

Matt



Photo K.1: Matt

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

St. Kiernan's Primary School - background and context

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

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

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

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

Curriculum and assessment

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Table 13: A day in junior infants for Matt

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

Well-being

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Photo K.2: Matt playing BINGO with his friends

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

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

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

Identity and Belonging

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

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

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

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



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

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



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

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

Communicating

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

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

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

Matt: *Dia dhuit. (Hello).*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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



Photo K6: Matt playing with percussion instruments

Exploring and Thinking

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

Conclusion

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