities. When the*

session ends, I have ensured observations are shared and completed among the room team, that the cleaning is done properly, and all paperwork is completed. It is hard to manage all this and I'm not sure how much is being done properly. (Participant GH, 5th February 2021).

With regards to this situation, I asked if GH would be interested in working an additional hour per day to support her in managing her room. She agreed and felt that this would allow her more time to ensure all paperwork was completed without impacting on her time with the children.

Other issues which arose from these one-to-one meetings, included supporting children's toilet training, as this was another area of regression for some children who returned after lockdown. A change in children's eating and sleeping habits was also noted by the other participants as areas of concerns. With these issues, the participants and I spoke at length during our one-to-one sessions. As we tried to consider suitable strategies which would support the children and families. However, I felt that at times, the participants did not feel comfortable, with the conversation being forced (Hargreaves and O'Connor, 2018) as if it were method of assessing the participant's work and expertise. For instance, when discussing a child's regression in their language development one participant stated, *if we do small group activities, then his peers can act as role models and scaffold his language development, essentially, Bandura and Vygotsky's theory of social learning put into practice* (Participant OP, 3rd February 2021).

While I was impressed with the level of knowledge this participant had and her ability to link theory to practice, I felt as though it was almost rehearsed. Yet, use of such professional language can support a shared identity among the group (Egnal, 2016). However, I began to question how comfortable the team were during the one-to-ones, which I documented in my reflective journal.

One participant asked if she were in trouble, when I asked why she thought that? She responded that we usually only come into the office if something is wrong. I think this is the reason why the participants are almost performing, the environment is not comfortable. When we discuss issues, they respond with very formal answers, it does not seem personal like it is their practice, but as if they were reading a case study and trying to resolve an issue. (Reflective Journal entry, 6th of February 2021).

Similarly, during the second week of one-to-ones, I felt that some participants still felt uncomfortable in being open and natural in their responses. An example of this

occurred when discussing one participant's curriculum planning. I asked KL how she was finding the planning as it was on a smaller scale as ECCE children had not returned due to the restrictions.

> *I find it very interesting as the children who are attending now were typically quieter in a larger group, so I can really focus on their interests. With reduced numbers, I find that I can engage with the parents and ensure that linkage from home and setting* (Participant KL, 11th of February 2021).

From previous discussions and observations, I knew this participant was knowledgeable and proficient in her practice, but I did question if some of the participants had a sense of false collegiality (Hargreaves and O'Connor, 201). In addition to this concern, the sessions during the second week were significantly shorter due to this lack of engagement. The first sessions were on average forty minutes long, with the second week's sessions no longer than twenty minutes. However, this may have been due to the discussion regarding the impact of COVID-19. Nonetheless, I began to question the authenticity, particularly the responses offered when following up with the previous week's reported issues.

> *When asked about how the new strategies were going, seven out of the nine participants reported that the children and other educators were still adjusting to them, so could not report back any notable change. Or due to high absenteeism of children, some strategies couldn't be put in place. The two remaining participants noted positive changes, particularly GH, whose hours increased. The other participant EF remarked that holding the settling periods outside appeared to support both the child and parents. But she also made a reference to the importance of the supporting smooth transitions, which almost appeared rehearsed* (Reflective Journal entry, 12th February 2021).

After some careful consideration and a discussion with my critical friend, I decided to hold the post intervention interviews with the participants a week early. This would mean that the one-to-ones would end on the third week, and the final session would be the post intervention interview. This would either confirm my concerns that this intervention was not offering the authentic data as participants felt uncomfortable or it would highlight areas of the one-to-ones which I could improve upon while continuing the intervention.

### 4.1.3 Post intervention interview:

I held post intervention focussed interviews (Appendix 7) with the individual participants, as such interviews can provide greater depth through the co-construction of

knowledge between the interviewer and the interviewee through dialogue (Fontana and Frey, 2000). When asked about positive elements of the one-to-ones, participants stated, *I enjoyed the chance to have a discussion with no distractions, it was nice to have a catch up* and *it was good to discuss the issues of the room* (Appendix 8).

When asked about continuing the one-to-ones on a weekly basis, the reaction from the participants was as follows. Seven out of the nine participants stated that they would like to continue the one-to-ones but on a lesser basis, with suggestions such as once every three to four weeks being mentioned by a majority. The remaining two suggested conducting the one-to-ones on a fortnightly basis. When asked about any suggestions which could improve the one-to-one discussions, the following was mentioned by MN,

> *If we could possibly invite more team members to see if others have the same issues and challenges, if we could do it on a bigger scale, as GH worked with A, and I have him in my room now so she could offer me some advice of what worked for her.* GH also mentioned having discussions on a larger scale; *If we could meet with more of the team, we could share issues and see how others are managing.*

Similarly, CD stated, *I would like to link in with more of the team, with COVID I feel like I haven't had a chance to talk to them and see how they are managing their room and practices.* The findings which emerged from the post intervention interviews were as follows in Figure 4.3
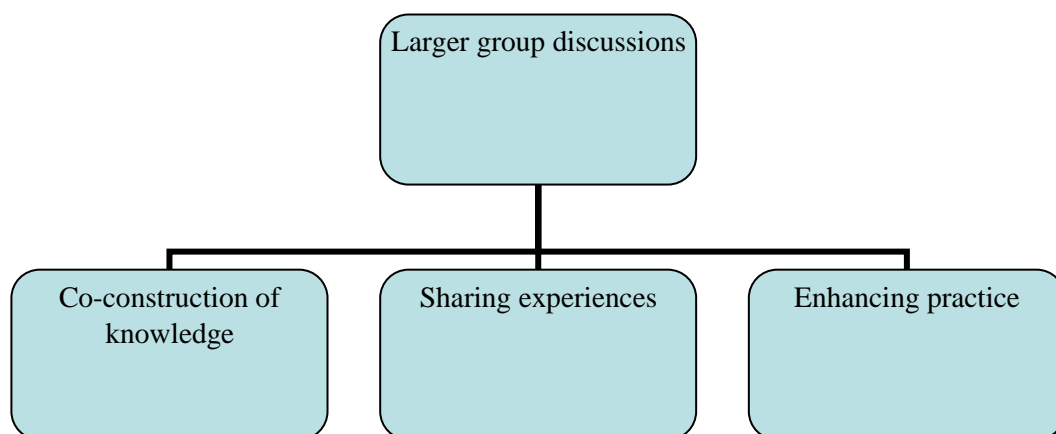
While I felt that the initial one-to-one sessions offered more than the second, it may have been due to the discussion surrounding the impact of COVID-19 on the participant's personal lives. They may have felt more comfortable or as though we had a connection (Wenger et al., 2002; Vincent et al., 2018) through this shared trauma. Therefore, the decision was made to continue one-to-ones with the team on a lesser basis and outside of the research. I felt as though this intervention had not offered the

data which I had hoped, with participants either slow to engage or the responses appearing contrived. I felt that situations were forced and so the participants did not feel as though it was a natural or informal environment (Hargreaves and O'Connor, 2018). Still, this cycle highlights the 'messiness' of action research, as it is not a linear process. Often solutions are not obvious, which emphasises the need to continue to engage in literature and meet with critical friends (Cook, 2009; McDonagh et al., 2020).

4.2 Action Research Cycle Two:

Through identifying the emerging themes relating to my first action research cycle, I decided to implement a different intervention which would be more fitting to my values (McDonagh, 2020). From the data, the participants indicated that larger group discussions would enhance practice and the co-construction of knowledge. I decided to meet with my critical friend, P, to discuss how I could facilitate this while maintaining COVID-19 safety precautions. Due to COVID-19 restrictions relating to play pods, group meetings could not be held inside. However, with the unpredictability of the weather, meetings could not be held outside either. P suggested that each room could meet after their individual session. This would allow for up to three participants to discuss and reflect upon the events of the week. As regular meetings often encourage critical and collaborative discussions (Tomkin et al., 2019).

4.2.1 Debriefing Sessions:

For the first three weeks of March, I would go into all five rooms of the setting to discuss the session with all members of the team. However, I would only document the view of the participants. These debriefing sessions would occur after the children had left and we would hold them at least once a week or more frequently if needed. Four of the five rooms are preschool rooms, so they are three-hour sessions. The remaining room is a full day care room and so this session ends at 4:30pm. The debriefing schedule is included (Appendix 9).

The first debriefing session was quite a general discussion, I asked about new children settling in and if the participants were experiencing any challenges. GH began by stating that *the children appeared to be settling in well, especially since we began conducting the settling in period in the playground.* However, GH highlighted that a consequence of this was one of the *children, was struggling when going outdoors as he expected to see his parents.* I asked what we could do to support the child during this challenge, the participants were slow to engage, so I attempted to offer suggestions.

I was becoming concerned that participants were not engaging in the CoP, as not all the necessary elements of a CoP were present. The domain, which is the interest or concern, and the practice which is the specific area were present. However, community

which is the mutual engagement (Wenger and Lave, 2015) was absent.

This was a reoccurring issue within Preschool room A, as I felt I was still directing the conversation.

> *When discussing challenges within the room, I found that the participants were slow to engage. For instance, one issue which emerged in Preschool room A was supporting a child with limited language in initiating play with his peers. Similarly, participants of Preschool Room C experienced difficulty in supporting a child engage in group play. While all participants were forthcoming in sharing their challenges, it was not the case when attempting to establish possible supports for the children. However, separately in Preschool Room D, I observed some of the more experienced participants beginning to discuss their own experiences relating to similar situations and the strategies they implemented at the time. It appeared the more confident and experienced educators would participate more than the novice educators among the research cohort* (Reflective Journal entry, 2nd March 2021).

While I acknowledge that novice members often engage in marginal interaction with the CoP, as they observe the practices and culture of the setting from their more experienced colleagues (Wenger, 1998; Polizzi et al., 2021), I was growing concerned with their lack of interaction. However, it was during the second week of this cycle when conducting an exit interview with an educator that I gained a different perspective as to why this may be the case.

4.2.2 Altering my practice:

An educator was leaving the early childhood education and care sector, and after conducting her exit interview, she and I were having were having an informal discussion. She asked if she could offer me some advice regarding my practice and stated, *'you talk too much, you use big and intimating words, you refer to your own practice when offering advice and you're too rigid with policies and procedures'* *(Educator, 8th March 2021).* While this was hard to hear, I had to consider what she had said and decided to meta-reflect. Meta-reflection is described as revisiting reflective documents and reflecting on your cognitive processes, it can offer new learning by considering the perspectives of others (Sullivan et al., 2016). This practice allowed me to consider not only the perspective of others but recognise that my values remained unaligned to my practice. Furthermore, to become a transformational leader, one must stand back and reflect upon their practice and communication skills. This is often done

in consultation with a trusted and honest colleague, who describes how their communication skills are perceived by others (Babb and Gesler, 2021). I documented my thoughts in my reflective journal.

> *My values were still not being lived as my insecurities as a new leader had altered my agenda. I had become so focussed on fulfilling technocratic practices, using academic language, and referring to my own practice to reaffirm my position as leader* (Reflective journal entry 9th March 2021).

This excerpt from my reflective journal correlates to a study conducted by McDowall and Clark (2012), who found that new ECEC leaders expressed a lack of confidence regarding their role, particularly when introducing change. They also struggled when negotiating leadership practice, such as supervision which does not create a sense of inadequacy among their peers. It also coincides with Rodd's (2013) theory of leadership communication in which advising is overused, rather than the more effective communication of listening. However, it could be argued that I was engaging in such practice due to Imposter Syndrome, which new leaders in particular can often struggle with. Imposter Syndrome a sense of incompetence which can negatively impact ones' practice and is often produced through situational variables such as contextual factors, within the organisation such as my journey to leadership (Aparna and Menon, 2019; Oc, 2018). It may have caused barriers to communication as the use of academic language can often lead to the message being lost or people disengaging during communication (Kumbakonam, 2016).

Nonetheless, my leadership practice negatively influenced the community's domain, as if there is a lack of connection among the participants and the area of interest, they will not become fully committed to the community (Wenger and Snyder, 2000). To live my values and cultivate a CoP with my colleagues, I would have to adjust my practice accordingly. I would continue with the debriefing sessions and acting as community co-ordinator (CC) by encouraging participation and dialogue (Gotto IV et al., 2008). However, I would be more mindful of my own contributions while trying to encourage that of others. I implemented this practice from the third week of the debriefing session.

The findings of the third week of debriefing sessions, illustrate that there was more interaction among the participants in comparison to the first and second week. This may

have been due to a better understanding on my part of my own influence. Yet, it is argued that as a CoP evolves roles, often organically shift with the development of new leaders and contributors, as people become more comfortable with the content and community (Gotto IV et al., 2008). *Nonetheless, the participants who I would have considered more withdrawn in the initial discussions were slightly more vocal in sharing their experiences in the room* (10th March 2021, Reflective Journal Entry). This is illustrated in Figure 4.4 below.
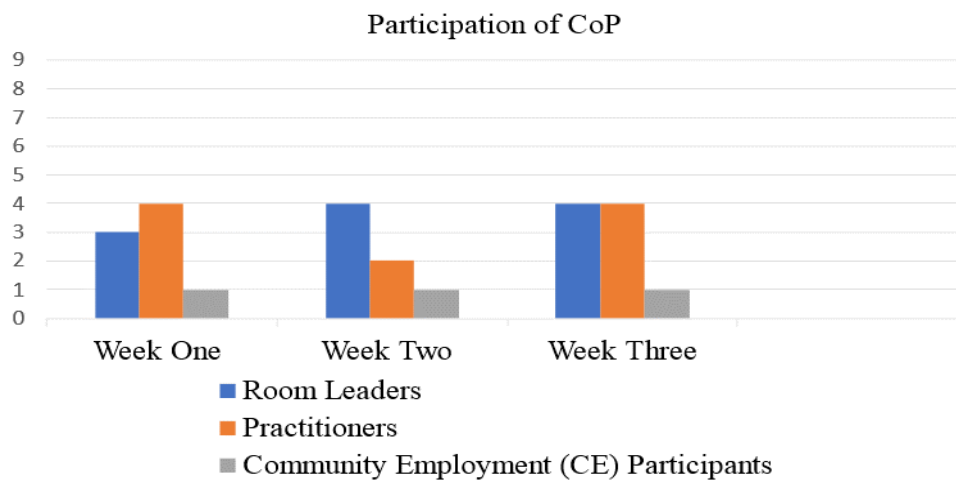
The increased participation among the participants supported not only group discussions but collective reflection among the team, with participants engaging in reflection on action (Schön, 1992). During these discussions, participants would share their experiences in practice and considered methods of enhancing it. A majority of the issues discussed related to supporting children with either environmental or developmental needs. This led to other members of the team beginning to consider similar issues which arose in their previous practice. It also led to participants considering situations from different perspectives. For instance, in the Preschool Room E, a participant, EF, had noted that one child was struggling with leaving their parent in the morning. The other participant, IJ offered her own insight,

> *I noticed that with B too and I think it is from the lockdown. In my last place, we had a similar challenge, but obviously we weren't dealing with COVID-19. But by extending our time outside when children are dropped off it means they don't have as many transitions to deal with. So, they can be distracted and supported*

outside before attempting to move them into the indoor environment (Participant IJ, 9th March 2021).

I also observed the participants of Preschool Room D working collaboratively to resolve a challenge regarding children and toileting within their room. Each participant shared their own knowledge and experiences in a respectful manner and recognised the value of it. This open and active dialogue among the participants in which they shared their experiences and knowledge to solve a problem, is one of the key functions of a CoP (Li et al., 2009; Wenger et al., 2002). Furthermore, such collaboration led to the introduction of a new strategy which supported the children in the room and their professional practice (Eaker et al., 2002).I felt as though the participants were engaging at a more meaningful level. However, to establish how they felt, I held a post intervention focus group within the individual rooms after the third week of the intervention. Relevant extracts of the debriefing sessions are attached (Appendix 10).

4.2.3 Post intervention semi-structured focus group:

I decided to use semi-structured focus group (Appendix 11), as such forms of data collection can offer greater opinions and therefore more data (Cohen et al., 2018). These would be conducted within the individual rooms, while maintaining social distancing and mask wearing to ensure COVID-19 safety precautions. I began by asking how the debriefing sessions effected the participant's professional practice? Many participants felt that the debriefing sessions allowed for group discussion on the events of the day, while considering the perspective of others. This led to others stating,

I felt like I wasn't thinking about work as much when I went home, like you would still think about it but in a more positive way because you know there is support with you (Eimear) and the team. Like we've time to chat about how the day went and I think when it's only you (referring to oneself), you can focus on the negative but with other people you can see the positives of how the day went (Participant KL).

A challenge which was noted by the participants was time management, as more cleaning had to occur do to COVID-19. This was particularly difficult to manage for those in the full day care room,

I suppose because I'm in the full day care room, it was trickier to chat after the session because we were trying to make sure the cleaning got done. But I did feel that any issues that may have occurred during the day were spoken about, like I was worried about a child or parent I knew that I could talk to you

(Eimear) and the educators, and we could try and sort it out. (Participant QR).

Several participants suggested including more members of the team into the debriefing sessions, as it would support greater learning and offer insight in previous strategies which worked with children. There was also a sense of disconnect among the rooms with their peers due to COVID-19 and the introduction of the pods system.

> *(Before COVID-19) I could ask other members of the team for advice, like even if they didn't have that particular child before, they might have had similar experiences and discussing it lets you hash it out and consider alternative practices* (Participant OP).

The findings from the post intervention focus groups suggested that while there were issues among some rooms in relation to time constraints, the debriefing sessions appeared to benefit the participant's learning and practice. By taking on board the data I received from the educator in relation to my own practice, I felt that this had supported the participants in becoming more assertive in contributing to the group by altering my practice. Previously, when engaging in the CoP, I would hinder the opportunity of mutual engagement by asking and answering the questions. I had to become a leader who was comfortable, even when not in control. This change in my mindset and practice, would empower the participants to participate and support my values of collaboration (Piercey, 2010). It was a combination of my self-awareness which provided my motivation (Goleman, 2006) to change my practice and my self-management of adaptability (ibid) which supported me in doing so. Within this research, a theme which remained consistent throughout all cycles, was collaboration, through meeting as a collective group. The participants highlighted the advantages of this, not only in relation to expanding their knowledge and therefore their practice, but in reconnecting as a team (Beauchamp et al., 2021).

4.3 Action Research Cycle Three

The findings from the post intervention semi-structured focus group found that, the participant's felt that more knowledge could emerge from conducting a whole team meeting. The presence of a CoP supports social learning, by holding a whole team meeting it would create a greater bank of knowledge and expertise to support this social learning (Callahan, 2004). It would also support a sense of connection among the team since COVID-19 had restricted our whole team interactions (Beauchamp et al., 2021).

In order to accommodate this meeting, I needed to consult with our centre's co-ordinator to discuss my plans for the meeting, while maintaining the centre's COVID-19 policies and procedures. I had decided to hold the meeting outside in the playground

to ensure the safety of all members of the team. After receiving permission, I set about organising a date and agenda for the meeting. All members of the team were consulted when deciding a date and time, to ensure a high attendance. This is one of the roles of a CC in that they organise CoP meetings and topics for discussion (Wenger et al., 2002). The agenda for the meeting is included in the appendix (Appendix 12). This was shared with the team to ensure that they could add any topics which they would like to discuss. Members of the team added the following topics.
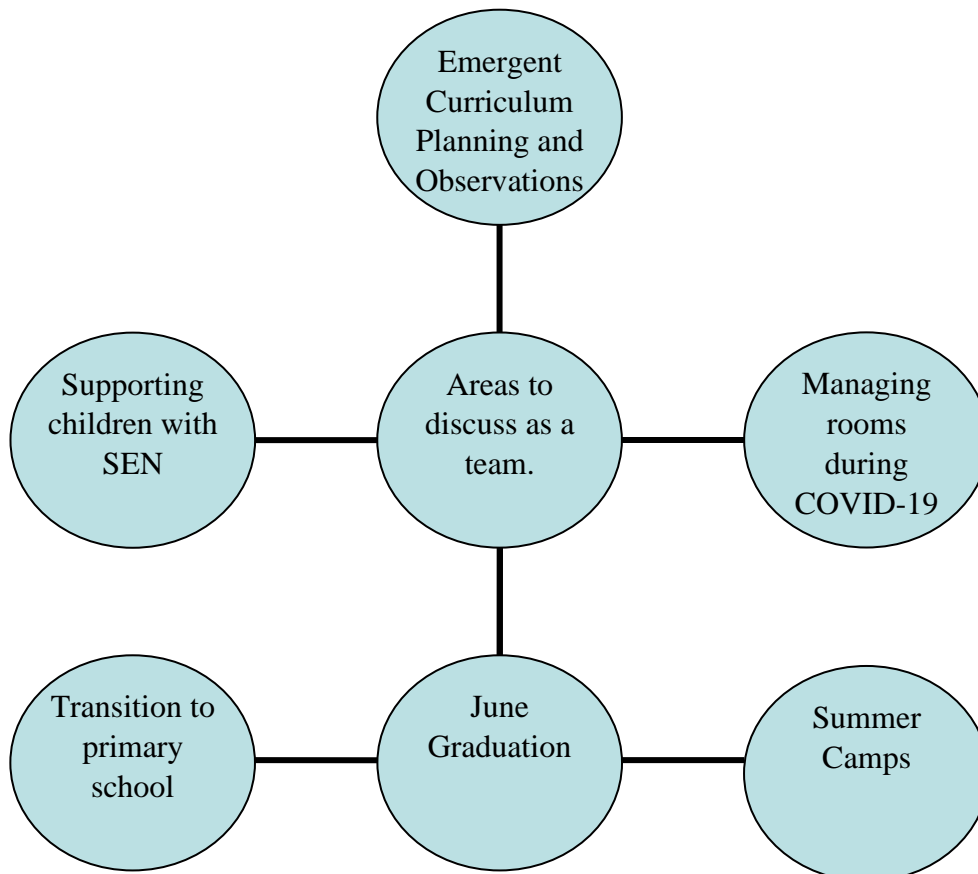
Figure 4.5 The agenda for the team meeting.

The meeting began with a discussion on a plan for September and the cohort of new children which we would have. We then moved on to the first aid training plan for the team. With both topics there was little to no interaction from the team, this may have been due to the lack of questions both topics posed as I had offered all the information I had at the time. Therefore, the message could have been perceived as linear, and thereby not requiring a response (van Ruler, 2018). However, when we began discussing the emergent curriculum and other areas highlighted by the participants, there was significantly more interaction. In relation to the emergent curriculum,

participants began sharing knowledge in relation to implementing the curriculum and documentation (Appendix 13 for transcript).

> QR: *I struggle with the quiet children, like it is important that they too have an opportunity to have their voices heard and reflected within the planner. But it's hard to grasp what their interests are because they tend to join the others in playing.*
>
> IJ: *I found this with J last year and I would ask his Mam what he did at the weekend or if anything interesting happened and then link it to an activity and slowly, he would start to come out of his shell.*

When questions arose in relation to the medium-term curriculum, participants appeared comfortable in sharing their knowledge and experience.

> GH: *That's what I did in my room, like obviously they are younger than your children, but I decided to look at sharing and through the interests of the children in the short-term planner, I created scenarios where I could support their sharing. Like taking turns when on bikes or when washing the dolls.*
>
> OP: *OK, so the long-term planner is essentially the ethos of the setting and then we decided the medium planner based on our observations so say language support through the activities based on the children's interests?*
>
> GH: *That's what I do.*

This sharing of and co-construction of knowledge became more apparent as the meeting continued. It appeared that participants were more comfortable in sharing and discussing their experience and knowledge in practical matters such as June graduation, transition to primary school and outdoor environment. I felt that some members had moved from the peripheral to the active group (Vincent et al., 2018). By meeting collectively as a CoP, it supported the team in not only adopting new educational practices (Wenger et al., 2002). This was evident when discussing altering our practice in supporting the transition to primary school and the June graduation. Many participants also became more vocal when discussing improving the outdoor area. They shared their knowledge and ideas in promoting children's learning and development. It also appeared that many were enthused with the suggestion of each room taking an area of the environment and using their own expertise to modify it. It is suggested that

effective CoPs concentrate on utilising the community's agency and strength (Iaquinto et al., 2011).

Nonetheless, I still felt as though some participants were more reluctant to share their knowledge and experience than others. Or it may be due to these participants feeling uncomfortable as they may believe that their perspective will not be understood or valued (Smith, 2013; Lasater, 2016).

> *I feel like this team meeting supported the co-construction of knowledge and exploration of new practices. I was conscious of my own engagement, as I did not want to be perceived as dictating the proceedings. However, I would interject if I felt that some participants wanted to engage but did not know how to start the conversation. Some of these participants would be considered novice within the ECEC profession, I wonder if they feel as though their opinion would not be held in the same regard as the veterans of the setting? (Reflective Journal entry, 5th May 2021).*

While I considered the perspective of the participants within my own reflective journal, to establish how the participants actually felt I shared a post meeting online questionnaire. I felt that this may support the participants in being more authentic in their response as they would remain anonymous (Cohen et al., 2018).

4.3.1 Post intervention questionnaire:

This questionnaire would support me in answering my research question of *'How can as an early educational leader cultivate a community of practice with my colleagues?'*. In my final AR cycle, I held a team meeting which the participants suggested would support their learning and practice. The questionnaire which consists of five questions (Appendix 14), a majority of which required qualitative responses, would offer me a more personal response and greater depths of opinion from the participants (Cohen et al., 2018).

All nine participants felt that the team meeting supported their collective learning through sharing their challenges and knowledge as a team. The participants also stated that group discussions were provided for during the meeting as it was an informal setting, and all members of the team were present. Figure 4.6 illustrates the participants levels of comfort when engaging in the CoP.

Q 3. How comfortable or uncomfortable did you feel sharing your opinions in the meeting?
7 responses
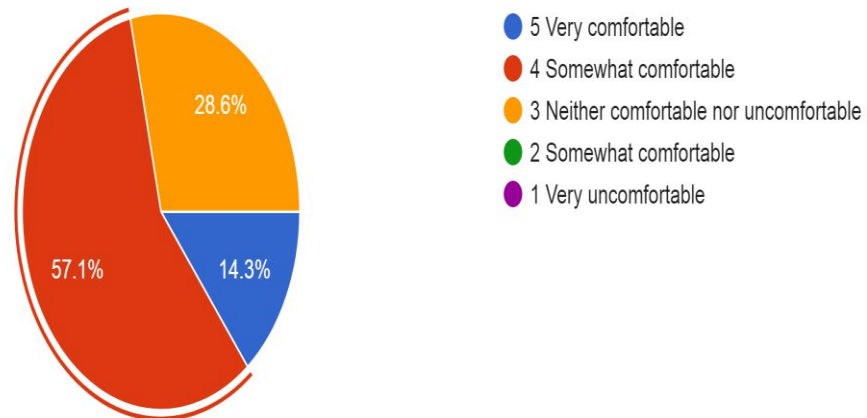
When asked about the effectiveness of the debriefing sessions within individual rooms, the responses from the participants were positive. With some participants noting that through discussions relating to challenges, they now consider the perspective of others. Time management was again noted as an issue in ensuring meaningful discussions occurred, which was concerning as time constraints are considered a barrier to effective communication (van Rooyen, 2018). The final question asked for suggestions that could support our team meetings. The responses included, *holding meetings more regularly and inviting other professionals into the meetings to enhance our learning in specific areas such as language.*

4.4 Conclusion:

This chapter discussed in detail, the findings and results of the data gathered through my baseline questionnaire, reflections, interviews, focus groups and conversations with my critical friend. This data supported me in identifying themes and areas of my practice which would support me in living my values and answer the question, *'How can I, as an early educational leader, cultivate a community of practice in my setting?* While the first action research cycle did not offer the data I had hoped, yet it highlighted the importance of continued interaction with participants, literature, and my critical friend. While I am still in the process of cultivating this CoP, engaging in this research has informed and enhanced my practice and reaffirmed my values. In chapter five, I will discuss my findings, recommendations for future practice and the significance of my research journey.

Chapter Five: Conclusions and Recommendations
5. Introduction:
In this chapter, I will conclude this thesis by discussing my conclusions and recommendations which have emerged when researching the topic of '*How can I, as an early educational leader, cultivate a community of practice in my setting?'*. Following this, I will reflect on the impact conducting this research has had on my values and my practice. Finally, I will describe how I intend on disseminating my research not only within my educational setting but throughout the wider early years' education community.

This journey began by exploring new strategies that might improve my practice as an early childhood educational leader. While I feel that this was accomplished, embarking upon this journey also increased my understanding of why I need to change and how best to do it. The research evolved in not only developing a community of practice among my colleagues but reflecting on my identity as a leader and the implications this had on my communication skills and my practice.

5.1 Cultivating a Community of Practice:
I had expected that the process of cultivating a community of practice would occur naturally within the setting, as participants had indicated their interest in peer support and collaboration. One challenge which I did foresee was the impact of COVID-19, due to government restrictions and policies of the organisations, some elements of design had to be altered. This included inviting an external professional into the setting and the whole team meeting occurring later than hoped. I also become acutely aware of the sense of disconnect among the team (Beauchamp et al., 2021) due to the implementation of play pods. However, there were some benefits to this, as participants of the community of practice who would engage peripherally or observe during discussions, had the opportunity to engage within smaller groups. This occurred firstly as one-to-ones and then as debriefing sessions within their room. Smaller groups are recommended as they support participants in becoming coming comfortable, while forming relationships (Wenger et al., 2002).

Another finding which emerged was my role within cultivating a community of practice. As Community Coordinator, I unfortunately fell into the forewarn traps of taking control of the meetings and having the sense that I should have all the answers (Gotto IV et al., 2008) to the questions, I was asking. This was primary due to my

communication skills and sense of identity as a leader, which will be discussed in detail below.

5.1.1 Communication Skills:

My communication skills played a pivotal role in the participation and engagement of the participants during community of practice meetings. As a leader of the ECEC setting, I felt as though I also needed to lead the community of practice. While the participants identified the barriers to effective communication as a lack of time and distractions. This theme was later revisited by an educator who was not a participant in the research. This educator informed me that my own communication skills were negatively impacting on cultivating a community of practice. This was due to my use of academic language, which is a barrier to effective communication, as the use of academic language can be misinterpreted (Kumbakonam, 2016; Kapur, 2018). It is my belief that my practice also led to contrived conversations among the participants during one-to-ones, as I had set the tone as a formal and task-based space, rather than an informal, relational space (Hargreaves and O'Connor, 2018).

However, it was not only my verbal communication skills which were negatively impacting the engagement of the participants, but my lack of listening. Rodd (2013) states that listening is an essential quality which ECEC leader must possess, with leaders often overusing advising as a means of communication. Unfortunately, when questions emerged from participants I would engage in participation, in sharing an experience and reification, producing a resource to support the meaning making (Wenger et al., 2002). Rather than give the participant time to engage, which can result in a lack of participation within the community of practice (ibid). My use of language, referring to my own practice and lack of listening can cause a perceptual barrier to communication, in which the participant believes that why they have to say will not be heard or of interest to others (Lasater, 2016; Eisenberg, 2010). Through engaging in meta-reflection, thereby reflecting over reflective documents while considering the perspective of others (McDonagh et al., 2020), I became aware that my communication skills stemmed from my perception of a leader.

5.1.2 The impact of my sense of identity as a leader:

My sense of identity had an intrinsic link to both my communication skills and cultivating a community of practice. As McDowall Clark (2012) had found in his study, I was struggling to align my practice with my notion of what an ECEC leader should

be. My understanding of leadership was evident in my technocratic practices, as I had not yet gained confidence or grown comfortable with my new professional identity (Barron, 2016; Buchanan, 2015). In addition to this, my concept of leadership was based around multiple roles, therefore I was attempting to ensure all duties were fulfilled. This led to not only time constraints, but feelings of stress (Strehmel, 2016; Aubrey, 2011).

In addition to this, I was struggling with imposter syndrome which was not only having a negative effect on myself as a leader, but the team. As some novice participants were reluctant to participate in the community of practice and others were using academic language. This is due to my feelings of imposter syndrome filtering into the ECEC rooms and impacting the team (Aparna and Menon, 2019).

5.2 Recommendations:

Through engaging in this research, I now recognise aspects of it which could be improved upon. When cultivating a community of practice, I would recommend that participants are involved from the designing period. This would allow participants to have a greater sense of identity and belonging within the community of practice, while also provoking interest in becoming a member (Wenger, 1998). I would also recommend that the leader of the ECEC setting does not take on the role as Community Co-Ordinator. Rather, a member of the team should have the option to self-nominate (Wenger et al., 2002).

I would recommend the use of smaller groups such as one-to-ones and debriefing sessions in conjunction with team meetings. While the one-to-one sessions did not offer the data I had hoped for, it did support the participants and I to connect during the very challenging times of COVID-19 (Beauchamp et al., 2021). As within this research it was evident that it contributed to the formation of relationships among the participants and I (Wenger et al., 2002). I would also recommend the introduction of external professionals joining the community of practice when it becomes mature (ibid). I suggest that children are invited to participate to promote their sense of agency and identity within the setting.

My recommendation for new leaders or those lacking confidence is to engage in mentoring. This mentoring should occur within the setting and among the team as it can promote not only the leader's capabilities but the confidence of their colleagues

(Kodden, 2019). I feel that this should occur with critical reflection, individually and collectively as a community of practice. As critical reflection within a group and communities of practice shares many similar traits in that they enhance professional development through participation (Vrieling et al., 2019). It also provides an opportunity for members to discuss any challenges in practice, while attempting to enhance their practice (Akella, et al., 2021; Wenger, (1998). I would further recommend ECEC leaders engaging in meta-reflection, as it allows leaders to gain insight into the perspective of others (Brookfield, 2017; Bassot, 2016).

For ECEC leaders, I would encourage them to deeply consider their values, levels of emotional intelligence and communication skills (Nguyen et al., 2019). This can support the management of relationships between colleagues and leaders, as the leader shows honest interest in the lives of their colleagues (ibid). This was evident during the one-to-one meetings whereby the participants and I discussed the impact COVID-19 had on our lives. This practice correlates to a study conducted by Tench (2016) which found that educational leaders with high levels of emotional intelligence were more competent in supporting their colleagues during challenging times. Furthermore, this practice can support the leader in gaining a better understanding of their colleagues and setting, through *"contextual literacy",* (Siraj-Blatchford and Manni, 2007, p.12), which is particularly important when introducing change (Rodd, 2013).

Finally, I would recommend that ECEC settings develop a joint sense of identity through cultivating a community of practice. This would support the team in recognising their vision and focus, while taking ownership of their practice (Wenger et al., 2002). I feel that this is particularly important as the ECEC profession remains without a professional identity (Moloney, 2015). I believe that this played a role in my own practice, as I was attempting to navigate several roles while living in contradiction to my values (Whitehead, 1989).

5.3 Impact of this research on my values and practice:

This self-study action research journey has supported me in reaffirming my values of a collegial environment and socially constructing knowledge with my colleagues. I became aware of this when I amended my practice and truly understood my role as the coordinator of the community of practice (Wenger et al., 2002). The unexpected data which was provided by the educator following her exit interview, heightened my awareness in the difference between how I am perceieved and how I am actually

feeling. When I became comfortable with the uncomfortable data, I was able to be true to my own values and my concept of a leader. This has impacted my practice, as I step back and no longer jump to answer the questions with jargon. It is rather paradoxical, as I am promoting a collegial and collaborative environment by reducing my collaboration.

5.3.1 My Claim to knowledge:

Through actively engaging in self-study action research, reflective and meta-reflective practice, researching literature, and being guided by my critical friend and the data from the participants, I can now make a claim to knowledge that I have developed my own living theory (Whitehead, 2018). This knowledge emerged through the messiness of action research, which is the nature of self-study action research and while there may be a sense of chaos and a lack of order, the creativity and learning will often emerge from these moments (Whitehead 2016; Glenn, 2020).

This theory finds that there is an intrinsic link between cultivating a community of practice, communication skills and sense of identity as a leader. As the forementioned findings have stated, each element is connected to the other and each element impacted the other. The literature has shown the importance of a leader's communication skills, sense of identity and confidence and their role in cultivating a community of practice. However, I believe that this research has shown the importance of considering all three elements as one, rather than single entities.

5.4 Limitations of this research:

A limitation of this research was that it was a small-scale self-study AR project and deeply personal to me, so if it were replicated in a similar context, it may not offer the identical findings or results (McDonagh et al., 2020). Nonetheless, the learning and theory which emerged from this study may be applicable to the practice of other new leaders. Another limitation of this research was the lack of technology when cultivating the community of practice, as the use of virtual spaces is recognised as a principle of design (Wenger et al., 2002). This option was explored but due to the policies within the centre relating to the use of online social platforms outside of working requirements, it was not a viable option. Similarly, external professionals could not be invited into our setting to support our community of practice design or share their knowledge and experience with us (Wenger and Lave, 2015). Unfortunately, due to COVID-19 this was not an option, but it will be revisited in the future.

5.5 Disseminating my research

I will share this research with my colleagues as I feel if I am promoting an environment which supports co-construction of knowledge and participation it is important to model it. I also plan on disseminating this research with the wider ECEC community through conferences and webinars. As stated throughout this research process, social participation enhances ones' learning and meaning making (Wenger et al., 2002). I feel it could also support any ECEC leader who shared similar concerns and challenges as I did, and it could offer them a different perspective (McDonagh et al., 2020).

5.6 Conclusion:

This chapter discussed the findings and recommendations of this research. It also discussed my claim to knowledge, the limitations of this study and my plans of sharing my research. It highlighted the impact this research had not only on my values and practice, but as my identity as an ECEC leader. While I am still adapting to my new role and becoming more comfortable as a leader, I will continue my attempt of cultivating a community of practice through critically and meta-reflecting on my practice, as engaging in such practice profoundly supported my learning and supported me in growing nearer to living my values.

List of References:

Akella, D., Gibbs, A., Gilbert, B., Henry, B., Lee, V., Mathis, D., and William, V. (2021) Critical Reflection and Communities of Practice as Professional Development Strategies for Educators. *International Journal for Cross-Disciplinary Subjects in Education (IJCDSE), Volume 12, Issue 1, 2021*. [online] Available from: https://infonomics-society.org/wp-content/uploads/Critical-Reflection-and-Communities-of-Practice-as-Professional-Development-Strategies-for-Educators-.pdf (Accessed online on the 24th of May 2021).

Al-Saad, H. (2014) *Demystifying Ontology and Epistemology in research methods.* [online] Available from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/260244813_Demystifying_Ontology_and_Epistemology_in_Research_Methods (Accessed online on the 5th December 2020).

Ali, I., and Sherin, M. (2016) Principals' Communication Styles and School Performance in Al Alin Government School, UAE. *International Journal of Research Studies in Education 2017 January, Volume 6 Number 1, 29-46*. [online] Available from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/307137296_Principals'_communication_styles_and_school_performance_in_Al_Ain_government_schools_UAE (Accessed online on the 14th November 2020).

Anderson, G. L. and Herr, K. (2009) Practitioner Action Research and Educational Leadership. In: Noffke, S., and Somekh, B. (2009) *The Sage Handbook of Educational Action Research, p. 155-165.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Aparna K. and Menon, P. (2019) *Imposter Syndrome: An integrative Framework of its Antecedents, Consequences and Moderating Factors on Sustainable leadership behaviours*. [Online]. Available from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/339984968_Impostor_Syndrome_An_Integrative_Framework_of_its_Antecedents_Consequences_and_Moderating_Factors_on_Sustainable_Leader_Behaviors (Accessed online on the 19th May 2021).

Aubrey, C. (2011) *Leading and Managing in the Early Years, Second Edition.* London: SAGE Publishing.

Ayuba, S. H., Manafb, N. A., and Hamzahc, R. M. (2014) The International Conference on Communication and Media 2014 (i-COME'14), 18-20 October 2014, Langkawi, MALAYSIA Leadership: Communicating Strategically in the 21st Century. *Procedia - Social and Behavioural Sciences 155 (2014) 502 – 506.* [online] Available from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/269576857_Leadership_Communicating_Strategically_in_the_21_st_Century (Accessed online on the 4th of November 2020).

Babb, D. L., and Gesler, D. (2021) Putting Transformational Leadership into Practice. Creating Positive Change, March/April 2021. [online]. Available from: https://www.childcareexchange.com/files/2021/03/5025856.pdf (Accessed online on the 19th of June 2021).

Barron, I. (2016) Flight turbulence: the stormy professional trajectory of trainee early years' teachers in England. *International Journal of Early Education, 24:3, p.325-341.*

Bass, B. M. (1997). Does the Transactional-Transformational Leadership Paradigm Transcend Organizational and National Boundaries? *Am. Psychol. 52 (2), 130–139.* Available   from: https://home.ubalt.edu/tmitch/641/bass%20does%20trans%20ldr%20transcend%20AmPsy%2097.pdf (Accessed online on the 16[th of] March 2021).

Bassey, M. (1990) Creating education through research, *Research Intelligence, autumn 40-1.* [online] Available from: https://bera-journals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1080/0141192920180101 (Accessed online on the 5th December 2020).

Bassot, B. (2016) *The Reflective Practice Guide, an interdisciplinary approach to critical reflection.* London: Routledge.

Beauchamp, G., Hulme, M., Clarke, L., Hamilton, L., and Harvey, J. A. (2021) 'People miss people': A study of school leadership and management in the four nations of the United Kingdom in the early stage of the COVID-19 pandemic. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership Volume: 49 Issue: 3, page(s): 375-392.* [online]   Available   from: https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1741143220987841 (Accessed online on the 23[rd of] March 2021).

Bell, R. L., and Muir, C. (2014) A review of business communication under the leadership function. *Business Studies Journal, 6, 99-121*. [online] Available from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/274780378_A_review_of_business_communication_under_the_leadership_function (Accessed online on the 9th November 2020).

Benmira, S., and Agboola, M. (2021) *Evolution of Leadership.* [online] Available from: https://bmjleader.bmj.com/content/leader/5/1/3.full.pdf (Accessed online on the 12th of February 2021).

Blank, H. L. (1997). Advocacy Leadership. Kagan, S. L., and Bowman, B. T. (1997) *Leadership in Early Care and Education* (23-33). Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children. [online] Available from: https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.456.1120&rep=rep1&type=pdf#:~:text=As%20noted%20in%20the%20National,%2C%20administrative%20leadership%2C%20advocacy%20leadership%2C (Accessed online on the 5th November 2020).

Blankenship, S. S., and Ruona, W. E. A (2009) *Professional Learning Communities and Communities of Practice: A Comparison of Models, Literature Review [online].* Available from: https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED504776.pdf (Accessed online on the 16th of June 2021).

Borgatti, S. (2004) Communities of Practice. [online]. Available from: http://www.analytictech.com/mb119/communities_of_practice.htm (Accessed online on the 20th of March 2021).

Borton, T. (1970) Reach, Touch, Teach. London: Hutchinson. Cited in Jasper, M. (2003). *Beginning reflective practice.* Cheltenham: Nelson thorn.

Braun, V., and Clarke, V. (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology,* [online]. *3, 77-101.* [online] Available at: http://ojs.aishe.org/index.php/aishe-j/article/viewFile/335/553. (Accessed on the 28th of December 2020).

Brookfield, Stephen D. (2017) *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher, Second Edition.* San Francisco: Jossey Bass, John Wiley & Sons.

Brown, J. (2016) p. 68 Research and Ethics. In: Trodd, L. (2016) *The Early Years Handbook for Students and Practitioners, An Essential Guide for the Foundation Degree and Levels 4 and 5, A David Fulton Book.* Oxon: Routledge.

Buchanan, R. (2015) Teacher identity and agency in an era of accountability. *Teachers and Teaching, theory and practice, Vol 21, Issue 6. P. 700-719.* [online]. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2015.1044329 (Accessed online on the 3rd of March 2021).

Burns, A. (2005) State-of-the-Art Article Action research: an evolving paradigm? *Lang. Teach. 38, 57–74.* [online] Available from: https://research-management.mq.edu.au/ws/portalfiles/portal/62417997/Publisher+version+%28open+access%29.pdf (Accessed online on the 6th of December 2020).

Cafferky, I. (2013) Leadership in a Community Based Early Childhood Care and Education service: Governance and Practice. [online] https://www.roscommonchildcare.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Leadership-in-a-community-based-ECCE-Service..pdf (Accessed online on the 16th December 2021).

Callahan, S. (2004) *White Paper Want to manage tacit knowledge? Communities of practice offer a versatile solution.* [online] Available from: https://www.anecdote.com/pdfs/papers/Want_to_manage_tacit_knowledge.pdf (Accessed online on the 14th of March 2021).

Cain, T. (2011) Teachers' Classroom-based action research. *International Journal of Research and Methods in Education, 34, (1), p. 3-16.* [online] Available from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/232987359_Teachers'_classroom-based_action_research (Accessed online on the 6th of December 2020).

Chatman, A. J., and Kennedy, J. A. (2010) Psychological perspectives of leadership. In: Nohria, N., and Khurana, R. (2010) *Handbook of Leadership Theory and Practice: A Harvard Business School Centennial Colloquium.* [online] Available from: http://faculty.haas.berkeley.edu/chatman/papers/Psychological_Perspectives_on_Leadership.pdf (Accessed online on the 15th of November 2020).

Childer, D. (2015) *The Hersey-Blanchard Situational Leadership Theory.* [online] Available from: https://www.donnaschilder.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/The-Hersey-Blanchard-Situational-Leadership%25C2%25AE-

Theory.pdf+&cd=3&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=ie (Accessed online on the 20th of March 2021).

Cohen, L., Manion, L., and Morrison, K. (2018) *Research Methods in Education.* 8th Edition ed. London: Routledge.

Cook, T. (2009) The purpose of mess in action research: Building rigor though a messy turn. *Educational Action Research. 17. 277-291.* [online] Available from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/238400495_The_purpose_of_mess_in_action _research_Building_rigour_though_a_messy_turn (Accessed online in the 21st December 2020).

Costello, G. J., Conboy, K., and Donnellan, B. (2015) Reflections on 'reflection' in Action Research. *Conference Paper, June 2015.* [online] Available from: http://mural.maynoothuniversity.ie/10881/1/BD-Reflections-2015.pdf. (Accessed online on the 8th of December 2020).

Creswell, J. W., and Plano Clark, V. L. (2011) *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research, Second edition.* Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publishing.

Crompton, D.A. (1997) Community Leadership. In Kagan, S.L., and Bowman, B. T. (1997) *Leadership in Early Care, pp. 9-14*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children. [online] Available from: https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.456.1120&rep=rep1&type= pdf#:~:text=As%20noted%20in%20the%20National,%2C%20administrative%20leader ship%2C%20advocacy%20leadership%2C (Accessed online on the 6th November 2020).

De Vries, R. E., Bakker-Pieper, A., and Oostenveld, W. (2010) Leadership communication? The relations of leaders' communication styles with leadership styles, knowledge sharing and leadership outcomes. *Journal of business and psychology, [online] 25(3), 367-380.* [online] Available from: https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2912722/ (Accessed online on the 24th of October 2020).

Denzin, N. K., and Lincoln, Y. S. (2000). Introduction: The discipline and practice of qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (2000) (eds.), *The Sage Handbook of qualitative research, 2nd edition, pp. 1-28*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2005). Introduction: The discipline and practice of qualitative research. In N. Denzin, & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research (3rd ed., pp. 1-32).* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA), (2016) *CHILD CARE ACT 1991 (EARLY YEARS SERVICES) REGULATIONS 2016,* Dublin: The Stationary Office.

Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) (2020) *Code of Ethics and Code of Professional Responsibilities.* [online] Available from: http://www.limerickchildcare.ie/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Code-of-Professional-Responsibilities-and-Code-of-Ethics-for-Early-Years-Educators.pdf (Accessed online on the 10th October 2020).

Dickens. L., and Watkins, K. (1999). Action Research: Rethinking Lewin. *Management Learning – Manage Learning. 30. 127-140.* [online] Available from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/247748272_Action_Research_Rethinking_Lewin (Accessed online on the 6th of December 2020).

Di Giulio, J. (2014) Are leaders born or made? *Leadership and Business Acumen.* [online]. Available from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/270684591_Are_leaders_born_or_made (Accessed online on the 14th of November 2020).

Douglass, L. A. (2019) *Directorate for Education and Skills, Leadership for Quality Early Childhood Education and Care OECD Education Working Paper No. 211.* [online] Available from: http://www.oecd.org/officialdocuments/publicdisplaydocumentpdf/?cote=EDU/WKP%282019%2919&docLanguage=En (Accessed online on the 21st of November 2020).

Duignan, M. (2017) Ireland – ECEC Workforce Profile. In: Oberhuemer, P., and Schreyer, I. (2017) *Workforce Profiles in Systems of Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe,* [online] Available from: www.seepro.eu/English/Country_Reports.htm (Accessed online on the 24th of April 2021).

Dunne, J. (2015) *Participatory Action Research: Effect of Emphasising Graduate Attributes on Work-Placement Reflection.* [Online]. Available from: https://arrow.tudublin.ie/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1032&context=ltcdis (Accessed online on the 18th of April 2021).

Eaker, R., Dufour, R., and Dufour, R. (2002) *Getting Started: Reculturing Schools to Become Professional Learning Communities*. USA: Solution Tree Press.

Early Childhood Ireland (ECI) LINC (Leadership for Inclusion) (2021) [online] Available from: https://www.earlychildhoodireland.ie/linc-leadership-for-inclusion-in-the-early-years/ (Accessed online on the 28th of May 2021).

Early Childhood Ireland (ECI) (2020). Access and Inclusion Model. [online] Available from: https://www.earlychildhoodireland.ie/access-and-inclusion-model-aim/ (Accessed online on the 18th of April 2021).

Ebbeck, M., and Waniganayake, M. (2003) *Early Childhood Professionals: Leading today and tomorrow*. NSW: MacLennan + Petty Pty Ltd.

Egnal, B. (2016) *The (Few) Benefits of Jargon. Leading Through Language: Choosing Words that Influence and Inspire.* [online] Available from: https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/9781119176602.ch2 (Accessed online on the 19th of March 2021).

Eisenberg, E. M. (2010) *Organizational communication: Balancing creativity and constraint.* New York: Saint Martin's

Felicien, A., Andimignon, M., and Jawawi, R. (2013) *Foundations of Educational Leadership.* [online] Available from: http://oasis.col.org/bitstream/handle/11599/2484/2013_VUSSC_Foundations-Educational-Leadership.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y (Accessed online on the 19th March 2021).

Fontana, A., and Frey, J. (2000) *The interview: From structured questions to negotiated text. In Handbook of Qualitative Research, 2nd ed.;* Denzin, N., Lincoln, Y.S., (2000) Eds.; Sage: Thousand Oaks, CA.

Gee, J. P. (1990) Social Linguistics and Literacies: Ideology in Discourses, Critical Perspectives on Literacy and Education. [online] Available from: https://curricublog.files.wordpress.com/2009/01/gee-discourses-1990.pdf (Accessed online on the 21st of November 2020).

Gibbs, G. (1988) *Learning by doing: a guide to teaching and learning methods.* Oxford: Further Education Unit. [online] Available from:

https://thoughtsmostlyaboutlearning.files.wordpress.com/2015/12/learning-by-doing-graham-gibbs.pdf (Accessed online on the 10th of December 2020).

Gibbs, A. (2012) Focus groups and group interviews. In: Arthur, J., Waring, M., Coe, R., and Hedges, L.V. (2012) pp. 186-192. *Research Methods and Methodologies in Education.* London: SAGE Publishing.

Glenn, M. (2020) How can I develop a better understanding of my practice? In: McDonagh, C., Roche, M., Sullivan, B., and Glenn, M. (2020) *Enhancing practice through classroom research.* A Teacher's Guide to Professional Development. London: Routledge.

Grin, J., Hassink, J., Karadzic, V., and Moors, E. H. M. (2018) *Transformative Leadership and Contextual Change*. [online] Available from: https://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:86-ZXn-vdtkJ:https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/10/7/2159/pdf+&cd=6&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=ie (Accessed online on the 24th May 2021).

Goleman, D., Boyatzis, R., and McKee, A (2002) *Primal Leadership*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

Goleman, D. (2004) Emotional Intelligence: What makes a leader? *Harvard Business Review*. [online] Available from: http://athena.ecs.csus.edu/~buckley/CSc233/What-makes-a-Leader-HBR.pdf (Accessed on the 16th of November 2020).

Goleman, D. (2006). *Emotional intelligence: Why it can matter more than IQ.* [online] Available from: https://www.academia.edu/37329006/Emotional_Intelligence_Why_it_Can_Matter_More_Than_IQ_by_Daniel_Goleman (Accessed online on the 20th of November 2021).

Goleman, D., and Boyatzis, R. (2017) *Emotional Intelligence Has 12 Elements. Which Do You Need to Work On?* [online] Available from: https://hbr.org/2017/02/emotional-intelligence-has-12-elements-which-do-you-need-to-work-on (Accessed online on the 16th of November 2020).

Gotto IV, G. S., Turnbull, A., Summers, J. A., and Blue-Banning, A. (2008) *Community of Practice, Development Manual, A step-by-step guide for designing and developing a Community of Practice. Rehabilitation Research and Training Centre on Policies*

Affecting Families and Children with Disabilities. [Online]. Available from: https://ktdrr.org/resources/rush/copmanual/CoP_Manual.pdf (Accessed online on the 10th of February 2021).

Guffey, M. E. & Loewy, D., (2014). *Business Communication: Process &Product (8th ed.),* Stamford, CT: Cengage Learning.

Hackman, M. Z., and Johnson, C.E (2014) Leadership*: Communication Perspective.* Illinois: Waveland Press.

Hallet, E. (2013) We all share a common vision and passion; Early years' professionals reflect upon their leadership of practice role. *Journal of Early Childhood Research, 11(3),   p.   312-325.* [online]   Available   from: http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.819.2457&rep=rep1&type=pdf (Accessed online on the 21st of November 2020).

Hargreaves, A., and O'Connor, M. T. (2018) Leading collaborative professionalism [online].   Available   from: http://www.andyhargreaves.com/uploads/5/2/9/2/5292616/seminar_series_274-april2018.pdf (Accessed online on the 21st of May 2021).

Hogg, A. M., Adams, D., Otten, S., and Hinkle, S. (2004) *The Social Identity Perspective: Intergroup Relations, Self-Conception, and Small Groups*. [online] Available   from: https://www.academia.edu/24194204/The_Social_Identity_Perspective_Intergroup_Relations_Self_Conception_and_Small_Groups (Accessed online on the 21st November 2020).

Hujala, E. (2004) Dimensions of Leadership in Childcare Context. *Scandiviavian Journal of Educational Research, Vol. 48, No, 1, February 2004.* [online] Available from: http://people.uta.fi/eeva.hujala/Hujala_2004.pdf   (Accessed online on the 22nd of November 2020).

Iaquinto, B., Ison, R., Faggian, R. (2010). Creating communities of practice: Scoping purposeful design. *Journal of Knowledge Management, 15(1), 4–21.* [Online] Available from:https://www.researchgate.net/publication/220363252_Creating_communities_of_practice_Scoping_purposeful_design (Accessed online on the 20th of March 2021).

Jäppinen, K. A. (2014, p. 82) *Collaborative Educational Leadership: The Emergence of Human Interactional Sense-Making Process as a Complex System.* [online] Available from: https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1074492.pdf (Accessed online on the 12th of June 2021).

Kagan, S. L., and Bowman, B. T. (1997) *Leadership in Early Care and Education* (23-33). Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children. [online]   Available   from: https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.456.1120&rep=rep1&type=pdf#:~:text=As%20noted%20in%20the%20National,%2C%20administrative%20leadership%2C%20advocacy%20leadership%2C (Accessed online on the 5th November 2020).

Kagan, S. L., and Neuman, M. J. (1997). Conceptual Leadership. In: Kagan, S. L., and Bowman, B. T. (1997) *Leadership in Early Care and Education* (23-33). Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children. [online] Available from: https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.456.1120&rep=rep1&type=pdf#:~:text=As%20noted%20in%20the%20National,%2C%20administrative%20leadership%2C%20advocacy%20leadership%2C (Accessed online on the 5th November 2020).

Kapur, R. (2018) *Barriers to Effective Communication.* [online] Available from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/323794732_Barriers_to_Effective_Communication (Accessed online on the 11th of November 2020).

Kaushik, V., and Walsh, C. A. (2019) *Article Pragmatism as a Research Paradigm and Its Implications for Social Work Research.* [online] Available from: https://ideas.repec.org/a/gam/jscscx/v8y2019i9p255-d264760.html (Accessed online on the 7th December 2020).

Kemmis, S., McTaggart, R., and Nixon, R. (2014, p.6) The *Action Research Planner, Doing Critical Participatory Action Research.* New York: Springer publishing. [online] Available from: http://202.91.10.51:8080/xmlui/bitstream/handle/123456789/874/The%20Action%20R

esearch%20Planner%202014.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y (Accessed online on the 2nd December 2020).

Kemmis, S. (2012) Researching Educational Praxis: Spectator and Participant perspectives. *British Educational Research Journal, Vol 38. No. 6. December 2012, pp. 885-905.* [online] Available from: https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Researching-Educational-Praxis%3A-Spectator-and-Kemmis/6fc175fcd1ab81ddd9852d3304f348ff72caf5f3 (Accessed online on the 9th December 2020).

Kemmis, S. (2009) *Action Research as a practice changing practice.* [online] Available from:

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/233133766_Action_research_as_a_practice-based_practice (Accessed online on the 2nd of December 2020).

Kemmis, K., and McTaggart, R. (2000) Participatory Action Research. In Denzin, N., and Lincoln, Y. (2000) *Handbook of Qualitative Research (eds).* London: Sage.

Kemmis, S., and McTaggart, R. (1992) *The Action Research Planner (3rd Edition).* Geelong: Deakin University.

Kemmis, S., and McTaggart, R. (1988). *The Action Research Planner (2nd Edition).* Geelong: Deakin University.

Kets de Vries, M.F.R. 2005. The dangers of feeling like a fake. *Harvard Business Review: 83(9): 108–16.* [online] Available from: https://hbr.org/2005/09/the-dangers-of-feeling-like-a-fake (Accessed online on the 16th of June 2021).

Kivunja, C., and Kuyini, A. B. (2017) Understanding and Applying Research Paradigms in Educational Contexts. *International Journal of Higher Education Vol. 6, No. 5; 2017.* [online] Available from: https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1154775.pdf (Accessed online on the 3rd of December 2020).

Klevering, N., and McNae, R. (2018) Making sense of leadership in early childhood education: Tensions and complexities between concepts and practices. [online] Available from: https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/226933214.pdf (Accessed online on the 20th of January 2021)

Kodden, B. (2019) *Why Peter Drucker was wrong. The Meaning of True Leadership.* [online] Available from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/337137085_Why_Peter_Drucker_was_wrong _The_Meaning_of_True_Leadership (Accessed online on the 5th January 2021).

Koshy, V. (2010) *Action Research for Improving Educational Practice. A Step-by-step guide, Second Edition.* London: SAGE Publishing.

Kuhn, T. S. (1962) *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions.* [online] Available from: https://folk.ntnu.no/krill/bioko-references/Kuhn%201962.pdf (Accessed online on the 3rd of December 2020).

Kumar, R. (2011) *Research Methodology, a step-by-step guide for beginners, third edition.* London: SAGE Publications.

Kumbakonam, R. U. (2016) Communication Barriers. *Conference: National Conference on Communication Skills. At Vijayawada. Volume, 3, Special Issue, 2.* [online] Available from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/304038097_COMMUNICATION_BARRIER S (Accessed online on the 10th of November 2020).

Lasater, K. (2016) School Leader Relationships: The need for Explicit Training on Rapport, Trust, and Communication. *Journal of School Administration Research and Development, Winter, 2016.* [online] Available from: https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ115855.pdf&ved=2ahUKEwj63uf3iZvtAhXXTxUIH b5GAfYQFjADegQICRAM&usg=AOvVaw2aw0NWoVO2P1lWZ_cLegbJ (Accessed online on the 14th November 2020).

Lave, J., and Wenger, E. (1991) *Situated Learning Legitimate Peripheral Participation.* New York: Cambridge University Press.

Leavy Shankman, M., Allen, S. J., and Haber-Curran, P. (2015) *Emotionally Intelligent Leadership: A Guide for Students.* San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Lewin, K., Lippitt, R., and White, R., (1939), 'Patterns of Aggressive Behaviour in Experimentally Created "Social Climates"', *Journal of Social Psychology vol 10(2) pp 271 – 299.* [online] Available at: https://www-proquest-

com.jproxy.nuim.ie/docview/1290670609?accountid=12309&pq-origsite=summon (Accessed online on 22nd of February 2021).

Lewin, K. (1946) Action Research and Minority Problems. *Journal of Social Issues, 2 (4), pp. 34-36.* [online] Available from: https://www.cscd.osaka-u.ac.jp/user/rosaldo/K_Lewin_Action_research_minority_1946.pdf (Accessed online on the 8th of December 2020).

Li, L. C., Grimshaw, J. M., Nielsen, C., Judd, M., Coyte, P. C., and Graham, I. D. (2009) Evolution of Wenger's concept of community of practice. *Implementation Sci 4, 11.* [online] Available from: https://implementationscience.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/1748-5908-4-11) (Accessed online on the 18th of March 2021).

Lindon, J., and Trodd, L. (2016) *Reflective Practice and Early Years' Professionalism, Linking Theory to Practice, third edition.* London: Hodder Education.

Lundenberg, F. C. (2010) Communication: The Process, Barriers, And Improving Effectiveness, *Schooling Volume 1, Number 1, 2010.* [online] Available from: http://www.nationalforum.com/Electronic%20Journal%20Volumes/Lunenburg,%20Fred%20C,%20Communication%20Schooling%20V1%20N1%202010.pdf (Accessed online on the 23rd October 2020).

Luthra, A., (2015). *Effective Leadership is all about Communicating Effectively: Connecting Leadership and Communication.* [online] Available from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/307598681_Effective_Leadership_is_all_about_Communicating_Effectively_Connecting_Leadership_and_Communication/stats (Accessed online on the 15th of May 2021).

Mason, M (2008) What Is Complexity Theory and What Are Its Implications for Educational Change?, *Educational Philosophy and Theory, 40:1, 35-49,* [ONLINE] Available from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/227843165_What_Is_Complexity_Theory_and_What_Are_Its_Implications_for_Educational_Change (Accessed online on the 22nd of May 2021).

Masry, T. E., and Saas, M. (2018) On the Cultivation of Their Community of Practice: A Case Study of EFL Malaysian Pre-Service Teachers. *The Qualitative Report 2018*

Volume 23, Number 4, Article 11, 952-977. [online] Available from: https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol23/iss4/17/ (Accessed online on the 18th of March 2021).

Mathers, N., Fox, N., and Hunn, A. (2009) *Surveys and Questionnaires. The NIHR RDS for the East Midlands / Yorkshire & the Humber.* [Online]. Available from: https://www.rds-yh.nihr.ac.uk/wpcontent/uploads/2013/05/12_Surveys_and_Questionnaires_Revision_2009.pdf (Accessed online on the 18th of April 2021).

Maynooth University (2018) *Maynooth University Data Protection Policy.* [online] Available from: https://macmorris.maynoothuniversity.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/DATA-PROTECTION-POLICY-180518_0-1.pdf (Accessed online on the 10th of October 2020).

Maynooth University (2020) *Ethics Policy for Social Research carried out involving human participants.* [online] Available from: https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/sites/default/files/assets/document//Maynooth%20University%20%20Research%20Ethics%20Policy%20%28Updated%20March%202020%29.pdf (Accessed online on the 10th October 2020).

McClean, T. (2019) *Models for Reflection, The Institute, Training and Education for the Guernsey's Health and Social Sciences.* [online] Available from: http://theinstitute.gg/CHttpHandler.ashx?id=117767&p=0 (Accessed online on the 10th December 2020).

McDonagh, C. (2020) What to do about questions identified In: McDonagh, C., Roche, M., Sullivan, B., and Glenn, M. (2020) *Enhancing Practice Through Classroom Research, A Teacher's Guide to Professional Development.* Second Edition. ed. London: Routledge.

McDonagh, C., Roche, M., Sullivan, B., and Glenn, M. (2020) *Enhancing Practice Through Classroom Research. A Teacher's Guide to Professional Development.* Second Edition. London: Routledge.

McDowall Clark, R. (2012) 'I've never thought of myself as a leader but…': the Early Years Professional and catalytic leadership, *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal, 20:3, 391-401.* [online] Available from: https://www-tandfonline-

com.jproxy.nuim.ie/doi/full/10.1080/1350293X.2012.704762 (Accessed online on the 19th of June 2021).

McNiff, J. (2014) *Writing and Doing Action Research.* London: SAGE Publications.

McNiff, J. (2017) *Action Research for Professional Development, Concise advice for new and experienced action researchers. Second Edition.* Dorset: September Books.

Merton, R. K., and Kendall, P. (1946) The focused interview. *American Journal of Sociology Vol. 51, No. 6 (May 1946), pp. 541-557.* [online] Available from: https://www.jstor.org/stable/2770681?seq=1 (Accessed online on the 12th of December 2020).

Mittal, S. (2018) Barriers to Communication. *International Journal of Advanced Research and Development. Volume, 3, Issue 1, January 2018. 243-245.* [online] Available from: https://www.advancedjournal.com/archives/2018/vol3/issue1/3-1-24 (Accessed on the 12th of November 2020).

Moloney, M. (2015) *Untangling the knots – [k]not easy: professional identity in the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector. A paper prepared for the symposium, Early Educational Alignment: Reflecting on Context, Curriculum and Pedagogy.* [online].   Available   from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/283316786_Untangling_the_knots_knot_easy _professional_identity_in_the_early_childhood_care_and_education_sector (Accessed online on the 24th of April 2021).

Moloney, M., Sims., M, Rothe, A., Buettner, C., Sonter, L., Waniganayake, M., Oazo, M., Calder, P., and Girlich, S. (2019) Resisting Neoliberalism: Professionalisation of Early Childhood Education and Care. *International Journal of Elementary Education. Vol. 8, No. 1, 2019, pp. 1-10.* [online] Available from: https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/9f50/808beb4de0d1bda8ee861ae9c247f9648f64.pdf (Accessed online on the 24th of April 2021).

Moon, J. A. (2004) *Handbook of Reflective and Experiential Learning: Theory and Practice.* Routledge: London.

Moon, J. A. (2006) *Learning journals: A handbook for reflective practice and professional development (2nd ed.).* London: Routledge.

Mooney, E. (2020/21) *My Reflective Journal August 2020 to May 2021*. Unpublished.

Moriarty, M. (2019) *Every Leader's Reality Guide, Strategies to Release your True Leadership Potential.* Co Kerry: Hillglens Publishing.

Morrison, K. (2010) Complexity Theory, School Leadership and Management: Questions for Theory and Practice. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership 38(3) 374–393* [online] Available from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/258135337_Complexity_Theory_School_Leadership_and_Management_Questions_for_Theory_and_Practice

Nguyen, T., White, S., Hall, K., Bell, R., and Ballentine, W. (2019) Emotional Intelligence and Managerial Communication. *American Journal of Management, Vol, 19(2), 2019.* [online] Available from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/334593926_Emotional_Intelligence_and_Managerial_Communication (Accessed online on the 16th of November 2020).

Northouse, P. G. (2016). *Leadership: Theory and practice (7th ed.).* Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Oc, B. (2018) Contextual leadership: A systematic review of how contextual factors shape leadership and its outcomes. *The Leadership Quarterly, 29 (1): 218–35.* [Online]. Available from: https://www-sciencedirect-com.jproxy.nuim.ie/science/article/pii/S1048984317300413?via%3Dihub (Accessed online on the 18th of June 2021).

Ondondo, E. A. (2015) Acquired Language Disorders as Barriers to Effective Communication. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies, Vol. 5, No. 7, pp. 1324-1329, July 2015.* [online] Available from: https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/49be/8214710ecca5b51536923ad9e1ab6d8747bc.pdf (Accessed online on the 23rd of October 2020).

Piercey, D. (2010) Why Don't Teachers Collaborate? A Leadership Conundrum. *Phi Delta Kappan, 92 (1), pp. 54-56 [online].* Available from: https://bettereducate.com/uploads/file/40949_CollaborationTime_40665WhyDontTeachersCollaborateALeadershipConundrumWhyDontTeachersCollaborate.pdf (Accessed online on the 16th May 2021).

Phelps, R. (2005). The potential of reflective journals in studying complexity 'in

action'. Complicity: An International Journal of Complexity and Education, 2, 37–54. [Online]. Available from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/44151863_The_Potential_of_Reflective_Journals_in_Studying_Complexity_'In_Action' (Accessed online on the 2nd of February 2021).

Polizzi, S.J., Zhu, Y., Reid, J.W., Ofem, B., Salisbury, S., Beeth, M., Roehrig, G., Mohr-Schroeder, M., Sheppard, K., and Rushton, G. Science, and mathematics teacher communities of practice: social influences on discipline-based identity and self-efficacy beliefs. *International Journal of STEM Education 8, 30 (2021).* [Online]. Available from: https://stemeducationjournal.springeropen.com/articles/10.1186/s40594-021-00275-2

Quennerstedt, M. and Maivorsdotter, N., (2017). The role of learning theory in learning to teach. In C. Ennis (Ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Physical Education Pedagogies, (p. 417-427).* London: Routledge.

Radovic Markovic, M., and Salamzadeh, A. (2018) *The importance of communication in business management. Conference: The 7th International Scientific Conference on Employment, Education and Entrepreneurship At: Belgrade, Serbia. October 2018.* [online] Available from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/328630849_The_Importance_of_Communication_in_Business_Management (Accessed online on the 21st of October 2020).

Roche, M. (2020) Identifying an area of professional concern or interest. In: McDonagh, C., Roche, M., Sullivan, B., and Glenn, M. (2020) *Enhancing practice through classroom research. A Teacher's Guide to Professional Development.* London: Routledge.

Rodd, J. (2013) *Leadership in early childhood: The pathway to professionalism.* Crow's Nest: Allen & Unwin.

Ruben, B. D., and Gigliotti, R. A. (2016) 'Leadership as Social Influence: An Expanded View of Leadership Communication Theory and Practice', *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies*, *23(4), pp. 467–479.* [online] Available from: https://journals-sagepub-com.jproxy.nuim.ie/doi/full/10.1177/1548051816641876?utm_source=summon&utm_

medium=discovery-provider#articleCitationDownloadContainer (Accessed online on the 21st October 2020).

Ryan, A. (2015) Methodology: Collecting Data. In: Walsh, T., and Ryan, A. (2015) *Writing your thesis, a guide for postgraduate students.* Maynooth: MACE Press.

Schön, A. (1992) *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action.* [online] Available from: https://www-taylorfrancis-com.jproxy.nuim.ie/books/reflective-practitioner-donald-sch%C3%B6n/10.4324/9781315237473 (Accessed online on the 9th December 2020).

Serrat, O. (2017) *Understanding and Developing Emotional Intelligence. Knowledge* Solutions. [online] Available from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/318018981_Understanding_and_Developing_ Emotional_Intelligence (Accessed online on the 15th of November 2020).

Sims, M., M. Waniganayake and D. Hadley (2017), "Educational leadership: An evolving role in Australian early childhood settings", *Educational Management Administration & Leadership, Vol. 46/6, pp. 960-979,* [online] Available from: https://researchers.mq.edu.au/en/publications/educational-leadership-an-evolving-role-in-australian-early-child (Accessed online on the 12th of December 2020).

Siraj-Blatchford, I., and Manni, L. (2007) *Effective Leadership in the Early Years Sector Study,* Institute of Education, University of London, London. [online] Available from: https://trove.nla.gov.au/work/31978691?versionId=38825906+193527485. (Accessed online on the 18th of November 2020).

Smith, C. (2013) *The Seven Barriers to Communication.* [online] Available from: https://opin.ca/article/seven-barriers-communication. (Accessed online on the 14th of November 2020).

Smith, S. U., Hayes, S., & Shea, P (2017). A critical review of the use of Wenger's Community of Practice (CoP) theoretical framework in online and blended learning research, 2000- 2014, Online Learning 21(1), 209-237. [online] Available from: https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1140262.pdf (Accessed online on the 19th of February 2021).

Starratt, R.J. (2009), Ethical leadership, in Davies, B. (Ed), *The essentials of school leadership, 2nd edition.* Los Angeles: Sage Publishing.

Strehmel, P. (2016) p.348-355 Leadership in Early Childhood Education - Theoretical and Empirical Approaches. *Varhaiskasvatuksen Tiedelehti Journal of Early Childhood Education Research Volume 5 Issue 2 2016, 344–355.* [online] Available from: https://jecer.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Strehmel-issue5-2.pdf (Accessed online on the 8th of November 2020).

Sullivan, B., Glenn, M., Roche, M., and McDonagh, C. (2016) *Introduction to Critical Reflection and Action for Teacher Researchers.* London: Routledge.

Sullivan, B. (2020) Generating evidence from data. In: McDonagh, C., Roche, M., Sullivan, B., and Glenn, M. (2020) *Enhancing Practice Through Classroom Research, A Teacher's Guide to Professional Development.* Second Edition. ed. London: Routledge.

Tench, R. (2016) Emotional Intelligence: An Essential Leadership Trait for Educators, *The William & Mary Educational Review: Vol. 4: Issue. 1, Article 2.* [online] Available from: https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/235396868.pdf (Accessed online on the 4th of November 2020).

Tintore, M., and Aris, N. (2015) Improving school leadership through communication, *Conference: 17th Annual Global Conference of the International Leadership Association (ILA). Leading across borders and generations, October 2015.* [online] Available from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/301891549_Improving_school_leadership_through_communication (Accessed online on the 4th of November 2020).

Tobin, J. (2014). Management and leadership issues for school building leaders. *NCPEA International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation, 9, 1-14.* [online] Available from: https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1024110. (Accessed online on the 3rd of November 2020).

Tomkin, J. H., Beilstein, S. O., Morphew, J, W., and Herman, G, L. (2019) Evidence that communities of practice are associated with active learning in large STEM lectures. *International Journal of STEM Education volume 6, Article number: 1 (2019)* [Online].

Available from:

https://stemeducationjournal.springeropen.com/articles/10.1186/s40594-018-0154-z

(Accessed online on the 4th of April 2021).

Urban, M., Vandenbroeck, M., Lazzari, A., Peeters, J. & van Laere, K. (2011). *Competence Requirements in Early Education and Care (CORE). A Study for the European Commission Directorate-General for Education and Culture. Final Report. Brussels: European Commission, Directorate-General for Education and Culture*. [online] Available from: https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED534599.pdf (Accessed online on the 21st of November 2020).

van Rooyen, N. L. (2018) *Developing a Model to Overcome the Organisational Communication Deficiencies that exist in the PAM industry*. [online] Available from: https://scholar.sun.ac.za/bitstream/handle/10019.1/103425/vanrooyen_developing_2018 .pdf?isAllowed=y&sequence=1. (Accessed online on the 1st of November 2020).

Vijayadevar, S. D. S. (2020) Developing Collaborative Leadership Practices in the Singapore Early Childhood Education (ECE) Context through Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). [online] Available from: https://researcharchive.vuw.ac.nz/xmlui/bitstream/handle/10063/9070/thesis_access.pdf ?sequence=1 (Accessed online on the 15th of March 2021).

Vincent, K., Steynorm A., Waagsaether, K., and Cull, T. (2018), Communities of practice: One size does not fit all. *Climate Services, Volume 11, 2018, Pages 72-77,* [online]. Available from: https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2405880716300553 (Accessed online on the 18th of March 2021).

Vrieling, E., van den Beemt, A., and de Laat, M. (2019) Facilitating social learning in teacher education: a case study, *Studies in Continuing Education, 41:1, 76-93* [online]. Available from: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/0158037X.2018.1466779 (Accessed online on the 15th of May 2021).

Vygotsky, L. (1978) *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processed*. London: Harvard Press University.

Waniganayake, M. (2014) Being and becoming Early Childhood Leaders: Reflections on Leadership Studies in Early Childhood Education and the Future Leadership Research Agenda. *Varhaiskasvatukse Tiedelehti Journal of Early Childhood Education Research, Vol.3, No.1, 2014, p.65−81*. [online] Available from: https://jecer.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Waniganayake-issue3-1.pdf. (Accessed online on the 19th of November 2020).

Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Wenger, E., McDermott, R. A., and Snyder, W. (2002) *Cultivating Communities of Practice: A Guide to Managing Knowledge*. Boston: Harvard Business Press.

Wenger, E., and Snyder, W. (2000) Communities of Practice: The Organizational Frontier. *Harvard Business Review, January–February 2000.* [Online]. Available from: https://hbr.org/2000/01/communities-of-practice-the-organizational-frontier (Accessed online on the 15th of April 2021).

Wenger, E., and Lave, J. (2015) Communities of practice, a brief introduction. [online] Available from: https://wenger-trayner.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/07-Brief-introduction-to-communities-of-practice.pdf (Accessed online on the 3rd March 2021).

Wenger-Trayner, E., and Wenger-Trayner, B. (2014) *Learning in a landscape of practice, A framework*. London: Routledge.

Whitehead, J. (2019) Action research for self-study and living educational theories. In: Zuber Skerritt, O., and Wood, L. (eds.) *Action learning and action research: genres and approaches*. [online] Available from: http://insight.cumbria.ac.uk/id/eprint/4139/1/Whitehead_ActionResearchFor.pdf (Accessed online on the 2nd of December 2020).

Whitehead, J. (2018) *Living Theory Research as a Way of Life.* Bath: Brown Dog.

Whitehead, J, (2016) *Embracing the 'messiness' of action research in enhancing your educational influences in learning with the Network Educational Action Research Ireland (NEARI). Notes for a presentation by Jack Whitehead to a meeting of NEARI in Dublin on the 16th of January 2016.* [online] Available

from: http://www.actionresearch.net/writings/jack/jacknearidublin120116.p (Accessed online on the 25th of February 2021).

Whitehead, J. (1989) Creating a living educational theory from questions of the kind, "How do I improve my practice?", *Cambridge Journal of Education, 19 (1): 41-52.* [online] Available from: https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ423850 (Accessed online on the 23rd of September 2021).

Wong, D., and Waniganayake, M. (2013) Mentoring as a Leadership Development Strategy in Early Childhood Education. *Researching Leadership in Early Childhood Education, 163-180.* [online] Available from: https://ilrfec.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/67/2014/02/art_09Wong-Waniganayake.pdf. (Accessed online on the 12th of May 2021).

Wood, J.T. (2009) *Communication in our lives: Communication in small groups: theory, process, skills. Fifth Edition.* Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

Zembylas, M. (2018) Rethinking the demands of 'preferred' teacher professional identities: Ethical and political implications. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 76 (2018) 78-85.* Available from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/328665214_Rethinking_the_demands_for_'preferred'_teacher_professional_identities_Ethical_and_political_implications (Accessed online on the 23rd February 2021).

Appendices:

Appendix 1 – Letter to the Board of Management:

Roinn Froebel Don Bhun- agus Luath- Oideachas, Ollscoil Mhá Nuad
Maynooth University Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education

29/10/2020

Dear Chairperson,

I am writing to you to inform you that I intend on conducting a self-study action research project within the early years' setting of the ************. This project will inform my thesis for my Master of Education (Research in Practice), which I have undertaken with Maynooth University. This research project is based on improving my practice as an early educational leader, with a clear focus on critical reflection and identifying and living my professional values.

Should some or indeed all of the early years' team agree to partake within this study, it will not affect their daily practice or learning within the setting. I believe that observing a colleague engaging in a self-study research project would support our team in their own professional journey.

During the research process, I will abide by the Maynooth University Ethical Guidelines of Human Studies and policies and procedures of this early years' setting. These will include confidentiality, GDPR and my interactions with my fellow educators. The centre will not be mentioned but a brief and vague description will be given. This will include location (rural/urban), type of early years' setting (community), number of educators and families within the setting and the implemented curriculum approach.

I hope to start this research in January and continue it until mid-May2021 when I will begin to analyse my data. I will continue to communicate with the participants throughout this journey. If you have an interest in the findings of the research, I will compile a synopsis to share.

Should you have any questions or wish for me to clarify any aspects of my research please do not hesitate to contact me. I have attached my contact details below.

Yours Sincerely,

Eimear Mooney   eimear.mooney.2017@mumail.ie

Appendix 2– Letter and information sheet for my colleagues:

Roinn Froebel Don Bhun- agus Luath- Oideachas, Ollscoil Mhá Nuad
Maynooth University Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education

29/10/2020

Dear Colleagues,

I am a student on the Master of Education programme at Maynooth University. As part of this programme, I am doing a research project. The focus of my research is 'How can I, as an early educational leader cultivate a community of practice in my setting?'

In order to do this, I intend to carry out research with you, my colleagues. The data will be collected using focus groups, one-to-one interviews, and questionnaires to gain your views my practice. Your name and the name of the setting will not be included in the thesis that I will write at the end of the research. Should this research be published or shared with a research conference or with my fellow students, your identity and that of the setting will remain confidential. Please note that if you decide to participate, you are entitled to withdraw from the research process at any stage. All information will be confidential, and information will be destroyed in a stated timeframe in accordance with the University guidelines. The correct guidelines will be complied with when carrying out this research. The research will not be carried out until approval is granted by the Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education.

I have enclosed an information sheet of the planned research with this letter and letter of consent, should you agree to participate in this research project.

If you have any queries on any part of this research project or wish for me to clarify any details, please feel free to contact me by email at eimear.mooney.2017@mumail.ie

Yours faithfully,

Eimear Mooney.

**Roinn Froebel Don Bhun- agus Luath- Oideachas,
Ollscoil Mhá Nuad
Maynooth University Froebel Department of Primary
and Early Childhood Education**

Information Sheet

Who is this information sheet for?

This information sheet is for colleagues.

What is this Action Research Project about?

Educators undertaking the Master of Education in the Froebel Department of Primary
and Early Childhood Education at Maynooth University, are required to conduct an
action research project, examining an area of their own practice as a student and
educator. This project will involve an analysis of the educator's own practice. Data will
be generated using my daily reflective journal, focus groups, questionnaires, and one-
to-one meetings with participants. The educator is then required to produce a thesis
documenting this action research project.

What is the research question?

How can I, as an early educational leader cultivate a community of practice in my
setting?

What sorts of methods will be used?

I plan on using focus groups, questionnaires, and interviews with you in order to gain as
much information relating to my practice as an educational leader within our early
childhood care and education practice and setting. I will also be using my own
reflective journal to track my own practice and progression.

Who else will be involved?

The study will be carried out by myself as part of the Master of Education course in the
Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education under the supervision
of Mrs. Annette J. Kearns. The thesis will be submitted for assessment to the module
leader Dr Bernadette Wrynn and will be examined by the Department staff. The
external examiners will also access the final thesis.

What are you being asked to do?

You are being asked for your consent to permit me to undertake this study with you as
participants. In all cases the data that is collected will be treated with the utmost
confidentiality and the analysis will be reported anonymously. The data captured will
only be used for the purpose of the research as part of the Master of Education in the

Froebel Department, Maynooth University and will be destroyed in accordance with university guidelines.

What level of engagement should I expect if I choose to participate?

As stated, I plan on using questionnaires, focus groups and one-to-one interviews to gather my data. The amount of time spent engaging in all of the above will vary, however, for one-to-one meetings and debriefing sessions, I intend to spend on spending approximately half an hour and for focus meetings I intend to spend on spending approximately forty-five minutes. For team meetings, I do not intend for them to last for more than an hour.

If the ECEC setting closes due to COVID-19 Government restrictions for example, will the research continue?

Yes, I will continue my research journey and plan to continue my data collection. This would mean that rather than meeting in person we would meet remotely via Zoom or Microsoft teams. However, due to policies and procedures of the setting, discussions relating to children are not permitted on such platforms as GDPR (General Data Protection Regulations) cannot be guaranteed. For the questionnaires, it would mean using an online platform such as Survey Monkey, which would ensure that your anonymity and the confidentially of your answers remains.

If I participate, will it be stressful?

We are all experiencing very challenging times and I do not wish to add to anyone's stress. I intend to make on making the process as stress-free as possible and you can choose to withdraw from the research at any time.

How will you record the data?

For questionnaires, I will record the answers. For focus meetings or one-to-one interviews, I, with your consent voice record them and type out the transcript. You will not be identified in these recordings. I will use pseudonyms (a fictitious name) for each participant.

How will the data be stored?

I will keep all hard copies of questionnaires in a locked cabinet, I will then upload the findings onto my laptop in a secure and password protected folder. After ten years, I will shred all the information and permanently delete the files.

If this research is published or shared either verbally, written or through a conference or within the college with other students would my identity and that of the ECEC setting be revealed?

No, I would ensure that all details remain anonymous.

Can I agree to participate and choose to opt out at a later stage?

Yes, it is completely within your rights to choose to opt out of the study.

If I have any more questions, how can I contact you?

My contact details are as follows; eimear.mooney.2017@mumail.ie

Appendix 3 – Participants Consent Form:

Roinn Froebel Don Bhun- agus Luath-Oideachas,   Ollscoil Mhá Nuad
Maynooth University Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education

29/10/2020

Participant consent form

I have read the information provided in the attached letter and all of my questions have been answered. I voluntarily agree to my participation in this study. I am aware that I will receive a copy of this consent form for my information.

Participant's Signature_____

Date: _____

Appendix 4 – Baseline Questionnaire.

Roinn Froebel Don Bhun- agus Luath- Oideachas, Ollscoil Mhá Nuad

Maynooth University Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education

This questionnaire is to establish my current communication methods and their effectiveness. The term management refers to me and my practice, **not** the management team. Please answer all the questions anonymously, once complete please submit.

Q1. Is communication between management important?

Yes   No

Why? _____

_____

Q2. Is communication between the management and team in this setting effective?

Yes   No

Q3. What is the most frequently used communication system used by management?

Memo   Verbal   Email   Text

Q4. What do you feel is the most effective method?

Memo   Verbal   Email   Text

Which is your preference? _____

Q5. In your experience is the manager approachable?

Yes   No

Please explain_____

_____

Q6. While communicating with the manager, do you feel you are being respected, listened to, and heard?

Yes ☐   No ☐

Please explain. _____

_____

Q7. Where do most discussions occur?

The room   The yard   The office   The hallway

☐   ☐   ☐   ☐

Q8. Where do you feel discussions should occur?

_____

Q9. What are the barriers that impede effective communication within the setting?

Distraction   Lack of time   Lack of awareness   Lack of emotional awareness

☐   ☐   ☐   ☐

Q10. What suggestions would you make to help the manager to improve communication?

_____

_____

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire.

Roinn Froebel Don Bhun- agus Luath- Oideachas, Ollscoil Mhá Nuad

Maynooth University Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education

Appendix 5 - Timetable to meet with participants one-to-one.

From the 1st of February until the 26th of February

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
10:30am AB	10:30am EF	10:30am IJ	11:00am MN	11:00am QR
2pm CD	2pm GH	2pm KL	1:00pm OP	

Appendix 6 – Transcript of one-to-one meetings:

1ˢᵗ of February 2021 – One-to-one transcript with AB.

This one-to-one began with a discussion on the personal challenges faced due to the pandemic.

EM: How do you feel about being back to work?

AB: I was a little nervous but it's nice to be busy.

EM: How are things in your room?

AB: We've only five children, so we get to spend more time with them.

EM: Have they settled back in OK?

AB: Yes, they are older, so they know settled quickly. Only a child was a little upset, but she said because her brother is at home, and she wanted to stay with him. But I distracted her, and she was fine after.

EM: It's hard when they know their siblings are at home.

AB: She knew he didn't have school, she's very smart.

EM: Do you feel there are any issues in the room?

AB: No thankfully everything is fine. I'm just trying to make sure to stick to the updated COVID-19 policies.

EM: There's a lot to them, but if you need any support or have any questions, please let me know.

AB: I am just wondering about the Wage Subsidy.

Discussion continued regarding wage subsidy.

EM: Have you any other questions?

AB: No, I'm good.

EM: Will we leave it there and we can check in next week?

AB: Yes, that's grand.

8ᵗʰ of February 2021 – One-to-one transcript with AB.

EM: How are you?

AB: Good, we are busier in the room now that more which is good.

EM: You've ten children in the room? How are they settling in?

AB: Good, they are happy to see their friends and the other children are happy that the room is busier.

EM: How are you finding the COVID-19 policies? You mentioned before that you found there was a lot to them.

AB: No, it's fine. I am used to them now so it's easier. I just want to make sure that I am doing it right.

EM: Well, like I said if you've any concerns please let me know.

AB: No, I don't. It's just ensuring that the cleaning is done properly now that the room is busier. Before the children didn't play with all the toys but now, they are working their way around the room (Laughs).

EM: Are you using the dishwasher?

AB: It's harder with smaller toys because they'll block the drain.

EM: I could get laundry bags and we could put some toys in there?

AB: That would work, yeah.

EM: Do you feel there are any challenges?

AB: No, just making sure the cleaning is done properly but if we can use the dishwasher that will take the pressure off.

EM: Anything else you'd like to discuss?

AB: No, I'm happy.

1st of February 2021 - One-to-one transcript with CD.

This one-to-one began with a discussion on the personal challenges faced due to the pandemic.

EM: How are you finding being back in the work?

CD: I would rather be busy in work.

EM: How do you think the children are finding it to be back?

CD: Some are happy to be back, and others are struggling, like you can see they are tired when they arrive in the morning, and some aren't eating fruit or vegetables.

EM: Why do you think that is?

CD: Well, they probably had a more relaxed routine at home with bedtimes and because schools were closed. With their diets, their parents had said they didn't eat much for them at home like fruit or vegetables. So, we have to try and get them back into a routine. I know from my own two, that routines were slack over the lockdown.

EM: So how will you get these children back into a routine?

CD: It will be a slow process because I've noticed some get tired after dinner when we try to go outside.

EM: Do you think a quiet time after dinner would help them recharge?

CD: It could do, like just read a story with them or play calm music?

EM: You could try both and use the tent for those who want some time alone. It might just help them recharge after dinner.

CD: That's it, I was talking to non-participant and we're going to do a food tasting day again for those who are struggling to eat fruit and veg. We also spoke to the cook about ordering more fruit for smoothies.

EM: I think that's a great idea.

CD: It's just to try and get them back on track with their diets.

EM: Have you mentioned the tiredness and refusal of food to the families?

CD: Yes, they agreed that the routine was much looser over lockdown and the children won't eat certain foods at home. Like even their fine motor skills with using cutlery has regressed and sitting at the table. Some parents said the children won't use cutlery or sit during meals, so we have to try and get them back in the habit.

EM: During mealtimes are yourself and non-participant sitting with them?

CD: Yes, and encouraging them to use their cutlery, but to be honest once they are trying the food. I'm not going to push too hard with the cutlery because that will come.

EM: I completely agree, we can introduce activities to support their fine motor skills. Like threading, the peg boards and mark making with pencils.

CD: Yeah, that's it. I would rather they show an interest in their food and sitting at the table for now.

EM: Exactly, we can build on the fine motor skills through other activities. If we push too hard with using cutlery, the children will focus on that rather than eating.

CD: That's it.

EM: OK, so if there anything else you would like to discuss?

CD: No, I'm happy with everything.

EM: OK, so I can check in with you then during the week to see how everything is going and at our next one-to-one we can discuss how the mealtimes are going.

CD: Yeah perfect.

8th of February 2021 - One-to-one transcript with CD (Second Meeting).

EM: So how are things?

CD: Good, yes.

EM: Last time we met, you said that the children were struggling with eating, tiredness, and their fine motor skills. So how are they getting on with eating more fruit and vegetables?

CD: Still much the same, like we did the smoothies and they enjoyed making them but didn't seem too impressed when they tried them. T thought it would taste like a milkshake (Laughs).

EM: OK, so he wasn't happy when it tasted like fruit?

CD: No and when he said that the others agreed so only D really drank most of his, but he loves fruit.

EM: Have you planned anything else?

CD: Just to keep encouraging them and their parents.

EM: Could you do stories or more cooking?

CD: Yeah, we plan to this week. We spoke to the parents and tried to encourage them, and we'll keep doing that. But it's only been a week.

EM: How about the tiredness?

CD: We are doing the quiet time after dinner, and they seem to enjoy that but sometimes they want to go outside straight away so it depends on the day.

EM: How are their fine motor skills?

CD: Much the same, plenty of eating with their fingers and we try to encourage using forks but at the same time we want them to eat so we don't push too hard.

EM: No, I understand it's getting a balance. Did you introduce any activities for fine motor skills?

CD: Peg boards and lacing, which they like. So, we'll add different elements to that in the coming days.

EM: Are there any other challenges?

CD: No just the ones you mentioned, like it'll take more than a week to see progression, you know?

EM: No, I understand. Is there anything else you'd like to talk about?

CD: No, that's it.

2nd of February 2021 - One-to-one transcript with GH.

This one-to-one also began with a discussion regarding the personal issues relating to COVID-19.

EM: How are you finding being back?

GH: Good, I didn't think the lockdown would be extended to be honest. I'm surprised that the ECCE (Free preschool) hasn't reopened.

EM: To be honest, I thought all age groups would be back.

GH: Same as that.

EM: Do you think the children are settling back in?

GH: Yeah, some better than others. Like we've children returning most weeks, so the children are happy to see their friends come back. It was hard the first week when only a few children were here. Like some of the children were asking for their friends. But I just said they'd be back soon.

EM: How are you finding implementing the COVID-19 policies and procedures?

GH: It's grand, the only thing is the time it takes to complete all the paperwork?

EM: Like the return to childcare form?

GH: No like even the daily cleaning forms.

EM: Do you find those to be very time consuming?

GH: To be honest yeah, like on top of all the other paperwork, and like those have to be completed for health and safety so I try to do it in the afternoon but it's tough to manage everything.

EM: So, it's a challenge to manage all the paperwork in the timeframe?

GH: Yes, definitely like sometimes I don't get out on time, if I'm honest.

EM: OK, well that's not ideal.

GH: No, it's just to get things done.

EM: No, I understand like I'm the same start the next day with everything already prepared.

GH: Exactly.

EM: But it shouldn't be done on your time.

GH: I don't mind.

EM: If I were to offer you an additional hour a day would you be interested in it?

GH: Yes, definitely. I could get so much more done.

EM: OK, so your position was originally 25 hours a week so we would just be returning to your original hours.

GH: Brilliant thank you.

EM: OK, so let me know when you can start those additional hours, like if you need to organise childcare for the boys and I'll make the changes to payroll and your contract.

GH: I can start from tomorrow; Mam has the boys anyways.

EM: Well, if, you're sure. There's no problem if you've to delay.

GH: No, it'll be grand.

EM: OK, well I can check in with you throughout the week and at your next one-to-one next week if that suits you?

GH: That's great thank you.

9th of February 2021 - One-to-one transcript with GH (Second Meeting).

EM: How are things?

GH: Good, yeah, such a difference with the additional hour.

EM: Really?

GH: Getting all my paperwork done and the cleaning so it's great. Like our room is busier now than it was last week so there's more cleaning, but I don't feel rushed. Like I'm organized.

EM: That's great and your Mam has the boys?

GH: Yeah, she's delighted to have them and if can't take them my sister does so it's grand.

EM: How are you finding the additional paperwork of cleaning and sanitizing sheets?

GH: Last week it was harder you know, trying to make sure they were all done but like it's so much easier to manage now that I've the additional time. Like even the learning journals, planners, and observations, I've more time now to give them so it's great. I don't know myself.

EM: How are the children?

GH: Great, like they are brilliant with washing their hands and wiping their noses. It's amazing how quickly they adapt.

EM: Any challenges?

GH: Not at the moment thank God! But when we're not back to full capacity in the room, so it's grand.

EM: Will we leave it there so?

GH: Yeah, thanks a million.

2nd of February 2021 - One-to-one transcript with EF (First Meeting).

The meeting initially begins with personal discussions relation to COVID-19 and the impact it has on EF personal life. EF began by discussing the challenges faced within the room.

EF: I've noticed that the children are struggling to settle back in after lockdown.

EM: In what way do you feel that they are struggling?

EF: It's fine when the children are outside but when we go to move them upstairs it's that separation from the parents that they're struggling with. Like particularly E, he's fine when he's outside playing and even when his mother leaves. But we go to move upstairs to the room he struggles with that transition. I think the biggest difficulty is that we can't allow parents into the room to help the children settle.

EM: OK so how can we support the children to settle in upstairs after the lockdown while maintaining COVID procedures?

EF: This is the difficulty, as much as we want to support children to settle in, we're in really challenging times whereby we've never experienced this before.

EM: OK, so what if we held the transition or the settling in period outside? if the parents stayed outside with the children and the rest of the group until the child feels comfortable enough to move upstairs and away from their parent? This may take days or weeks but at least children will be comfortable in moving upstairs and we won't be forgetting the parents in this situation.

EF: What about the COVID safety procedures?

EM: We would still be maintaining them because we'd be wearing our masks as would the parents, we would maintain social distancing and we wouldn't be inviting anybody into the building. Also, children bringing in toys or items that will support them settling in, I feel like if it's something that a child needs to support them setting in, we can revisit that policy.

EF: What about the outdoor times of the other rooms?

EM: Myself and J will have a look at the outdoor schedule and see if we can adjust it so that you can have your outside time during the settling in time. I'm sure the other rooms will be understanding to the challenge you're facing and if they are experiencing the same issue or similar issues, we can adjust the time accordingly.

EF: OK, so if we try that then we're outside for the setting period. How long do you think it'll take before we know?

EM: It's hard to know each child will have a different set in in time but at least if we tried this it'll make the transition easier on them and their parents.

EF: OK well I can let you know how we get on.

EM: We can review is next week at our one-to-one, and I'll be in and out of the rooms and playground to monitor it and check in with you.

EF: Perfect thanks.

EM: OK was there anything else or are you happy to finish up?

EF: No, I'm happy to finish up it does anything in the meantime I'll call into you.

9ᵗʰ of February 2021 meeting with EF (Second Meeting).

EM: How are things?

EF: Grand.

EM: How are things in the room? Last time we spoke you said that children we're struggling with settling in periods so, we agreed to hold them outside.

EF: It has made such a difference, particularly to E. Like he's smiling coming in and playing with the other children. The parents seemed relieved too, like they can see the progression which is good.

EM: It's hard that they can't come inside to the rooms.

EF: Yeah, but they understand, like E's Mam said she just wants him mixing. He has no siblings and so lockdown has been lonely for him.

EM: How does he mix?

EF: Great yeah, he's great at sharing and mixing with the others.

EM: How do you think he'll fine coming inside?

EF: Well, he comes in to use the toilet and is fine, waves goodbye to his Mam. So, I think he'll be grand. But it's so important that children experience smooth transitions, it sets the tone for their settling in period and even moving rooms in the future.

EM: That's very true. How are the others settling?

EF: Grand, they've been great.

EM: Are you experiencing any other challenges in the room?

EF: No thankfully, we'll start to prepare E to spend more time inside, but I shouldn't think that'll be a problem.

EM: Is there anything else you'd like to discuss?

EF: Just a question about Annual Leave.

The discussion continued regarding annual leave, and we finished the meeting afterwards.

3ʳᵈ of February 2021 - One-to-one transcript with IJ (First Meeting)

As with all one-to-ones, this discussion started with a chat regarding COVID-19 and how IJ was feeling.

EM: How are you feeling being back to work?

IJ: I was unsure if I would be back because a lot of CE (Community Employment) didn't return the same time as other employees in some settings.

EM: Why was that?

IJ: I think management decided they weren't needed.

EM: Whoops! (Laughs)

IJ: No, no. I'd rather be working to be honest. I want some sense of normality.

EM: That's good then, so you've settled back in?

IJ: I have, like there's more to do now but with three of us in the room it's manageable.

EM: So more like duties?

IJ: Well yeah, like the deep cleaning and especially our age group, everything goes in the mouth. So, we've to ensure that everything is cleaned really well at the end of the day and write it up. But like that it is manageable.

EM: Do you agree with the amount of cleaning?

IJ: I do, and it gives me a sense of comfort oddly enough. Like ensuring everything is cleaned has reduced all infectious illnesses, even tummy bugs.

EM: That's true and the hand washing is probably helping too.

IJ: Definitely.

EM: How are you finding working in the toddler room?

IJ: I love it, like you can really see the progression and the growth. Like the children's language and development is progressing before your eyes. Like E, is struggling a bit with the settling in but I know you spoke to EF about holding it outside. I think that will work.

EM: I hope it will. Do you have any suggestions to help E settle?

IJ: No, I reckon holding the settling in period outside with his Mam will work.

EM: So, do you feel there are any other issues?

IJ: No, no.

EM: Is the toddler room, a room you'd be interested in staying in for September?

IJ: Oh yeah, I enjoy working with the girls and like that it is a room where the development is visible so it's very enjoyable. Like you can see the theory in real life.

EM: How do you mean?

IJ: Like the theorists and their theories are visible with that age group I find.

EM: Well, it's good that you're enjoying it. Are there any challenges in the room?

IJ: No, apart from COVID-19 there isn't really any issues, and we can't do much about that, just keep going as we are.

EM: From what I've seen you're working well with the team.

IJ: Yeah, we work well together so it makes the job easier when you get on with your team- mates.

EM: The plan is to meet again next week and have another chat, how does that sound?

IJ: Yeah, sounds good.

10th of February 2021 - One-to-one transcript with IJ (Second Meeting)

EM: How are you?

IJ: Good, thank God.

EM: How are things in the room?

IJ: Grand, kept going plenty of cleaning. Especially with that age group because they put everything in their mouths, but it's grand, manageable.

EM: So, you're still enjoying working with the toddlers?

IJ: (Laughs) Most days, no they've great personalities and I get on well with the team, so it's great.

EM: E seems to be settling better.

IJ: Yes, thankfully.

EM: Are there any other challenges in the room?

IJ: Just the cleaning but we're going to start rotating the equipment and focus on sensory resources.

EM: To reduce cleaning?

IJ: Well, that and they are more interest in sensory play.

EM: That age group tend to be.

IJ: Like we're not reducing the toys but offering more sensory play, so those resources aren't one dimensional either.

EM: No, good idea. I'll pop in to see how they are getting on.

IJ: Yes, do but ignore the mess!!

EM: Are there any other issues you'd like to discuss?

IJ: No thankfully, things are going well thankfully.

3rd of February 2021 - One-to-one transcript with KL (First Meeting)

Again, this discussion began with a chat relating to any personal issues which may have arisen due to COVID-19.

EM: How are things in the room?

KL: Yeah, they're fine, kept busy with our group.

EM: It's a busy room, how have the children settled? They've been starting in dribs and drabs with the new guidelines.

KL: Most are grand, but the children with older siblings off from school are finding it harder, because they know their brothers or sisters are at home. So, that's hard on them.

EM: It is, especially when they are there during the drop off.

KL: That's it. We've noticed some have regressed with toileting. Like one child, who was once toilet trained is having more accidents now.

EM: I've noticed that did you speak to his parents?

KL: Yeah, his Mam said she noticed it during it around Christmas and put him back in pull ups. So, I'm not sure if that helped, but it's a busy house so it's understandable.

EM: What strategies have you and the team tried?

KL: Just reminding him to go and if he does have an accident, trying to encourage him to help us change him.

EM: How's that going?

KL: Not great, he can be a little uncooperative at times.

EM: How do you mean?

KL: Well, he won't tell us and if he does have an accident, he'll tend to try and hide under the table so we can't change him.

EM: So, have you any plans in place to support him?

KL: Plenty of praise, link in with Mam and keep asking if he needs to go.

EM: Will you let me know how it goes?

KL: Of course.

EM: If you need any additional resources let me know.

KL: No problem.

EM: If there's nothing else to discuss will we end it there?

KL: Yeah perfect.

10th of February 2021 - One-to-one transcript with KL (Second Meeting)

EM: How are things?

KL: Good thanks.

EM: Last time we were here, you spoke about a child having toileting accidents. How is he?

KL: Well, he hasn't been in much this week, so it's hard to know if they are. Like Monday was the only day he was in. He isn't sick, his Mam is off work.

EM: Yeah, she rang me to let me know. I think when we see a child absent, we panic now.

KL: Yeah, that's the truth.

EM: How are you finding everything else, like lower numbers of children?

KL: I find it very interesting as the children who are attending now were typically quieter in a larger group, so I can really focus on their interests. With reduced numbers, I find that I can engage with the parents and ensure that linkage from home and settling in.

EM: Really?

KL: Yeah, it makes such a difference. Like there's two children, who are usually very quiet and just engage with the games or activities that are happening at the time. But now, you'd want to hear them, they've great ideas and such interests.

EM: That's great, like what?

KL: Well one loves nature and the other is very caring, so she washes the dolls and looks after them.

EM: Do you find you get to link in with the parents too?

KL: Yeah, like we can have a good chat about what the children did and their interests, whereas before we would try to get to every parent but at times we couldn't.

EM: Do you feel it makes a difference to your day?

KL: Yeah, it all does, like I feel I know the children better and the parents.

EM: Do you think it'll stay the same when the other children come back?

KL: I hope so, but I'll do my best to try and make sure it does.

EM: That's great to hear.

KL: Can I ask you a question?

EM: Of course.

The discussion continued briefly regarding a personal matter and then the meeting ended.

4th of February 2021 - One-to-one transcript with MN (First Meeting)

Again, this discussion began with a chat relating to any personal issues which may have arisen due to COVID-19.

EM: How are things in the room?

MN: Generally, good but one child's speech has regressed since the lockdown, he isn't attempting to verbalise and is struggling to engage with his peers.

EM: OK, can you give me examples?

MN: Like he isn't verbally communicating as much as he did before lockdown, like he's back pointing rather than attempting to make sounds.

EM: Did you chat to his parents about this?

MN: Yeah, and they said he's doing the same at home.

EM: Have they put anything in place to support him?

MN: Just trying to get him to ask for what he wants.

EM: What have you guys tried in the room?

MN: Much the same, or saying it for him, like 'you would like the car?'

EM: OK, so we still have fewer numbers in the rooms, so small groups would definitely be small groups. Would you try that? And purposefully place certain children in that group who would encourage communication?

MN: Yeah, like the child who is fierce chatty. So, we could even pair them together for small group.

EM: Yeah, good idea. We could also try contacting our Access and Inclusion mentor to discuss activities which would support this child's speech and language.

MN: Yeah, and then we could share the recommendations with his parents.

EM: Exactly. So, I'll ring our mentor, and arrange a chat with yourself, I'll also see if she can link in with their parents.

MN: Perfect, in the meantime we'll do the speech modelling and small groups.

EM: Are there any other issues?

MN: Just in relation to the cleaning.

We discussed the cleaning of rooms and equipment for several minutes.

MN: Just back to the small groups, like could I bring them out in small groups?

EM: Of course, yeah.

MN: Perfect, no that's everything.

EM: We'll check in next week.

11th of February 2021 - One-to-one transcript with MN (Second Meeting)

EM: How are things?

MN: Good, yeah.

EM: So, I got a call yesterday from that child's Mam that he would be out for a few days.

MN: Yeah, and we were just putting the small groups in place on Monday and now he's out so it's disappointing but what can we do?

EM: I spoke to our Access and Inclusion mentor, and she's going to try and link in with yourself and the child's parents in a fortnight. They've a back log to work through but she agreed to implement the small groups and agreed with the modelling of language.

MN: Well hopefully he'll be back soon.

EM: How's everything else in the room?

MN: No everything is grand, like even with the lower numbers we're still busy. But it's good to be back and at least with lower numbers we are getting into a cleaning routine so when it's busier we'll have a rhythm.

EM: How are you finding the policies?

MN: Grand like I know they were updated but not much has changed so it's grand. The children are great at washing their hands and catching their sneezes.

EM: They adapt quickly.

MN then asked a question in relation to afterschool care for her child, which continued for over five minutes. The meeting then ended.

4th of February 2021 - One-to-one transcript with OP (First Meeting).

Again, this discussion began with a chat relating to any personal issues which may have arisen due to COVID-19.

EM: How are you?

OP: Actually, delighted to be back, I thought I'd be dreading it. But no, it's great, back into some kind of a routine.

EM: How are things in the room?

OP: Busy but good, like we've less numbers but the same amount of cleaning.

EM: How are you finding it?

OP: Grand, I like cleaning so I'm in my element.

EM: How are the children?

OP: Good thank God. The only thing I suppose is that particular child's speech. Like he has regressed with it. I know MN spoke to you and like we are trying to model language,   but   he   really   has   regressed.
EM: I mentioned small group activities, how do you think they would work for the child?

OP: Yeah, if we do small group activities, then his peers can act as role models and scaffold his language development, essentially, Bandura and Vygotsky's theory of social learning put into practice.

EM: Great link to theory.

OP: (Laughs) Only positive thing about COVID-19, I don't feel like I'm missing out when I'm stuck inside studying.

EM: (Laughs) Yeah, I know the feeling.

OP: But I do think that small groups could work with for the child, like MN said to put him in the same group as K. Which I think would work well.

EM: Great, and I'll contact our Access and Inclusion Mentor and hopefully she can guide ourselves and the child's parents.

OP: Yeah exactly.

EM: Are they any other issues?

The conversation then moved onto a personal topic.

11th of February 2021 - One-to-one transcript with OP (Second Meeting)
EM: That was a quick week.
OP: Wasn't it.
EM: How are things?

OP: Grand, but the child is off for a little while now, so we didn't get much of a chance to implement the plan of small group activities.

EM: No, it's a pity.

OP: But like it would have only barely been a week so from what I could see like there wasn't much improvement. But I think the planned group will get on together.

EM: Well at least that's something.

OP: Yeah, hopefully it'll bring their language on a bit. MN said you were speaking our mentor about supports for them.

EM: Yeah, but like that they are out the door busy, so it'll be a fortnight or so before we hear back.

OP: Hopefully he'll be back soon, and we can really get going with the small groups.

EM: Hopefully.

5th of February 2021 - One-to-one transcript with QR (First Meeting)

QR: Am I in trouble?

EM: Why would you think that?

QR: We usually only come into the office if something is wrong.

EM: Oh right, well no, there's no issues just a chat.

Again, this discussion began with a chat relating to any personal issues which may have arisen due to COVID-19.

EM: How are things in the room?

QR: Grand yeah, kept going.

EM: I spoke to KL about the child's toileting issue.

QR: Yeah, the poor pet is struggling. But like that we just have to take it a day at a time and go from there. There's so much going on for the everyone, it's understandable.

EM: That's it, like for the children there has been a lot of upheaval.

QR: Exactly, no we'll keep praising him and reminding him. I chatted to Mam and she's doing the same.

EM: Exactly. How's everyone else?

QR: Good, yeah. It's tricky to get round to all of them because they are having so many accidents.

EM: No, I understand

QR: I won't lie it's hard to tell because it hasn't been long. So, we'll give it more time and see.

12th of February 2021 - One-to-one transcript with QR (Second Meeting)

We spent a number of minutes discussing a personal issue.

EM: How's the child? He's missed a good bit of time this week.

QR: Yeah, he has, but when he was here, there was a slight improvement.

EM: That's good news.

QR: Yeah at least he finished on a good note before he was absent so we can refer back to it.

EM: How's everything else?

QR: Grand yeah, like not much has changed in a week (Laughs) which is a good thing given the circumstances,

EM: Very true. How do you think we'll manage with more children when they all come back?

QR: We just may manage, this thing isn't going anywhere so, we'll have to deal with it.

EM: Like the positive attitude! How are you finding planning in the room with less children?

QR: Much the same, like you plan for more than one child when your busy so it's grand.

EM: How are you managing the cleaning?

QR: Loving the fact we've a dishwasher! But no everything is grand.

EM: Have you anything else you'd like to discuss?

QR: No, I'm grand.

Roinn Froebel Don Bhun- agus Luath- Oideachas, Ollscoil Mhá Nuad

Maynooth University Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education

Appendix 7 -Focussed Interview Questions, (Post one-to-one intervention)

Q1. How did you find the one-to-one sessions?

Q2. Do you think we should continue the one-to-one sessions on a weekly basis?

Q3. What suggestions do you have that could improve the one-to-one discussions?

Appendix 8: Post one-to-one intervention focus interviews discussions.

Question 1: How did you find the one-to-one sessions?

IJ: *It was nice to have a chat without distractions.*
KL: *It was nice to have a catch up and it was good to discuss the issues of the room.*
OP: *It was good to chat about everything from COVID-19 to like how it impacted me in my personal and work like.*
CD: *I enjoyed them; it was good to talk.*
MN: *I found them good, like to chat but not in the room.*
GH: *Yeah, they were good and nice to be able to chat about things without distractions.*
QR: *I enjoyed it, it was nice to chat without having to watch the kids and be distracted.*
AB: *Yeah, I found it nice to be able to talk to you about any issues.*
EF: *I enjoyed the chat; it was good to talk about COVID-19 and the effects of it.*

Question 2: Do you think we should continue the one-to-one sessions on a weekly basis?

IJ: *Yeah, like it would be nice to continue it but maybe once a fortnight.*
KL: *I think it would be good to continue it because it's nice to chat but maybe once every three weeks.*
OP: *Yeah, I think so, but would we have enough to chat about weekly? Like I could come to you if I needed to so maybe once every three or four weeks.*
CD: *I think we should, but maybe every fortnight.*
MN: *I know I can pop in if I need to talk to you, so maybe once every three or four weeks for like official one-to-ones.*
GH: *You know, it was good to chat, but every week would be hard so if it was every three weeks we could have more to talk about.*
QR: *I spoke to CD and like that once a month like four weeks or so unless something important happened.*
AB: *I would like to continue them, but maybe not every week, like once a month.*
EF: *Yeah, it would be good to keep them going. Maybe not weekly though.*

Question 3: What suggestions do you have that could improve the one-to-one discussions?

OP: *If we could possibly invite more team members to see if others have the same issues and challenges, if we could do it on a bigger scale as C worked with A and I have him in my room now so she could offer me some advice of what worked for her.*
GH: *Maybe having discussions on a larger scale; If we could meet with more of the team, we could share issues and see how others are managing.*
MN: *I would like to link in with more of the team, with COVID I feel like I haven't had a chance to talk to them and see how they are managing their room and practices.*

AB: *None just not as often maybe.*
KL: *None,*
IJ: *No, None.*
QR: *Maybe more people to chat about issues with.*
EF: *No, happy with them just having them like less frequently.*
CD: *No nothing.*

Appendix 9 - Debriefing Sessions Schedule.

Roinn Froebel Don Bhun- agus Luath- Oideachas, Ollscoil Mhá Nuad

Maynooth University Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education

Room	Participants	Day
Preschool Room C	GH and AB	Monday
Preschool Room D	KL and QR	Monday
Preschool Room E	EF and IJ,	Wednesday
Preschool Room A	MN and OP,	Thursday
Preschool Room B	CD	Friday

Roinn Froebel Don Bhun- agus Luath- Oideachas, Ollscoil Mhá Nuad

Maynooth University Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education

Appendix 10: Extracts of the debriefing sessions:

Note: Prior to the sessions, all non-participants were informed that their part in the discussions would not be discussed.

Debriefing sessions from 1st to the 19th of March 2021.

Monday 1st of March 2021 – Preschool C (First Session):

EM: So how are things in the room?

GH: Good, yeah. We're kept going with cleaning now that there's more children in but with my additional hour, we're managing it.

AB: Yes, we're busy even with the dishwasher, there's so much more to wash because there's more children.

EM: Are they playing with more equipment?

GH: Yeah, definitely, or just moving things but because they've handled it. We need to make sure to wash it afterwards.

EM: There's a lot of equipment in the room.

GH: There is but they handle everything, like maybe not play with it but handle it.

EM: Is there too much?

GH: Do you think?

EM: Well, in my old place I use to do an informal observation to see what they play with and what they don't. Then look to remove the unused equipment and rotate it later. That way the children stay stimulated and can see the equipment and it reduced unnecessary cleaning for equipment.

GH: Yeah, we could try it.

EM: What would you have normally done before COVID?

GH: Well, there wasn't as much cleaning, so we didn't really need to rotate the equipment.

EM: AB, in your last place, would you have rotated the equipment?

AB: Sometimes, yes. To keep the children stimulated and to make sure they could see all of the equipment. Like shelves wouldn't be too full.

EM: So, would you be interested in doing an informal observation?

GH: How would we do it?

EM: Just keep a notebook and document what the children play with over a few days?

GH: Yeah, we could try it.

EM: Ok, so will we check in next week and see how we get on?

GH: Yeah, ok.

EM: AB?

AB: Yeah, no problem.

<u>Monday 8th of March 2021 – Preschool C (Second Session)</u>

EM: How did the rotation of equipment go?

GH: Good yeah, the observation was tricky at first because you're trying to keep track but between the two of us, we managed it.

EM: There does seem to be less equipment,

AB: Yeah, but the children aren't bored. We kept what they play with and what they don't we put away for now.

EM: Have you noticed a difference?

GH: Yes, they play with the equipment for longer than before and we've less cleaning.

EM: Have they asked where items are?

GH: No actually, I think they are seeing more.

EM: How's everything else?

GH: Well, one of the children is struggling with group play.

EM: How do you mean?

GH: Like when another child approaches, they'll push them or grab the toys away from them.

EM: OK, is it any child or one in particular that they push?

GH: No, any child.

EM: OK, so why do you think they are doing it?

AB: Not sure, like it's unprovoked.

EM: Have you tried small groups?

GH: Like divide them up?

EM: Yeah, maybe the child is feeling threatened by another child approaching, so a smaller group may support them. I used to do it in my room, and it did support children's play.

GH: So, do the other children go outside?

EM: They can do, yeah. Like divide up the outside time within the room.

GH: OK, sure we can try it.

Monday 15th of March 2021 – Preschool C (Third Session):

EM: How are things going guys?

GH: Better, the small groups seem to be working a bit better for that child.

EM: How is the child responding to it?

GH: Yeah, they're OK. But there were still some incidents.

EM: With pushing others?

GH: Yeah, so I've popped them in my group, and I was thinking back to another child who use to hit other children. So, I would support them on the floor.

EM: How do you mean?

GH: Well, while they're playing, I sit with them and support them. So, if another child approaches, I can say 'oh here is your friend coming to play', ask the other child if they'd like to play and relay it back.

EM: Great so supportive supervision. How are you finding it AB?

AB: Yes, there is an improvement, and the smaller groups make it easier to support them individually.

EM: OK, so we'll keep it going so?

GH: Yeah, I think so.

Monday 1st of March 2021 – Preschool D (First Session):

EM (Eimear/ Researcher): So how are things?

KL: Kept going now yeah.

EM: Is everything alright?

QR: Ah, just busy in the room.

EM: A lot of the children have returned.

QR: That's it so we're busier, and (the child struggling with toileting) is back so we're trying to support him with the toileting.

EM: It's a lot to manage, how are they getting on?

KL: Some days are better than others, we just keep praising him. But he does have some accidents.

EM: What's his Mam saying?

QR: Much the same, that he has regressed but she's putting it down to lockdown which is fair enough.

EM: So, can we implement any new strategies to support them?

KL: Like what?

EM: Well with other children, what would you have done in the past?

KL: I suppose much the same, plenty of praise and reminders.

EM: OK, so could we include toilet breaks into the routine until it becomes a natural routine?

QR: Like with all the children?

EM: Yeah, exactly.

QR: We could try and see.

EM: What do you guys think? Or have you any ideas?

KL: No, we could try that.

EM: OK, so we'll see how we get on with that for a few days and revisit it?

QR: Yeah, we'll try it.

Monday 8th of March 2021 – Preschool D (Second Session):

EM: How goes the toileting routine?

QR: Good yeah.

EM: Are there as many accidents?

QR: Depends on the day, appears to be the later in the week, more likely the accidents. So, plenty of reminders.

EM: I was thinking about what I use to do, and I use to get books for rooms like based on their needs.

QR: So, like toileting stories.

EM: Yeah, like social stories.

QR: Yeah, that could work, and it would link in the handwashing. Do we have any?

EM: I brought one in from home to try.

QR: OK, yeah, we could try that.

EM: What do you think KL?

KL: Yeah, we could try it and see because there's still the odd accident so it might work.

EM: OK, brilliant. We'll see how that goes so.

Monday 15th of March – Preschool D (Third Session).

EM: How are we?

QR: Good, yeah.

EM: How goes the toileting?

QR: Good, we were thinking about the stories and decided to make one for the room instead.

EM: So, all the children are in the story?

QR: Well, we've reduced numbers, so it was easier!

EM: That's a great idea! Really brilliant. Is it working?

QR: Yeah, the children love it because they are in it.

EM: Brilliant idea.

QR: A few years ago, I made a book for the room, and they loved it, so we did the same this year but included their interest and needs.

EM: I might have to rob your idea!

KL: The children have responded so well to it.

EM: How's (particular child) finding it?

KL: He enjoys reading it, so it's working well, still the odd accident but better attitude towards the idea.

EM: Really great idea!

Wednesday 3rd of March 2021 – Preschool E (First Session).

EM: How are things?

EF: Good now, the children have settled back in so, we're getting back to normal.

EM: How's E getting on settling in?

EF: Yeah, he keeps looking at the gate and it's hard to get him to engage with activities and his friends.

EM: OK, What we could do to support E during this challenge?

EF: I'm not really sure to be honest, like he still needs the settling in period with his Mam so to get rid of that, I don't think would help him.

EM: What do you think IJ?

IJ: It's a hard one, because he is really struggling. But bringing him outside and seeing him looking for his Mam would break your heart.

EM: So, is there anything we could do to help him?

EF: Not sure.

EM: What if we alter the outdoor time to his settling in time? That way, when he goes out the next time, it would be home time. His Mam is usually early so we could ask that she slowly delay her collection time to be the same as his peers?

EF: Yeah, that could work.

IJ: Yeah, I reckon it could.

EM: OK, so will we chat to his Mam and see how she feels about it and go from there?

EF: Yeah, I'll mention it to her and see.

EM: Perfect, thanks GH.

Wednesday 10ᵗʰ of March 2021 – Preschool Room E (Second Session):

EM: How are we?

EF: Good yeah.

IJ: Grand.

EM: How was today?

EF: Grand, E had a good day.

EM: How is he getting on with the new outside time?

EF: Yeah, a better day today, he seems to be settling. Now the only thing is, he is still expecting to see his Mam when we go outside.

IJ: It would break your heart, really.

EM: OK, so how can we support him?

EF: It's a hard one.

EM: Could we swap playgrounds?

EF: How do you mean?

EM: Well, when I worked with that age, I found they could be distracted if it something new! So, if we bring them into the other playground, he might be distracted enough by the change that he won't look for his Mam straight away.

EF: We could try it.

EM: What do you guys think?

IJ: I think try it.

Tuesday 16th of March 2021 – Preschool Room E (Third Session):

EM: So, how goes it?

IJ: We're getting there, slowly with (child struggling to settle) and settling in.

EF: He seems to have linked in with another child, so while he is still upset when he goes out it isn't as bad.

IJ: We tried the new playground idea, and it didn't really work. So, we brought out the sand and messy play, (another child) use to love messy play and it distracted him, so we tried it.

EF: Now, he'll look to the gate, but it isn't exactly in his line of vision, only when we walk by. But the messy play of sand and the water is distracting him.

EM: That's good, so there's a slight increase?

IJ: More good days than bad so far. We'll keep at it.

<u>Thursday 4th of March 2021 – Preschool A (First Session).</u>

EM: How's all?

MN: Good, yeah.

EM: How's A getting on?

MN: We got the child goals from the AIM mentor but we're already doing a lot of it.

EM: The recasting and modelling?

MN: Yeah, just repeating what we think he's asking for.

EM: Has there been an improvement?

MN: Not really, no.

EM: It's only been a few days, so we can give it more time. What did his Mam say?

MN: Much the same, that she was encouraging his speech and trying to get him into speech and language.

EM: But there's huge back logs due to COVID-19.

MN: That's what she said.

EM: Are we singing and reading to the children much?

MN: Yeah, for those who are interested.

EM: I use to find out the child's interest and get stories relating to the topic.

MN: Yeah, we could do with more dinosaur books.

EM: There's some in the staff room.

MN: OK, we'll see if he's interested in that.

EM: What do you think OP? In your previous place what would you have done.

OP: No, it's a good idea, much the same.

EM: OK, we'll try that and check in after a week.

MN: OK.

OP: OK.

Thursday 11th of March 2021 – Preschool A (Second Session).

EM: How are things?

MN: Ah, poor (particular child) is struggling to initiate play with his friends. We did the stories but when he tries to join play and can't verbalise it, he gets frustrated.

EM: With the others?

OP: No, himself.

EM: OK, so his trying to support him in initiating play non-verbally.

OP: That's it. So, like he'll see a group of children and want to join them.

EM: OK, so how do the other children respond?

OP: They don't fully understand, and some are more patient that others.

MN: Like some will ask him if he wants to play and he'll nod, but it's when he wants to join that he's struggling.

EM: OK, so what can we do to support him??

MN: Not sure.

EM: What if we ask for him, if we see him taking an interest in an area, we could say 'oh (child's name), would you like to play?'. That way it'll give him a chance to say yes or no. The other children could become more aware of his interest then.

MN: Yeah, I think we should try something because you'd feel for him. He's so gentle natured.

Friday 19th of March 2021 – Preschool A (Third Session):

EM: How's all?

MN: Yeah, we're good, it was quiet this week so we could really focus on supporting the child's speech. We were chatting and we think we'll include hand gestures.

EM: What do you mean?

OP: OK, so when he goes to join his peers playing, he kind of just stands there until one

of the other children says something. So, we have started to place our hands on our chest and say, 'can I play'. Now, we only started this week, but we keep doing it with all the children.

EM: Sounds like a good idea.

MN: Well, in my course they said that verbal communication and body language can be linked. So, even if he isn't saying the exact words, the other children will recognise the body language and hopefully understand what he is asking.

OP: So, that's why we are doing it with all the children.

EM: How has it been working?

MN: Well, it's hasn't been a week, and the numbers are low this week, so we are still supporting him when the children are playing. Like saying I think he would like to join.

EM: Did you chat to his parents?

OP: Yeah, we told them about the gestures, and they said they would try it, they are looking into Làmh for him, so it might be something we consider here.

MN: Could our Access and Inclusion Mentor support us with that?

EM: Yeah, she should be able to, even a few gestures, that we could share. We could look into Hanen too.

Friday 5ᵗʰ of March 2021 – Preschool B (First Session).

EM: How are you all?

OP: Good,

EM: How are the children?

OP: OK, yes. The eating hasn't improved but the tiredness isn't as bad now. They are getting into a routine.

EM: That's good, are you still doing the quiet time.

OP: Yes, for those who want it.

EM: Are there many children?

OP: Depends on the day, Mondays, and Fridays yes.

EM: How are they getting on with the fine motor skills?

Non-Participant responds.

OP: They enjoy the sand and playdough, which helps their motor skills.

EM: I use to hide things in the playdough so they would have to pull it apart. So, it supports their fine motor skills and hand to eye co-ordination.

OP: Yes, that could improve it. We can try that.

EM: OK, will we try it for a week or so?

Friday 12th of March 2021 – Preschool B (Second Session).

EM: How are we?

OP: Good, yes.

EM: How were things today?

OP: Yeah, good but the children didn't eat much at all today.

EM: Did they eat much breakfast?

OP: They did because they love toast.

Non-participant comment.

EM: OK, so we might have to monitor the toast situation.

OP: Maybe, yes.

EM: OK, so they get breakfast at 10:00am and snack at 12:00pm.

OP: Yeah,

EM: I know myself; we have a few toast lovers here and they would happily munch on it all day. But they are filling up on it.

OP: That's it.

EM: OK, so what if we give breakfast as soon as they come in and then do a lighter

snack at 12:00pm, like fruit? While monitoring the toast?

OP: Yes, OK.

Non-participant responds.

EM: How are the fine motor skills activities coming on?

OP: Yes, we are still doing them. But I find that they are bored with sensory play.

Non-participant responds.

EM: So, could we look at other activities? What are the interests? Apart from toast?

OP: Really, it's a mix so construction, shop, and small world.

EM: OK, so could we possibly encourage the children to butter their own toast? That way it's their interests and developmental needs?

OP: Would they be ok with knives?

EM: Just strong supervision, sit with them and tell them before-hand that knives aren't toys.

Non-participant responds.

EM: OK, so we'll go with buttering toast.

Friday 19th of March 2021 – Preschool B (Third Session).

EM: So, last time we spoke the children were going to butter their own toast.

OP: Yes, it was a bit worrying at the start, but they understand that knives aren't toys and we watch them carefully. I was thinking about their eating habits and if we should extent the fine motor skills to cutting their own fruit.

EM: Absolutely, it is recommended. Now, the only thing is with COVID-19 is they couldn't mix up food. They cut and eat their own. But I think it's a great idea.

OP: In my last place, the children would do it as part of the Healthy Ireland Smart Start.

EM: Yes, by rights they should be doing it here too, but COVID-19 stopped it. But they are mixing all morning so really there's a bigger argument supporting them cutting their fruit. Have you enough knives?

OP: Yes, plenty. No, I agree, I showed them how to do it and we sit and do it together.

Non-participant responds.

EM: I think this is something we will have to look at reintroducing throughout the setting.

Appendix 11: Semi-structured focus group transcript after debriefing session (Questions and Answers):

A reminder before we begin the focus group that participants can opt out of the study at any point. All participants will remain anonymous and thank you for your participation. Let us just start by discussing the debriefing sessions which occurred after the sessions for three weeks.

Q1. How do you feel this intervention effected your professional practice?

MN: I felt that it allowed me to discuss any issues or challenges on the day.

EF: Yeah, I would agree, I felt like if I had any questions or felt that I had concerns about a child or my practice I could ask you (Eimear) and we could chat it out. Like with the other educators there, we had the chance to discuss each other's perspectives and learn from each other.

OP: Like we only recently started working together and it is nice to have the chance to hear each other's previous experiences and see what we can take from it and implement it into our practice now.

QR: I suppose because I'm in the full day care room, it was trickier to chat after the session because we were trying to make sure the cleaning got done. But I did feel that any issues that may have occurred during the day were spoken about, like I was worried about a child or parent I knew that I could talk to you (Eimear) and the educators, and we could try and hash it out.

CD: Yes, like that we were struggling with a child was experiencing challenges with toileting, so I knew that every day I could update you and we could see what worked and what didn't work. But like what V said because we are full day care it can be harder to try and manage the time.

Eimear: KL what do you think? You also work in the full day care room; how did you feel about it?

KL: I felt like I wasn't thinking about work as much when I went home, like you would still think about it but in a more positive way because you know there is support with you (Eimear) and the team. Like we've time to chat about how the day went and I think

when it's only you (referring to oneself) you can focus on the negative but with other people you can see the positives of how the day went.

AB: I definitely found that, like if we had a day where it was tough, to have the chat and look at it from the eyes of others, it does help. Like there are things I don't hear or see so to have the chat really helped. Because we are always busy to have that time where we can chat and not try and supervise children or do paperwork, it was nice, like comforting.

IJ: Yeah, I definitely found that it was easier like no distractions, so to sit and chat was really nice. Like I found even with my course, I could ask questions about my assignments and have the time to chat about it and get some support and advice from the team.

MN: I found that too, like I knew I could ask questions about my course and get advice because my girls in the room have been there before me.

Eimear: How did you feel about the intervention GH?

GH: I like it because I found that any concerns about how the day went could be addressed quickly and we could try and put something in place to help the children. I felt that you (Eimear) knew what was going on so you could call in through the day and see how things were going. I think it was supportive as well, like even with my key person group I could link in with X (room leader, not involved in the study) and ask for her advice.

EF: I thought that it allowed me to spend more time with the children, because like what GH said we could catch up in the afternoon. So, I felt that if I needed to chat to OP and MN, I knew we would have time later.

Eimear: What did you find challenging about it?

QR: I suppose making sure we put time aside for it, because like that being full day care it is hard to make time for everything.

KL: Yeah, I would say the same, like we didn't want to take time away from the chat but there is so much cleaning and paperwork involved in our day, sometimes it would eat into our debriefing.

EF: Like that if we were having a busy day like with cleaning or if one of us were asked to stay late, we have to take a lunch break so it would reduce our debriefing time.

GH: I think that while it was nice to chat within our rooms, maybe chatting as a whole team would also help. Because we would have more perspectives and we could learn from the rest of the team too.

QR: I agree, like some of the children I have now would have been in EF's room before and while we can ring and chat it isn't the same as sitting down and discussing it because of distractions.

KL: That's true, like I would be nice even just as a team to sit and chat with each other, like a catch up. We haven't sat with each other and chatted in person since July.

IJ: I miss the chats too, like even to discuss the basic, mundane things, it's nice to hear the perspectives of others and like everyone brings something new to the table.

OP: I feel like I haven't seen the rest of the team in ages, like we walk pass each other's windows but we only wave in.

MN: I agree, like I feel disconnected from the rest of the team, like even you guys now on the phone like it isn't the same. I feel like we're working in two different centres.

Eimear: KL, AB, what do you think? Do you think that a challenge or a negative aspect of the debriefing sessions was that it was only among the team in your room?

KL: Yeah, I did to be honest, like that I could ask other members of the team for advice, like even if they didn't have that particular child before, they might have had similar experiences and discussing lets you hash it out. Like sometimes because it's only us chatting within the room, and I know you come in, but a different perspective who doesn't know the previous incidents can give support that can help everyone.

AB: Yes, I think so too. Like I do feel, as MN said disconnected from the rest of the time, because we arrive at different times, leave at different times and we don't see each other. I miss the other members of the team, like the people in the preschool building, I haven't seen them properly since July.

Eimear: CD, what do you think?

CD: I liked the debriefing sessions, but I do miss the chats and the support from a team meeting like at the moment I feel the same as GH, I learnt a lot from the others. It is comforting to discuss issues as a team because you don't feel that it is just you that may be feeling this way.

Eimear: Ok so going forward do you all think that a team meeting, if possible while

maintaining COVID-19 policies and procedures would be helpful?

CD: Yes, I think it would be good to catch up and chat about things as a team.

Eimear: What areas should be discussed?

EF: Maybe the emergent curriculum, or activities to support children with specific needs. Like it would be beneficial to hear the experiences of others.

KL: Even what people are thinking of doing for the June graduation, like we've spoken about this, but it would be nice to hear other people's ideas.

GH: Even, just to see how everyone is, like we've only seen them from a distance because of COVID.

OP: I agree, the emergent curriculum and planning for children, because it would benefit everyone to share ideas.

CD: I agree, I think chatting about the curriculum and observations would be helpful.

IJ: I agree.

Eimear: AB, MN, QR, what do you guys feel should be discussed at a team meeting?

AB: I think maybe supports for specific children, like not all AIM (Access and Inclusion Model) but children who maybe have needs, like how we can support them.

MN: Yeah, I think sharing experiences would be helpful and just even catching up would be nice after so long.

QR: I think discussing the curriculum, or even COVID and how each room has managed differently.

Eimear: Ok, so we can put it to the rest of the team and see if about organising a time and date that suits everyone. Is there anything else you would like to discuss?

All agreed No.

Appendix 12: Team Meeting Agenda (5th of May 2021)

1. ECCE September 2021.
2. First Aid Responder Refresher Training in June/July.
3. Emergent Curriculum.
4. Graduation in June.
5. Transition to Primary School.
6. The outdoor environment.

Appendix 13: Transcript from Team Meeting (5th of May 2021).

In attendance: EM, AB, CD, EF, GH, IJ, KL, MN, OP, QR and the rest of the team who were not participants of the research.

   1. **ECCE September 2021**

EM: The occupancy for September is on track, and currently we have similar numbers as September 2020. However, we appear to have more children with additional or special educational needs enrolled for September. We will be applying and, in some cases, reapplying for AIM and specific supports for some of these children. To support the needs of other children we will need to include training in administering anti-seizure medication for epilepsy. From speaking with other providers and professionals, the lockdowns have impacted on children who require additional supports for both developmental and environmental reasons.

The list of children and educators in each room will be shared in June, and more than likely most if not all educators will be moved. But we will be sure to let you know.

EM: Any questions, how do we feel about that? Non-participant asked a question.

   2. **First Aid Responder Training (Refresher) Training**

GH: This training will occur from the 28th of June until the 1st of July, there will be two groups with a maximum capacity of 8. The training will occur within the centre and one group will train for the first two days with the second group training for the last two days. Having already discussed the extension of work/training for term-time staff, this may mean that before or after training you may have to cover a colleague's room for two days to allow all members of the team to be up to date on their training. The plan is as follows, if everyone is agreeable to this, we can change the roster accordingly.

Monday and Tuesday:

X, QR, Y, OP, Z, and KL.

Wednesday and Thursday:

GH, W, OP, U, V.

Assistant Manager: Any questions? Two non-participants asked questions.

   3. **Emergent Curriculum**

EM (Eimear/Researcher): *Observations, Floor books, individual learning journals (memory books) and planners should all be linked.*

OP: *So, the observations noted should be included in the short-term planner, and then these will be implemented as activities and documented in the relevant child(ren)'s learning journal and floor book?*

GH: *That's the way I do it, like the next step on the observation is extending the child(ren)'s learning within this area, if the interest remains, should a child's interest*

move on this should be reflected on the planner, it's like a cycle of learning and documenting. Like when I'm attaching photos and descriptions in the floor book and learning journal, I try to make sure that children have an opportunity to narrate what was happening in the photos, so I understand the child's learning and what we may need to revisit.

QR: *I struggle with the quiet children, like it is important that they too have an opportunity to have their voices heard and reflected within the planner. But it's hard to grasp what their interests on because they tend to join the others in playing.*

IJ: *I found this with J last year and I would ask his Mam what he did at the weekend or if anything interesting happened and the then link it to an activity and slowly, he would start to come out of his shell.*

CD: *This could work for our children who are preverbal?*

QR: *That's true, like we can observe them but if we link with families at least we can share activities for at home.*

OP: *What do ye do when two interests or more are happening at once?*

EF: *I usually use the child's initials so I know that the preverbal or quieter children are being supported, but like that I could have two different areas of topics being explored at one to support all children in the learning.*

OP: *I did that before and then the next day the children had completely lost interest and wanted to explore a different area, like that's fine too.*

MN: *Do we need to document what happened so if we revisit it, like we know why the interest was changed.*

EM: *Yeah, ideally you want to show the learning journey. But don't forget, while this is child-led, certain areas will have to be adult initiated, such as supporting children's development in social skills such as turn taking, this is where the medium-term planner is used. We can implement these areas of learning through the planned activities. The long-term planner is our ethos and mission statement.*

QR: *So essentially, we can put some area of development in place in the medium planner?*

GH: *That's what I did in my room, like obviously they are younger than your children, but I decided to look at sharing and through the interests of the children in the short-term planner, I created scenarios where I could support their sharing. Like taking turns when on bikes or when washing the dolls.*

OP: *OK, so the long-term planner is essentially the ethos of the setting and then we decided the medium planner based on our observations so say language support through the activities based on the children's interests?*

GH: *That's what I do.*

EM: *That's essentially it, don't forget that the AistearSiolta practice guides offer guidance, and we can always link in again during the week.*

GH: *That's it, like implement it and see how you and the children find it. Will we move on?*

4. Graduation in June

EM: *Obviously, this year's graduation will be different from any other year. This year the children will be in the setting, last year we were in lockdown. So, what are your thoughts in celebrating their graduation?*

EF: *My thoughts for this years' graduation are a family day. We will share children's learning, have some snacks, maybe face painting, some decorations, and treats.*
OP: *Will we will supply the gowns so families can take photos of their children?*
GH: *I think we should,*
QR: *What about performing songs? I think we should maybe give that a miss. Like what EF said a family day seems more child friendly. Like we've a lot of children that are preverbal or who have English as a second language, so I don't think it's fair to put that expectation on them?*
CD: *I agree I think a family day would be nice, and to share the children's learning, like the families haven't had a chance to visit the rooms so that would nice.*
MN: *As someone with English as a second language, I feel that asking children to perform songs can put pressure on children who may not be comfortable in crowds, be introverted, or have English as an additional language is somewhat unfair.*
IJ: *It has been a stressful year for all of us too and I feel that a relaxed, end of year, family day might be more appropriate.*
EM: *OK, so if everyone agrees, we can plan that on the week of the 28th of June, we take one room per morning, including the Toddler Room, send out invites and just have a relaxed morning for everyone. Full day care, we can plan your celebration for the afternoon to ensure that all families can attend. How do you feel about that?*
AB: *I think this is a better idea, like my last place would do this and it is so much more relaxed for everyone. Like could we do dress up?*
EM: *I think each room has a chat and see what the interests are for the children, and we will go from there.*
Assistant Manager: *OK, so will each room devise a plan and we can set the wheels in motion.*

5. Transition to Primary School

EM: *As the some of the children prepare for primary school, we will share this information with yourselves. But any ideas on how we can support this transition?*
EF: *I've old uniforms at home from ************, could I bring them in for dress up with COVID-19?*
QR: *That would be great, I've plenty of small lunch boxes to support children opening them, I could share them.*
MN: *I use to print off photos of the schools and just put them on our walls as a conversation starter for the children.*
IJ: *How many are going to *************? Could we walk over to it and just show the children the building?*
Assistant Manager: *We've almost half of the children going to *************, with the others going to the ********* and ***.*
AB: *Could we link in families, like I remember two years ago asking families to share the teacher's name and we could bring it into conversation with the children.*
Assistant Manager: *I think it's really important to link in with families, we have the information from FirstFive with families and children for this transition.*
CD: *I saw that Mo Scèal, I use to make an 'All about me' booklet and it would share the children's interests and if a child was struggling with an area, I would try and address this in a positive manner.*
QR: *How do you mean?*

CD: *Like I would say, when I feel excited, movement breaks help me calm down. Like making the teacher aware without highlighting any new concerns to families and having a strategy rather than 'I struggle with this' approach.*

EF: *So, would you this with all the children going to school then?*

CD: *Yeah, like that way you link in with all the teachers and the families so they can implement strategies for the children before they start.*

KL: *That's a good idea, so would you fill out a part and leave a part for the family? Like the Aistear observations?*

CD: *Yeah, and I also ask the children what would they like to include?*

IJ: *So, their voice is heard too, and it could act as a conversation starter with the children and the teachers?*

MN: *I agree with CD, we should look at doing this.*

OP: *I agree.*

Non participates: *Response.*

Assistant Manager: *OK, so we will do this for June for the children. We can look at the Mo Scèal template or make our own.*

6. **Outdoor environment**

EM: *Our plan for the outdoor environment is to continue to utilise it as much as possible. We are looking into more equipment for after-schoolers and introducing more natural materials. We are looking for suggestions on this.*

OP: *Could we look at bringing small world areas into the outdoor environment like using tyres for sand, mud and pebbles and having different small world figurines?*

EF: *That would be brilliant! I've noticed that some of the children's physical development as regressed since lockdown so is there something we could introduce like more skipping ropes, balance beams and even natural materials to build, like wooden blocks?*

KL: *Could we look at a music wall? I did it before in my place and it can be very affordable when done correctly, like pots and pans from home. I know with COVID we have to be careful but if we left all materials for a week and washed and sterilised them, they should be fine?*

MN: *We love to water the plants out here but if we had a water wall with tubes and funnels it would be ideal, again like KL said, going to a hardware store it is quite affordable.*

QR: *For the afterschoolers, a few years ago we had a basketball hoop and goal posts, like the preschoolers would love these and we could take them in at night.*

EM: *We have the canopy now so we've more opportunities for bringing the indoor environment out.*

KL: *We could look at a library area in a shaded place. The children can get tired outside so at least with a comfy area they could rest.*

EF: *I made Sun catchers with old CD's before so the children could definitely help. A bug hotel is also easy to make, and we could look at each room making one. This would support children's interests and their knowledge in looking after the natural environment.*

IJ: *Bird feeders are easy to make too so we could look at involving the children. I remember before in one place; we asked the children to paint the tyres and it really gives them ownership.*

QR: *We could make a table and chairs with rings of timber. I did this at home, and it was literally rings of timber that are treated and don't weather.*
EM: *OK, so we have some great ideas there. How will we make it a reality?*
OP: *I wouldn't mind taking an area with the room. So, the children would really be involved?*
GH: *Love this idea, we could involve the kids.*
AB: *Exactly, it would be relevant to their interests then.*
EF: *I agree, like we could devise a plan as to who is doing what and help each other.*
QR: *We could document this and do a before and after with the children.*
Assistant Manager: *OK, so are we all in agreement then?*
Participants: *Agree.*
Non-participants: *Response.*
EM: *OK so we can meet as a room and then think about what areas would meet the children's interest and our areas of speciality.*

Roinn Froebel Don Bhun- agus Luath- Oideachas, Ollscoil Mhá Nuad

Maynooth University Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education

Appendix 14: Post Team Meeting Online Questionnaire

Questionnaire regarding team meeting.

This questionnaire will support my understanding of my practices in cultivating a community of practice. It is an element of data collection for Master of Education, research project. Please complete all questions and submit the questionnaire when complete. All data will be obtained anonymously. Your co-operation is greatly appreciated.

* Required

Q 1. How do you feel the meeting supported team learning? *

Q 2. How do you feel group discussions were provided for during our team meeting?

Q 3. How comfortable or uncomfortable did you feel sharing your opinions in the meeting? *

5 Very comfortable
4 Somewhat comfortable
3 Neither comfortable nor uncomfortable
2 Somewhat comfortable
1 Very uncomfortable

Q 4. How effective do you feel weekly debriefing sessions are within individual rooms?

Q 5. I would appreciate all suggestions you might have that could support our team meetings.