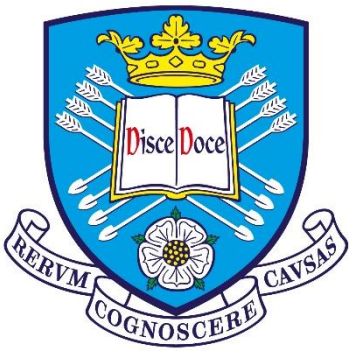

The University Of Sheffield.

‘Orientation or Destination’. Professional perspectives on early childhood education and the Quality Agenda in Ireland

By:

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Abstract

Quality ECE is internationally viewed as an instrument for responding to economic, political and social objectives. This has resulted in a contemporary ELC landscape delineated in recent years by policy hyperactivity focusing on the structures and processes of quality assurance. Using complexity theory as the theoretical framework, this thesis explores the visions and insights of practitioners, as well as a policymaker's perspective, on how the Quality Agenda in Ireland is raising standards. It also examines their views on the direction that ELC policy needs to take from here.

The methodology guiding this research is primarily qualitative and follows the interpretive paradigm. Online research methods explored practitioners' perspectives on how the Quality Agenda has and continues to impact their practice. Using an iterative approach, an online survey explored practitioners' perspectives on policies emerging from the Quality Agenda and its impact on their practices. This survey, together with the continuous policy initiatives announced during the data collection period, informed the online forum. The face-to-face interview with a policymaker facilitated an opportunity to raise key issues from the online research relating to quality reform and explore the intentions behind contemporary and future policy, which focused on quality development.

The findings were analysed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis, NVivo, and Concept Maps. These programs supported navigation through the complex responses, facilitating the creation of a picture of the key issues impacting on quality development. The findings were organised under three key themes: Concepts of Quality, Policy Impact, and Respecting the Practitioner. The Quality Agenda was generally deemed successful in raising standards. Orientation was highlighted as a neglected element of quality, requiring further focus. This research argues that a qualified workforce, working in collaboration with government and embracing social media platforms as an intersection for communication, is critical to future policy development.

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Glossary of acronyms

AIM Access and Inclusion Model

CAQDAS Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis System

CCC County Childcare Committees

CECDE Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education

CiE Children in Europe

CoRE Competence Requirements in Early Childhood

CPD Continuing Professional Development

CRA Children's Rights Alliance

CSO Central Statistics Office

CT Complexity Theory

DCYA Department of Children and Youth Affairs

DCCC Dublin City County Childcare Committee

DES Department of Education and Skills

DJELR Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform

DPER Department of Public Expenditure and Reform

EC European Commission

ECB European Central Bank

ECE Early Childhood Education

ECCE Early Childhood Care and Education (Free Pre-school Scheme)

ECEC Early Childhood Education and Care

ECI Early Childhood Ireland

ECJ European Court of Justice

EIU Economic Intelligence Unit

ELC Early Learning and Care

EOCP Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme

EP European Parliament

EU European Union

EYEPU Early Years Education Policy Unit

EYEI Early-years education-focused inspections

EYP Early Years Practitioner

EYS Early Years Specialist

FF Fianna Fáil

FG Fine Gael

G8 Group of 8

IBEC Irish Business and Employer's Confederation

ICTU Irish Congress of Trade Unions

IELS International Early Learning and Child Well-being Study

IMF International Monetary Fund

ISSA International Step-by-Step Association

LiNC Leadership for Inclusion Course

MLG Multi-Level Governance

NCCA National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

NCS National Childcare Scheme

NCIP National Childcare Investment Programme

NCCA National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

NCCC National Childcare Coordinating Committee

NCS National Childcare Scheme

NERA National Employment Rights Authority

NESC National Economic and Social Council

NESF National Economic and Social Forum

NGO Non-Governmental Organisation

NPM New Public Management

NQF National Quality Framework

NSAI National Síolta and Aistear Initiative

OECD Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

OMCYA Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs

PISA Programme for International Student Assessment

QA Quality Agenda

QDS Quality Development Service (Better Start)

QRF Quality Regulatory Frame

SEO Sectoral Employment Order

SIPTU Services Industrial Professional Trade Union

TA Thematic Analysis

TALIS Teaching and Learning International Study

UNCRC United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

WTO World Trade Organisation

UNESCO United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

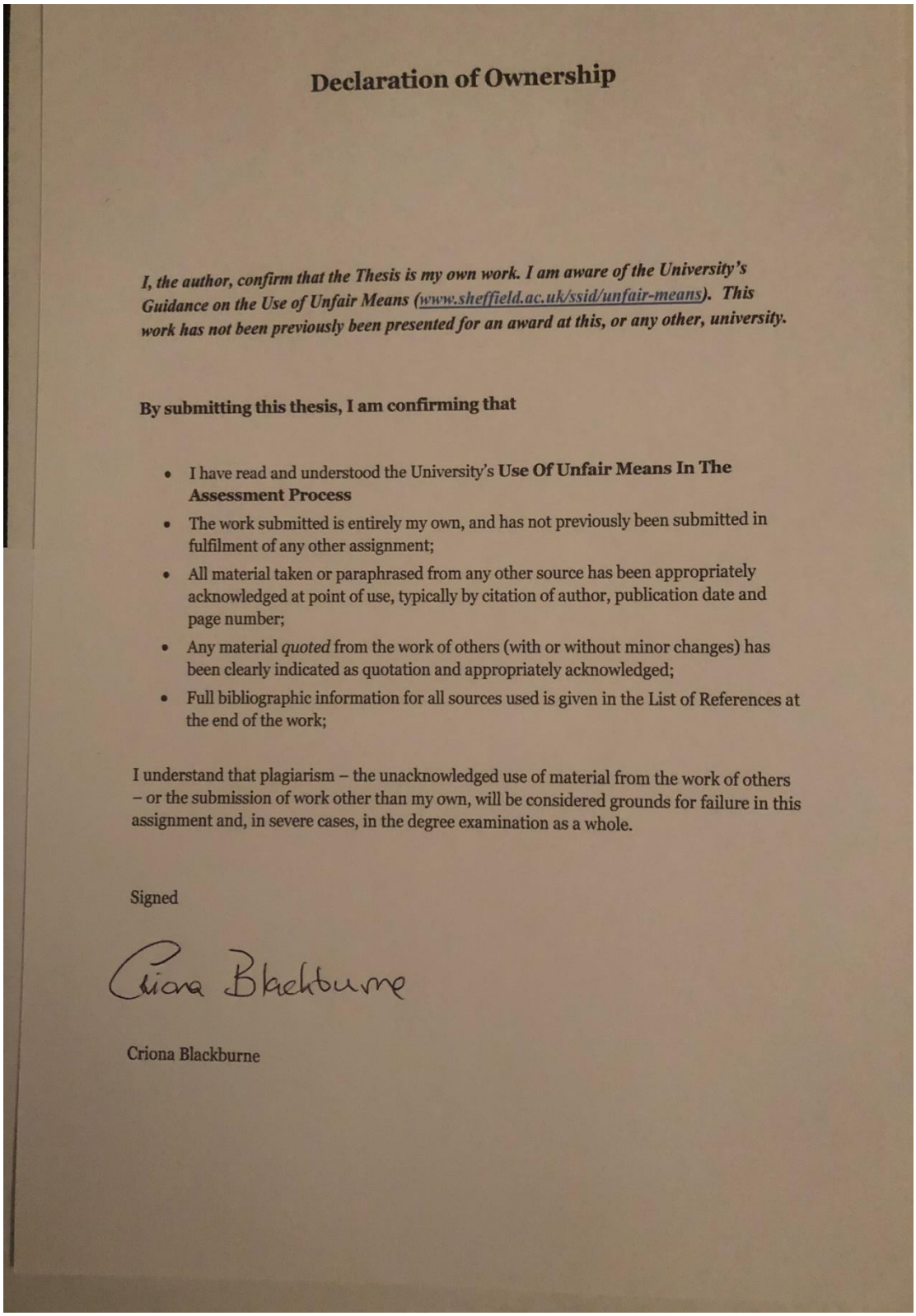
UNICEF United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund

UN United Nations

UIS UNESCO Institute for Statistics

VCO Voluntary Childcare Organisations

Declaration of Ownership



Declaration of Ownership

I, the author, confirm that the Thesis is my own work. I am aware of the University's Guidance on the Use of Unfair Means (www.sheffield.ac.uk/ssid/unfair-means). This work has not been previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, university.

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Signed

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Chapter 1- Introduction

The 21st Century has seen global recognition, both politically and socially, of the multitude of advantages arising from quality early childhood education for the economy, the workforce, society and for the child (OECD, 2017; Hunkin, 2017; French, 2013). This acknowledgement of the criticality of quality early childhood education has attracted the attention of an array of international organisations and child advocacy groups. Many of these organisations hold both the power and potential to significantly sculpt policy development, based on their ontological and epistemological views of what constitutes quality in early years settings. This recognition has led most developed nations, including Ireland, to increase both expenditure and control over the sector, while transforming both the structure and processes of how the ELC sector is governed and developed. This has led to rapid global policy change in response to wider social and economic processes, which have brought growing visibility to the sector. In Ireland, this has resulted in complex policy networks and governance, combined with a broad diversity of providers and provision (Urban et al, 2017; Walsh, 2016a).

Within this emerging policy landscape, the discourse of quality is unrelenting, but as Hunkin (2017, p.1) proposes, quality in the ECEC sector is both 'complex' and 'contestable' and thereby presents significant challenges in transferring policy aspirations into quality practices in ELC settings. Murphy and Skillen (2013, p.84) projected that the 'political stakes are high' when it comes to public services such as early childhood, where public and private concerns intersect, and governments are required to balance 'financial efficiency, political competence and the promotion of democratic values'. Within the demands arising from international funding organisations, public expectations and media attention, all calling on governments to enhance quality in the ELC sector, it is not surprising that governments internationally and here in Ireland have become preoccupied with establishing structures to ensure accountability for and the effectiveness of quality improvement within ELC services. Mason (2016, p.437) however, questions whether it is possible to implement change at 'classroom level' at the 'nexus' of teaching and learning, even with 'control structures, bureaucratic thoroughness, vertical relations and hierarchical accountability mechanisms in place'. Papadopoulos (2010, p.132) also focused on the challenges and complexity facing governments' implementation policies, arguing that accountability mechanisms act as 'a double-edged sword' where the structures put in place to safeguard quality within the sector can create unintended outcomes,

ironically often negating the policy's aspirations. Bovens (2010, p.958) called this the 'accountability paradox', where those being 'scrutinized' become better at meeting 'requirements'. However, this does not necessarily produce better practices; on the contrary, innovation and creativity may be inhibited where practitioners become preoccupied with meeting quality targets, as opposed to critically developing and extending the quality of democratic practice that is reflective of context and the complexity of childhood (Moss, 2015; Murphy & Skillen, 2013).

Many voices and actors impact on the development of quality in the ELC sector, from international organisations such as the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU, 2012), the OECD (OECD, 2017); World Bank (2012); the Gates Foundation (2017); the European Commission (2014); G20 (2018); UN (2015); UNICEF (2017), and UNESCO (2017) (Anderson et al. 2017), to national advocacy groups such as the Children's Rights Alliance (2012), Barnardos (2018), and various government departments and agencies. The one voice largely absent from the policy formation phase has been that of the early childhood practitioner, who is the most impacted by the various shifts in ELC policy and bears the responsibility for implementing and realising policy aspirations (O'Donoghue-Hynes, 2013). In view of these complexities, this research aspires to provide a platform to explore the impact and implications of ELC policies on the development of quality practices within early years settings, primarily from the practitioners' perspective, using a complexity theory framework. Mason (2016, p.437) proposed that the factors impacting on an education system are 'almost limitless' and it is within the 'scale', 'diversity' and 'interconnectedness' of all these factors 'that the possibility of change' and sustaining that change will lie. In addition to seeking practitioners' perspectives, this research explores the intentions behind early years policy from the policy development perspective by interviewing a key civil servant who has been directly involved in the planning and design of recent ELC policies, so that a direct bridge can be created between policy intentions and policy realisations. In this way, this research intends to capture and make meaning from the myriad of perspectives that influence practice in ELC settings.

The complexity theory lens is particularly effective in this regard, as it appreciates that developing quality structures and processes in early childhood is far from a simple linear task. Instead, it is complex, multifaceted, ever evolving, and contextually located in a specific time and space. Biesta (2016, p.203), from a philosophical perspective, recommended complexity theory as the most meaningful approach to educational research. Complexity

theory opens up possibilities for thinking differently and cultivating a broader understanding of the links between theory and practice. This does not simply seek answers to 'what works', but looks at wider issues, including the multidimensional purposes of education, thus viewing education as a '(complex) social reality constituted by the conscious acts of reflexive agents' (Biesta, 2016, p.203). He proposes that positive educational change is most likely to be successful when all agents from policy level down contribute to change. In particular, he illuminated the importance of listening to teachers and learners at the kernel of practice, as only they can make practice visible from the inside.

1.1 Rationale

Mahony and Hayes (2006) predicted that determining quality in the Irish context would need to be undertaken by those that held a stake in the Irish ELC sector. However, this is complex due to the 'diverse nature of its stakeholders and the diversity of perspectives' (Mahony & Hayes, 2006, p.197). As Moss (1994, p.4) note, 'the power of different stakeholders often determines the influence they have in the process'. In Ireland, Mahony and Hayes (2006, p.198) argue that the power of influence is narrow and tends to sway towards a 'range of experts who control the process of definition and evaluation based on 'technical expertise''. More recently, policy documents reflect recognition by the Irish government of this void, as policy development consistently veers towards a consultative approach with all stakeholders. Yet an analysis of the process of consultation demonstrates that the voice of the ELC practitioner remains limited (Blackburne, 2016c). Consequently, the early years professional, who has the practical knowledge of how policy transfers into practice and is therefore best positioned to evaluate the impact of policy, remains largely alienated from the processes of policy development.

1.2 Positionality

Urban (2012) proposes that there is no safe or neutral ground in research, therefore researchers are ethically bound to situate and position themselves in relation to contested meanings. This, he clarifies, is not about taking sides, but rather taking a stand. My position is reflective of my personal and professional trajectory, which has been dominated by educational processes from childhood, as a student, secondary school teacher, a mother, an ELC provider/educator, a tutor/lecturer through my Masters and EdD studies, and currently as an early years specialist employed by a government agency. This role was established

under the AIM (Access and Inclusion) Policy and operates within the government established Better Start initiative, which is a mentoring service directly working in collaboration with ELC to enhance quality of provision and practice (Rogers, 2014). A microscopic part of my experience in the role of Early Years Specialist (EYS) enabled me to view policy development in action. I was part of a working group developing an AIM box of resource toys, which would be distributed to all ECCE settings. Although this experience was brief, it did open my eyes to the levels of thought and discussion that go into even the smallest decisions. Collaboration was active, all members of the group were afforded a voice, and their thoughts considered. This opportunity provided me with a vision, although brief, of policy at formation point, rather than implementation, which is the greater part of my experience. These multiple lenses have positioned me as the recipient and implementer of policy, during a timespan in which government interest and control over the ELC sector extended, and where regulations and implications for non-compliance escalated intensively.

Within my own life trajectory lies complexity, as the multiple lenses of my life create numerous and sometimes contradictory personal perspectives. On the one hand, I can see how the government perceives a duty to increase control over quality in the ELC sector and ensure accountability for public finances. Equally, I can see the potential detriment of a culture of accountability and compliance to practitioners' sense of autonomy and control over their own settings and teaching practices. The only clear view that has emerged from my studies and experiences is that early childhood care and education is complex on multiple levels, and that the concepts of 'quality' and 'governance' are both subjective and complex. It is this strong sense of complexity which lends itself effectively to the chosen theoretical framework of complexity theory. It takes the view that early childhood and quality are complex in terms of both governance and practice, which leads this research to explore the perspectives of both practitioners and policymakers on how successful quality improvement measures have been in raising standards in ELC settings.

Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2018) argue that any funded research project must be politically sculpted based on the funding organisation. However, this research has been completely self-funded and consequently is not answerable to any funding body. Yet as Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011) propose, in research, politics is inescapable and both my current role and experience affect the views I will present in this project, both consciously and often unconsciously. Burgess (1993, p.1) highlight two views, which are particularly

pertinent to this research: firstly, that 'research must become policy relevant' and secondly, 'research must come closer to the requirements of practitioners'. Anderson and Biddle (1991) propose that while research informs politics, there is a clear difference between researchers and politicians. Researchers are afforded the time to explore the complexity of the issues at stake, whereas politicians are restrained by time and the need to make quick decisions to meet urgent political agendas. Therefore, I came to this research with multiple lenses, which span a period of intensifying regulations and government interest in the ELC sector. Equally, I arrived with epistemological and ontological views that are complex and somewhat split. Generally, I am drawn to the postmodern perspective and the idea that there is no single 'right' way, which is particularly apt for this research. As Campbell Barr (2018, p.76) highlights, postmodernism is a critical angle for 'considering the silenced knowledge of early years professionals'. However, I am alert to the limitations of postmodernism, which Young (2008) suggests presents knowledge as being non-existent. Furthermore, Gray and Mc Blain (2015) argue that postmodernism excels at problematising situations, but fails dreadfully at finding solutions. It is my aspiration that this research should seek solutions. It achieves this through identifying the strengths and challenges associated with implementing contemporary ELC policy from practitioners' perspectives. The intended outcomes are to identify beneficial policies and seek alternative policy approaches and future imaginaries beyond the current formulations of 'quality' within the ELC sector.

1.3 Emerging personal thought processes – research to date.

This research has been informed by the papers completed on the journey to Part II of the EdD in part fulfilment of the final award. Focusing on methodology and methods, the first paper concluded that the future of research did not lie in contradistinction between the positivist and interpretivist paradigms. Rather, the embracing of both approaches has the potential to develop new methodologies and methods capable of capturing diversity of views, and to generate data capable of forming new futures for early childhood education. While this does require compromise on both the positivist and interpretivist sides (Mukherji & Albon, 2015), this paper concurred with Popper (2002, p.xvi), who argues that 'if by chance' we find ourselves in a position where we cannot fully 'accept any of the existing creeds', all we 'can do is begin afresh' (Blackburne, 2016a, p.19). This led naturally to the suitability of bricolage as an approach to analysing research, which is not identified by constraints, but on the contrary is open to possibilities (Kincheloe, 2011). A bricolage approach was employed

in the second paper to examine how issues of competency, agency, and the value of the ELC worker impacts on their capability to implement the Quality Agenda (QA) proposed by international agencies and national governments. This paper illuminated that many pertinent issues within ELC policy development, such as inspections, professional expertise, economics, identity, status and professionalisation, directly affected the ability of ELC practitioners to implement QA (Blackburne, 2016b). The third paper looked in depth at the opportunities and constraints provided by using Facebook as a research method to capture the perspectives of the ELC practitioner on the day-to-day practical impact of the recent policy introduced as part of the Government's articulated QA (Blackburne, 2016c, p.18).
Policy analysis was the focus of Paper 4, which used Hyatt's model of critical discourse analysis to analyse the AIM Policy, launched in 2016, which embedded the concepts of equality, diversity and inclusion as fundamentally aligned to any assessment of quality reform in the sector. Paper 5 emerged as a natural consequence to the first four papers and focused on reconciling the discourses of utopianism with neoliberalism. It also made a direct link with the final research proposal, which led directly to this research. Therefore, the current research is a natural consequence and culmination of my EdD journey.

1.4 Exploring complexity

Early Childhood policy development has been both rapid and intense, dramatically changing the sector's governance processes. The impetus behind the myriad of policies has fluctuated between those clearly reflective of international ELC trends and those sculpted from evidence-based practice, many of which were responsive to political, economic, societal and media interest in particular events or a sustained need. The speed and intensity of policy development, many commentators argue, is not reflective of an overall plan, but instead has been characterised as haphazard, multifaceted, conflicting and confusing (Moloney, 2017; Urban et al., 2017). Walsh (2016a) described the current status of ELC policy as complex, difficult to navigate, and often contradictory, while Moloney (2017, p.3) defined the sector as fragmented and dysfunctional, resulting in a workforce that is 'dispirited and disenfranchised'. In contrast to expressions of disillusionment within the sector, the Irish government and related agencies tend to proclaim unprecedented progress in their overarching ambition of transforming the way ELC services are delivered (McGarry, 2014; DCYA, 2014). Aligned to this, as Urban et al. (2017, p.10) acknowledge, there have been 'unprecedented efforts to develop, expand and sustain better quality for children and

families'. Notwithstanding this, the sector has remained 'highly fragmented' due to the 'multitude of policy actors' pursing their own agendas. This resulted in an ELC, which was abstruse in terms of structure, quality, inequality, and key players.

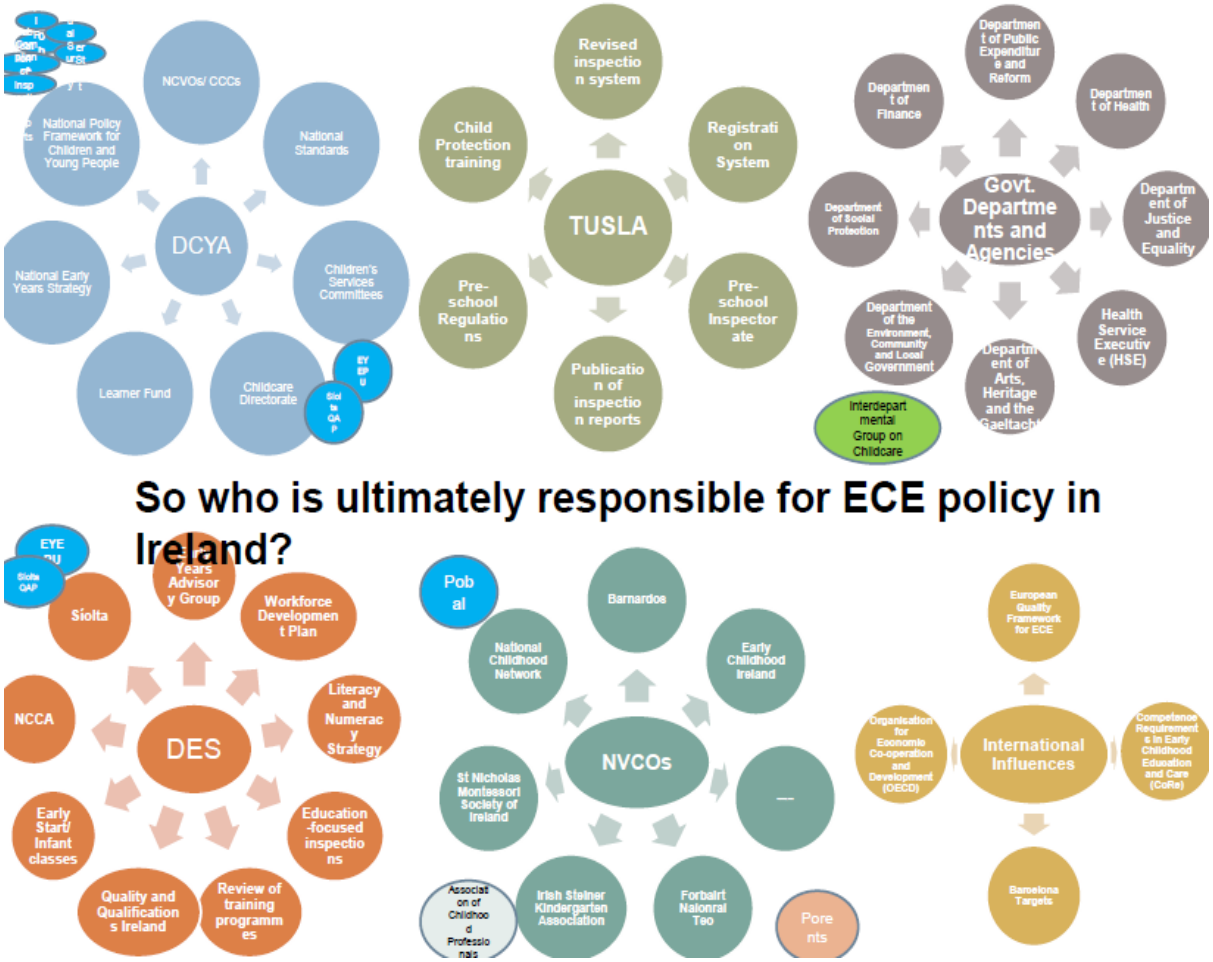


Figure 1: A sectoral map of those responsible for ECE policy in Ireland (Presentation from Dr Thomas Walsh, Maynooth University at OMEP 2015, shared by ECI, 2015)

ELC policy in Ireland has not developed in isolation, but is reflective of the intense interest and policy activity, emerging within what Hunkin (2017, p.35) terms a 'global paradigm', wherein the dominance of international education discourses has led to what she argues was an 'opaqueness' in policy development. As a result, Hunkin (2017) proposes that the challenge has arisen to reimagine early childhood policy through new lenses and new methodologies, ultimately moving away from dominant positivist discourses which define the concept of quality practice as something tangible and easily recognisable within the realm of 'evidence-based practice'.

Despite the spiralling attention that early childhood policy has been receiving, and the growing connectivity between national and international research informing policy, a significant chasm is emerging between the aspirations behind ELC policy development within the corridors of power, and how practitioners are receiving these changes. ELC practitioners are becoming increasingly restless, articulating frustrations at their lack of voice, recognition, and overall sense of being undervalued. This unrest is manifesting itself on social media, through protests and increased unionisation of the sector, a trend that can be seen both here in Ireland and internationally (ACP, 2019a; Brown, 2016).

Murphy (2015) illuminates the almost impossible challenge facing governments to respond to families' demands to reduce the cost of childcare, while childcare workers actively campaign for better pay and conditions. She describes this system as problematic and difficult to remedy. This is made even more complex by the fact that neither of these sets of stakeholders are represented by one unifying view. Rather, within each sector, be it parents or childcare workers, lies a myriad of views, all calling for priority.

ELC educators are instrumental in realising policy change within their classrooms (Van der Heijden et al., 2015). Yet O'Donoghue-Hynes (2012), in questioning ELC policy, identified that throughout the trajectory of Irish ELC policy development, the one voice consistently marginalised in terms of policy formation, and indeed evaluation, has been that of the ELC practitioner. In a more recent analysis, Blackburne (2016c) noted that while ELC practitioners were being consulted on contemporary policy and despite a possibly genuine desire by government to engage with their voices, the reality that emerged, and is emerging, is more reflective of tokenism than meaningful interaction with workers. Therefore, the key impetus for this research is to redress this imbalance and place the views of ELC practitioners and providers at the centre of an impact analysis of recent policies, in particular those which have emerged since the initiation of the Irish Government's Quality Agenda (QA), which was first announced in 2013. Listening to the views and perspectives of practitioners is fundamental on many levels; none less so in recognising the invaluable contribution they can make to ELC policy development, having direct experience on how policy transfers to practice at ground level in their settings. Fricker (2007, p.45) argues that this is a basic ethical concern, as she identified that if people are not taken seriously in their 'capacity as a knower', they are 'wronged in a capacity essential to human value'. As the role of the practitioner

within ELC policy documents is consistently recognised as fundamental to the realisation of quality, it is equally critical that they are listened to and their views taken seriously (Moss, 2010). Therefore, selecting a theoretical framework that could capture the multitude and potentially diverse views held by ELC practitioners was critical to this research.

1.5 Towards a theoretical framework

ELC practitioners will conceivably present heterogeneous perspectives on how they have been experiencing policy and how it has influenced practice within their settings. This diversity of opinion is reflective of the diverse qualifications and roles within the sector. While providing a genesis of opportunity to open policy to multiple and dynamic evaluations, this also creates challenges in developing a frame of reference to support and make meaning from the complex backdrop of opinions emerging from multiple positions, experiences, and values within the sector. This research, therefore, sought a theoretical framework that would be capable of creating meaning from these multiple perspectives.

Crotty (1998) describes a theoretical framework as an approach to comprehending and making meaning of society and human interactions within a set of assumptions that capture the epistemological and ontological views of the researcher. In this research, I sought a theoretical framework that would not only be capable of capturing my views and values, but also those of ELC practitioners and providers. My personal ontological and epistemological views, as stated earlier, are that the world is complex and socially constructed by the dominant discourses of contemporary society. From this epistemological stance and the nature of consulting with a disparate sector, complexity theory (CT) emerged as a natural choice, combined with the ontological premise that early childhood systems in Ireland are complex and dynamic; internationally, nationally and locally connected and influenced; unpredictable, and constantly in a state of flux.

Complexity theory presents a suitable framework for this research because it has the potential to construct ideas from the array of voices informing and influencing the development of quality in ELC structures and processes in Ireland (Walsh, 2016b; VanderVen, 1997). Ozga (2000) calls for rigorous research that does not disregard, but instead embraces complexity. Mangiofico (2014) posits that a CT framework does just this, as it enables the researcher to draw conclusions from the multiple perspectives that influence both policy and practice in

early childhood. He argues that while many stakeholders may have a 'similar frame of reference', the multitude of interested parties would perceive these frames differently depending on their own experiences and values (p.39). To establish understanding from such diversity of opinion, the future needs to be sculpted based on the past and present experiences of key players. Capturing on-the-ground experience of policy in action, as well as providing research methods that support 'dynamic interactions among participants', enabling their voices to exert influence on policy processes, are crucial (Mangiofico, 2014). In this regard, Stacey et al. (2000) propose that CT presents the possibility of creating order amongst disorder.

CT underlines the concept of listening and encouraging dialogue from an array of perspectives, which provides a framework for listening to divergent viewpoints on how the constantly evolving Quality Agenda is impacting and supporting practice within ELC settings. Pinar (2012, p.2) proposes that CT responds to systems that are 'dynamic, emergent, transformative and non-linear', all indisputable characteristics of ELC policy and practice. Quoting Doll, he proposes that change transpires from interactions between subjects and the environment. Aligning these views with the theories of Piaget, he theorises that transformation occurs through processes of 'equilibrium, disequilibrium, re-equilibrium'. This concurs with Ozga (2000, p.2) who defined policy 'as a process rather than a product, involving negotiations, contestations or a struggle between various groups who may lie outside the formal machinery of official policy making' or as Bradley (2011) noted, may lie within the inner spheres of policy development.

Bradley (2011, p.3) states that ELC policy processes in Ireland are complex, involving a 'community of human agents' in 'promoting, reinforcing or contesting dominant or competing paradigms' to influence its development. Buchanan (2013, p.1) argues that within these 'social and policy debates', real teachers with 'complex professional selves' exist. As Cumming (2015, p.57), highlights in the Australian context, in these times of change, early childhood educators become 'a momentary part of a constant process of becoming', a becoming that is shaped by policy, as practitioners primarily realise policy aims and intentions. Such complexities require structures to be in position to capture the dynamics at local level to allow practitioners' voices contribute to complex early childhood systems (Stacey et al., 2000). Ozga (2000, p.2), calls on practitioners who are responsible for policy implementation to realise the potential of their classrooms as a space to critique 'official

research outputs' and to 'orient themselves' in relation to 'official research claims', which Sims (2017) suggests, is challenging when governments impose tight regulations and accountability measures. Ball (2006), proposes that no single theory can explain the intricacies and scope of policy, which is impacted by the complex political and cultural structures at play.

Within this understanding, CT has the potential to seek a 'theoretical understanding of human behaviour as well as the impact of diverse contexts' (Ostrom, 2010, p.659). This is particularly relevant, as this research will be examining policy at both macro and micro level through relational fields and contexts. 'Complexity theory is not a complete framework', instead it is necessary to 'focus on the problems of a particular area to be able to conceptualize their complexity in a coherent fashion' (Morcol, 2012, pp.xi-xii). Within this context, the challenges facing ELC practitioners in implementing policy and their diverse experiences of how policy impacts their practice can be heard within the array of competing voices, all of which contribute to the accelerated policy development that has come to permeate the ELC sector. In order to gain an understanding of this complex and dynamic environment, the next section will examine the multiple ways in which analysing policy unearths further layers of complexity in understanding the dynamic characteristics of Ireland's ELC sector.

Chapter 2 – Background to Policy Development

2.1 Different ways of looking; different ways of analysing policy.

Dye (1976) notes that there are many theoretical approaches to analysing policy in order to understand and discover what governments do, why they do it, and what difference it will make. In Ireland, many of these approaches are evident within early childhood policy development, which has been demarcated by the absence of a distinctive, consistent, coherent or linear approach to policy development. Policy has emerged at times coherently in response to the wider government policy objectives, and at times in a more ad hoc manner, responsive to events that have moulded and changed the course of public perception and consequently government policy.

Leoveneau (2013, p.43) foregrounds the concept of rationalist theory, which he proposes 'assumes that all public decisions' are based on a 'background of rationality'. Within this theory, the government establishes policy goals based on perceived societal values in the view that the 'general interest' determines policy development. Within this paradigm, it is necessary to question who determines society's values and who determines what the general interest is, and whose interest? In the Irish ELC context, and indeed internationally, the consistent dominant discourse remains that of 'affordability, accessibility and quality' (DCYA, 2018a). While the frame of reference has been consistent, these are neither objective, nor clearly defined concepts. More recently, a new discourse is entering the fray, that of sustainability, which focuses on the viability of services and therefore it is not surprisingly, being voiced by childcare provider advocates, such as Early Childhood Ireland (ECI) and the Association of Childhood Professionals (ACP) and now entering into the fray of government discourse (ACP, 2017; ECI, 2018b; DCYA, 2018a).

Pierson (2000, p.251) proposed a theory of path dependence, namely that it was increasingly common for governments to follow a policy development characterised by 'specific patterns of timing and sequence' with a general focus on 'increasing returns'. Hayes et al. (2013, p.3) noted a significant shift in the 'language of policy debate' since the early 1990's, towards increasingly viewing childcare and children 'as a social investment'. This discourse is frequently echoed by policymakers in their justification of investment in quality structures in

early childhood. For example, in the foreword of Better Start: Brighter Futures, the National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014-2020, the former Taoiseach, Enda Kenny, indicated that the central theme of the framework was to 'enable Government and interagency collaboration to connect infrastructure to guarantee standards and make the best possible use of public money'. Francis Fitzgerald, then Minister for Children and Youth Affairs and responsible for launching the Quality Agenda on which this research focuses, stated that ensuring 'the best possible outcomes' for children was central to 'future economic planning' (DCYA, 2014: p.viii). Rogers (2014, p.27) in projecting the criticality of enhancing quality supports in the ELC sector, equally looked towards returns on investment as a part justification as to why 'quality is essential, not optional'.

Pierson (2000, p.251) however, also argues that while political development may be linear, sequential and focusing on returns, this is 'often punctuated by critical moments or junctures that shape the basic contours of social life'. In May 2013, RTE's broadcasting of *A Breach of Trust*, outlining poor practice in early years settings, reflected a critical moment that acted as a direct catalyst for Francis Fitzgerald's announcement of a suite of reforms aimed at 'transforming the way early childhood services are delivered' (DCYA, 2013b). Pierson (1993) further argues that institutional rigidity means that once a policy path has been put in place, it is very challenging to alter it. Hayes et al. (2013) concurred with this concept when they proposed that accelerated policy development in the early years sector from 1995 until 2012 in Ireland did not equate to significant changes in the system and delivery of early childhood education.

2013 set the path for transforming the way early childhood services are delivered. In that year, Hayes et al. (2013) analysed the previous period of rapid ELC policy formation, which they denoted had been occurring since 1995. Using Hall's (1993) typology of policy formation, they concluded that although marked as a period of significant policy change, the fundamental features of early childhood policy all remained constant. These were characterised by limited direct service delivery, reluctance to intervene in family matters, and consistently prioritising education over care. The prioritisation of education over care became a dominant feature following the introduction of the ECCE scheme. Moreover, it was particularly accelerated following the introduction of the Quality Agenda in 2013, where considerable focus was placed on the government funded ECCE scheme, which was provided for the years immediately preceding beginning primary school. Hayes et al. (2013) noted a

change in the language of policy formation away from a focus on supporting mothers' return to the workforce to an emphasis on investment in children. They proposed that the policy formation occurred under the umbrella of global influence, through 'EU funding instruments', the OECD, and 'international cost-benefit analysis' (p.3).

Hall (1993, p.275) argues that policymaking was considerably more complex than merely governments responding to 'national interest', as he questioned how 'the national interest comes to be defined'. He also proposes that 'policy legacies', similar to Pierson's concept of 'path dependence', is not an accurate theory for policy formation, as it does not clarify why some legacies continue to be more influential than others (p.275). As an alternative, Hall (1993, p.276) leans towards the concept of 'policymaking as social learning', quoting Hugo Heclo, who proposed:

> Politics finds its sources not only in power, but also in uncertainty – men collectively wondering what to do… Governments not only 'power'… they also puzzle. Policymaking is a form of collective puzzlement on society's behalf…. Much political interaction has constituted a process of social learning expressed through policy.

My personal experience of policy in action, as mentioned earlier, reflects the concept of collective puzzle solving.

As Hall (1993, p.276) points out, the social learning theory of policy making is flawed, as it implies that the government has autonomy in policy development, free from the pressure of external interest groups. He therefore rejected the state-centric theory and points in favour of the state-structural concept, where 'interest groups, political parties, and other actors outside the state' play a pivotal role in the policy process. In the trajectory of ELC policy in Ireland, this can be traced back to the partnership approach to policy development, which commenced as the dominant policy path in the late 1980's. Within the state-structural theory, Hall (1993, p.276) proposes that the 'structure and past activities of the state often affect the nature or force of the demands that these actors articulate'. Hayes et al. (2013) argue that this typified the situation that arose in ELC policy in Ireland from 1995-2012, where despite an efflorescence of policy activity, ultimately nothing changed in terms of the fundamental structures of early childhood education and care. Government's limited role in direct service delivery, state reluctance to engage in family matters, and the prioritisation of education over care still featured heavily. The implications of this lack of change are significant for this

research, firstly to question why, despite an emerging partnership approach which embraced consultation, were key issues fundamental to developing a quality childcare sector not realised? Secondly, to investigate whether unlike the preceding period, the timeline following 2013 has been characteristic of change, and if so, to what extent?

2.1.1 Historical trajectory of ECE policy development

Moran (2012, p.1) notes that a consistent feature of the Irish state since its foundation has been 'a willingness to share institutional responsibility' with private...non-state organisations. This was particularly illuminated from the late 1980's onwards, where successive governments, starting with the Haughey era, articulated their commitment to consultation and power sharing. This approach to policy development has not only been dominant since 1987, but has been widely acclaimed as productive and responsive to economic interests. It has, however, been equally criticised as being less responsive to other 'critical areas of Irish life', including childcare (O'Donnell, 2001, p.3). Hardiman (2006) highlights that social partnership provides a privileged position within government for social partners and broadens the base of influence on government thinking. Moran (2012, p.1) claims that partnership was a strategic move for government, where the state remained dominant and used the relationship to 'give legitimacy' to their political and economic decisions', primarily benefitting the elite in society rather than the general public. O'Donnell (2001, p.3) acknowledges that while partnership involves bargaining, negotiating, problem solving, creating a shared understanding, and a 'functional interdependence' between partners, this represents only part of the picture, as the more powerful policy actors dominate, while the weaker players submit to avoid political wilderness. In Ireland, this led effectively to limiting the potential for alternative policy approaches, with social policy consistently being overshadowed by the dominant ambition for economic competitiveness (Moran, 2012). The Partnership era was, however, marked by strategies that promised social fairness and presented a vision of a future embedded in the principles of children's rights (O'Donnell, 2001).

Through the early 90s to 2009, childcare was primarily viewed as a resource to support the labour market. Despite the language of quality and children's rights emerging within the public and policy domains, limited practical and tangible measures were taken to support the development of quality and children's rights within the sector (Bradley, 2011). As Hayes

(2010) proposes, it was against the backdrop of Ireland's signing and ratifying the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) that two important childcare strategies, the National Childcare Strategy (1999) and the National Children's Strategy (2000) were introduced. The National Childcare Strategy, formed by the Expert Working Group established under Partnership 2000 (DJERL, 1999), and the National Children's Strategy (2000) formed as an outcome of the *Ready to Learn* White Paper on Early Childhood Education, which had emerged from an interdepartmental group, a cross-departmental team, and members of a non-government advisory panel. The remit of the former was narrow. As Hayes (2014, p.4) notes, it was 'restricted in terms of reference' focusing only on the childcare needs of working parents. This strategy led to two successive national capital investment programmes. Firstly, the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOPC) (2000-2006), then the National Childcare Investment Programme (NCIP), which contributed significantly to the current childcare infrastructure of centre-based institutional care with mixed provision and a predominance of private providers, (approximately 70% to a more modest 30% community-based provision) (Hayes, 2014). A further outcome of the National Childcare Strategy was the formation of the County Childcare Committees (CCC) to support childcare development at local level, under the direction of a National Childcare Coordinating Committee (NCCC) to support resource and monitor the CCCs (IBEC/ICTU, 2005).

The National Childcare Strategy made a wide range of recommendations for quality improvement, which initially never moved beyond rhetoric and recommendations and only came to fruition after the announcement of the 2013 Quality Agenda. These included recommendations that ELC services should undergo a registration process that would require them to meet national minimum standards as a basic condition of operating. There was also a call for a common induction programme for inspectors, with at least one team member trained in early years. In this way, it was hoped that a more consistent and standardised approach to the implementation and interpretation of regulations could be developed. These recommendations reflected an objective vision of quality, where from a policy perspective, quality in ELC settings could be standardised and replicated through processes of regulation and inspection. Other recommendations included:

- Development of a scheme to support the cost of childcare

- Ensuring a minimum 60% of staff would have at least three years' training in both theory and practice components
- 20% of the workforce should be male
- A national pay scale should be developed to reflect the economic value of the work undertaken by ELC practitioners.

In the years following the launch of the strategy, however, none of these recommendations were realised in policy or legislation. The period did see significant capital investment in developing the childcare infrastructure. Funding was also allocated for the development of the County Childcare Committees (CCC) and voluntary childcare organisations (VCO), so that they could provide advice and support to providers and practitioners within this policy landscape. The sector was expanding rapidly, with many new providers and practitioners entering the sector for the first time. In contrast to the dynamic development of the early years infrastructure, the processes within settings were demarcated by attitudes. There was little incentive for staff to train or upskill due to the lack of mandatory qualifications; there was no clear vision or curriculum, and until the launch of the 2006 Childcare Regulations (GOI, 2006), there was no legislative requirement for settings to support children's wellbeing and development. O'Donnell (2001) argues that the failure to follow through on the promises within the strategies was expensive, disappointing, and damaging in terms of social progress. While the National Children's Strategy has firmly established children's rights within the policy framework, it was criticised for its 'lack of implementation', 'in key areas such as child poverty, the protection of children from abuse, and the lack of political leadership to ensure full implementation of the strategy' (Moran, 2009, p.2).

As far back as 2001, O'Donnell, (2001, p.12), notes that the concept of a partnership approach yielding true power over the social or financial policy landscape was somewhat of a fallacy. In reality, Ireland's overall approach to both 'market and social regulation has been, and will continue to be 'shaped' and 're-shaped by' our 'membership of the EU'. This situation was accelerated in 2009, with the collapse of the Irish banking sector. The economic crisis created a dramatic departure from the partnership approach, where the government's new 'legitimising discourse' no longer relied on social partners, but the restoration of Ireland's status within the international community. As the European Commission (2018a, p.34) observed, the 'social partnership model was considerably altered during and after the

economic crisis', 'reducing the social partners' power from negotiation to consultation, with the establishment in 2015 of a 'structured forum for economic dialogue' to merely listen to their views. The government, through economic necessity, relied on international organisations such as the international markets, European Commission (EC); European Central Bank (ECB); Debt Rating Agencies; international moneylenders; the OECD, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to legitimise its power (Moran, 2009). This marked the point where Irish policy was no longer developed on national terms; instead, it responded to the influence of an array of international institutions, including the organisations named above (Moran, 2009). The future of Ireland's ELC policies were and are significantly influenced by the dominant discourses emerging internationally, including the view that a quality early childhood sector is critical to the development of a prosperous nation (DES, 2018; DCYA, 2014). From 2009 onwards, there was a significant departure in Ireland from focusing on developing the structures of childcare settings towards concern for the quality of what was happening inside these buildings, reflective of international trends. Aligned with many OECD countries, in the years following 2009, early childhood policies were framed within the social investment paradigm, where funding quality in the ELC sector was equated as value for money in terms of economic returns in the future. Within this vision of quality, ELC policy is future-orientated; the child becomes a 'central figure', 'both as an emblem of the future and as a potential barrier to mothers' employment in the here and now' (Adamson & Brennan, 2014, p.46).

2.1.2 Emergence of the Quality Agenda

2009 was a significant year for quality development in the Irish sector, with the introduction of the ECCE scheme (Free Preschool Year). While the scheme arose in many respects out of political expediency in response to the economic crisis, its impact, intentional or otherwise, was to set in motion a convergence of policy attention towards the development of quality. In response to the economic crisis, an emergency budget was introduced on the 7th April 2009, when the then Minister for Finance, Brian Lenihan, announced the abolition of the Early Childcare Supplement, which had provided parents with €1000 for each child under six each year until their sixth birthday, with no accountability from parents on how that money was spent. In its place, he announced the free preschool year (ECCE scheme) for all children aged between 3 years and 3 months and 4 years and 6 months. Welcoming the scheme, the then Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Barry Andrews, referred to it as a commitment to

'children's social and educational development', 'a key building block', in the plan for a 'smart economy' and a strategic move in promoting 'equality of opportunity'. Quoting from the National Competitiveness Council report, he acclaimed how the scheme 'raises private and social returns'. Referring to the scheme as the 'right policy choice', he openly acknowledged the government's responsiveness to the National Economic and Social Forum (NESF), the OECD, Children's Rights Alliance and Barnardos. Interestingly, not once did Minister Andrews refer to the development of quality within the ELC sector (OMCYA, 2009). However, this scheme effectively placed power in the hands of the government who created the stipulations for entry into the scheme, and therefore, through contractual agreement with providers, could set the agenda for quality. Under the conditions for the scheme, anyone working within the ECCE rooms were required to hold a minimum FETAC Level 5 major award in childcare. Room leaders required FETAC Level 6 major award 'Supervision in Childcare' and as an incentive to increase graduate leadership in the sector, a higher capitation was awarded to rooms where the leader had achieved a Level 7 degree or higher (DPER, 2014). Neylon (2012) states that the scheme was a direct response to Ireland's dismal performance in *The Childcare Transition - A league table of Early Childhood Education and Care in Economically Advanced Countries*, together with the report of the National Competitive Council of the same year, which concurred that pre-primary investment provided a 'significant individual and social return' (Forfas, 2008, p.106). It also responded to the Barcelona Summit's (2002) recommendations that 90% of children would attend pre-primary, considering that in Ireland at that time less than 5% attended (DPEJR, 2014). The ECCE scheme enabled the government to enforce the two National Frameworks aimed at raising quality, Síolta and Aistear, which had been published in 2006 and 2008 respectively. These frameworks fundamentally became the bedrocks for early education policy developments from this point onwards (GOI, 2018b). While in hindsight, based on international directives and trends, the scheme appeared inevitable, it presented dramatic demands for change for ELC practitioners. They now had to raise their qualifications, in some cases accept a drop in income, and agree to implement Síolta, the National Quality Framework (2006) and Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework, both aimed at increasing quality in the sector and instil a 'post-modern relational pedagogy and rights based approaches to practice' (Neylon, 2012, p.5). The economic crisis weakened the position of practitioners, as the scheme for many meant survival. Nevertheless, the change was cautiously welcomed by the sector and a willingness existed to professionalise and meet the contractual agreements therein. At a national policy level, the ECCE scheme introduced

coherence to the Irish preschool system by providing unified frameworks of quality and curriculum, a minimum qualification level, and a single funding system. Providing higher capitation for degree-led ECCE rooms incentivised the workforce to achieve graduate status (Neylon, 2012). This policy trajectory, which increased public funding for the sector, was fundamentally an investment in private enterprise for a service that was considered and viewed to be a public good. Press et al. (2018) argue that government investment internationally in private enterprise effectively commercialises ELC, a situation that Urban (2018) contends effectively acts as a barrier to the development of sustainable quality within the sector.

From 2010 onwards, the concerted focus on the ELC sector continued and on the 2nd June 2011 the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) was established, replacing the Office for the Minister for Children and Youth affairs (OMCYA). This new department aspired to consolidate policies, which focused on children within one department, in contrast to the historically disjointed approach, where many departments held responsibility for children's affairs. The Minister for Children and Youth Affairs had a seat in the cabinet, thereby bringing both a voice and focus on children and family affairs into the heart of government (DCYA, 2018a).

Meanwhile, there was a consistent drive internationally towards progressive universalism from the European Commission (2011) and through setting and reaching quality targets as outlined by the OECD's (2012) policy levers. The most fundamental element that hastened the development of the Irish government's Quality Agenda arose from the airing on 28th May 2013 of RTE's programme, *A Breach of Trust*, which placed the spotlight on poor quality practices in a number of private crèches receiving ECCE funding. The images of what the then Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Frances Fitzgerald, termed 'appalling mistreatment of young children bordering on abuse' (Oireachtas, 2013), placed the national spotlight firmly on early childhood policy and its perceived inadequacy to prevent this type of abuse. This focus reoccurred in July 2019, when RTE aired a similar programme, *Behind Closed Doors*. Many critics questioned how, despite state investment of 'almost €1,139 billion', with both regulations and inspections in place since 1996, and furthermore with the introduction of the ECCE scheme, which had made it mandatory for preschool practitioners to hold minimum qualifications, 'did the practices' … 'exposed materialize'? (Moloney, 2014, p.72). Minister Fitzgerald responded to the first programme by promising 'robust

registration, regulation and inspection' (Oireachtas, 2013). The ensuing Quality Agenda comprised an 8-point plan aimed at raising standards in the sector, outlined below, including a broader and more intense focus on quality enhancement:

- Increase the qualifications of all staff to a minimum FETAC Level 5 major award in childcare.
- Creating a registration process for new and existing childcare centres
- Develop, a more 'comprehensive and broader based inspection regime' with increased sanctions for non-compliance.
- In response to calls for accountability and transparency, inspection reports would be published.
- Links would be established between qualifications and funding.
- The establishment of support and mentoring services.
- Funding would be increased to support the implementation of Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009) and Síolta, the National Quality Framework (DES, 2010a).
- A professional training system to ensure a high standard of qualifications across the sector (Oireachtas, 2013).

From this point onwards, the measures to enhance quality in the ELC sector were both rapid and intense, reflecting the broader Global Education Reform Movement (GERM) emerging internationally. Sahlberg (2014) observed that within this movement governments sought greater control to increase quality and effectiveness, while also remaining accountable to taxpayers by assuring investment in the sector would result in long term benefits for society and the economy. The popularity of GERM internationally was not lost on successive Irish governments, who valued the 'strong guidelines' emerging from organisations such as the OECD, EU and UNESCO. These provided evidence-based data to support 'quality, equity and the effectiveness of education', which placed 'priority on learning' and sought 'high achievement for all', while supporting practitioners to evidence their practice and strengthening governance through 'market-like logic and procedures', by following 'external performance standards' and ensuring compliance through robust regulatory systems by broadening the scope of inspectorates (Oireachtas, 2013; Sahlberg, 2011, p. 179).

This trajectory was observable with the publication in 2013 of inspection reports online and with the Minister promising increased sanctions, including closure and prosecution, for breaches in compliance (DCYA, 2013b). In September 2013, *Right from the Start, the Report of the Expert Advisory Group on the Early Years Strategy* was published. In the foreword to the report, Minister Fitzgerald again reiterated her commitment to the development of an Early Years Strategy and investment to support quality, emphasising its importance in 'delivering significant economic and societal return to the State' (DCYA, 2013a, p. vii). The report accentuated the importance of significant investment in the ELC sector and argued that to ensure the best chance for all children 'a major statement of political purpose and a radical re-orientation of structures, organisations, resources and policy priorities' would be required (DCYA, 2013a, p.2).

The Child and Family Agency Act was passed in December 2013 (GOI, 2013). This provided for the establishment of the Child and Family Agency, better known as Tusla, and the amendment of the Childcare Act 1991 to provide for the registration of early years services (Oireachtas, 2013). Subsequently, on the 1st January 2014, Tusla (meaning 'new day') commenced operation. This new independent legal entity became the state agency responsible for 'improving the wellbeing and outcomes for children'. The Early Years Inspectorate now operated under the auspices of Tusla, instead of their previous governing body, the HSE. The inspectorate's role included the overseeing of registrations and inspections of ELC services to ensure compliance with the preschool regulations (TUSLA, 2018a).

In March 2014, a Learner Fund was established to support practitioners to reach the minimum Level 5 qualifications, which would become mandatory for working in the ELC sector in the 2016 regulations. In April of the same year, *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures*, the National Policy Framework for Children and Young People (2014-2020) was published. This policy, while not specific to the early years, nonetheless had considerable relevance. The Framework's overarching aim was to provide a collaborative approach between all government departments to work in unity to strengthen the systems around the child, through planning, implementing and ensuring accountability for the structures supporting children's outcomes from birth to 24 years of age. A key priority of the Framework was to ensure the establishment of affordable quality childcare (DCYA, 2014).

In October 2014, Better Start, the National Quality Development Service (QDS) was established by the DCYA in collaboration with the Early Years Policy Unit (EYPU) of the Department of Education and Skills (DES). The objective of this agency was to provide a mentoring service to promote quality practice in ELC settings, underpinned by the national frameworks, Aistear and Síolta (Rogers, 2014). While governed by Pobal on behalf of the DCYA, Better Start was a national service, which worked within the statutory regulatory system and in collaboration with the National Síolta Coordinator, the NCCA's Aistear Coordinator, and the CCC's and VCO's to raise quality in ELC services. Its overarching objective was 'to bring coordination, cohesion and consistency to the provision of state funded ECEC quality supports' (Better Start, 2018).

On 3rd December 2014, the government announced a second layer of inspections, the Education Focused Inspections (EYEI), which would operate under the remit of the DES. The Education-Focused Inspectorate commenced their work in the second half of 2015. This provided additional alignment between early childhood and the rest of the education sector, but was criticised for further exacerbating the education-care divide, with increased focus on learning outcomes and a remit that focused only on the ECCE scheme. Attention thus concentrated again on pre-primary children at the expense of younger children in ELC settings (Moloney, 2016a). The education-focused inspections centred on the quality of leadership and the educational experiences of children participating in the ECCE programme, as promoted by the Aistear and Síolta frameworks (DES, 2018a, 2018c). The consistent element throughout all these measures to enhance quality and drive curriculum change were embedded in the two National Frameworks, Síolta and Aistear. The centrality of both these frameworks was reinforced with the publication of the Aistear-Síolta Practice Guide, which was published in online format by the NCCA in 2015, as a practical guide to support practitioners in providing quality experiences for children in their care (NCCA, 2015).

As the economy continued to improve, capital funding was again committed on an annual basis, to enhance quality provision. Two interdepartmental groups were established, *Future Investment in the Early Years* and the *Supporting Access to Early Childhood Care and Education* (ECCE) programme for children with additional needs. Both groups published their findings towards the end of 2015 (DCYA, 2015a, 2015b). In part, as a result of both groups work, Budget 2016 saw the allocation of additional funding to the DCYA to extend the Quality Agenda through the further promotion of Aistear and Síolta and the establishment

of the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) to facilitate meaningful access to the ECCE scheme for children with additional needs. The funding provided additional support to extend the online Aistear-Síolta practice guide and the establishment of the National Síolta-Aistear Initiative (NSAI). Prior to this point, Aistear and Síolta were coordinated and promoted separately; Aistear was under the remit of the National Council Curriculum Assessment (NCCA), whereas the Early Years Education Policy Unit (EYEPU) coordinated Síolta. Both the NCCA and EYEPU resided but developed separately within the Department of Education (DES). Síolta and Aistear were viewed as 'levers' to improve quality' and within this 'wider context', the then Minister for Education, Richard Bruton, launched a review of early years qualifications to evaluate 'the extent to which they met the requirements' of the Quality Agenda within a 'rapidly evolving sector' (DES, 2016, p.5). Consequently, a consultation process was initiated with ELC practitioners, where the findings indicated 'a very significant gap', between practitioners' training experiences and their readiness to 'implement and deliver Síolta and Aistear' (GOI, 2018, p.4).

These developments facilitated a more coordinated and informed approach towards the implementation of Aistear and Síolta in ELC settings, which included developing the National Síolta and Aistear Initiative (NSAI). NSAI remains funded by the DCYA and developed in collaboration with the DES. The initiative is coordinated by a steering committee, chaired by the DES, with members from the DCYA, DES and the NCCA building on the work previously undertaken separately by the NCCA and EYPU (NCCA, 2018, p.77). In May 2018, a representative from Better Start, the National Quality Development Service, joined the steering group of the NSAI, 'to further enhance the integration between both initiatives' (GOI, 2018b, p.10). A working group, which consisted of members from NSAI, NCCA, CCC and Better Start, convened to develop a new CPD training programme called Aistear and Play, which would be delivered by Better Start (Better Start, 2019). In January 2019, a National Síolta-Aistear Implementation Office was established in the Better Start offices to support central coordination of the NSAI initiative. The National Síolta Development Officer now moved between the Better Start and the Early Years Policy Education Unit (Better Start, 2019).

Appearing like an aside within the lens of practice initiatives, but still fundamental to the development of quality, the Children First Act (2015) was signed into law on 19th November 2015, which placed the protection of children on a statutory footing. This legislation placed a

legal requirement on all ELC services to ensure the safety and wellbeing of children attending their setting and made it mandatory for settings to report all child protection concerns (GOI, 2015).

Further acceleration of quality initiatives over and above the development of the NSAI continued through 2016-2018. In 2016, the revised preschool regulations, the Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016 were enacted, which made registration a requirement and created a stipulation that all staff working with young children must hold a minimum FETAC Level 5 to work in ELC settings (GOI, 2016). The Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines, together with the launch of the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM), were launched in 2016. The main purpose of AIM was to provide support to enable children with additional needs access to meaningfully participate in their free preschool year. The model consisted of seven levels of support, from universal to targeted. Levels 1-3 focused on embedding the principle of inclusion through information and training, while 4-7 comprised targeted support specific to the needs and context of the child. Level 4 provided access to advice and support from an early years specialist who could work in collaboration with disability services. Level 5 provided specialised equipment if required. Level 6 facilitated access to therapeutic services, and Level 7 provided additional capitation to lower the ratio of adults to children if considered critical to access and participation (DCYA, 2016b).

In 2017, the government announced the long awaited second free preschool year. Children could now start school when they reached the age of three years, with three entry points to the ECCE scheme throughout the year. In 2018, this changed to just one entry point in September each year, but children could start the scheme at two years and eight months and continue to be eligible until they reached five years and six months or started school. The Government increased capitation for both the higher and standard rate for the second year in succession, in recognition of the need for higher pay and potentially in response to the growing recruitment crisis (DCYA, 2018e).

Affordability, accessibility and quality have been the three articulated drivers of early childhood policy. While the ECCE scheme provided free universal access to preschool, access to affordable childcare remained an area where Ireland was noted for underachievement, both nationally and internationally (OECD, 2017). In a direct move

towards the creation of universally affordable childcare, the Childcare Support Bill was published in 2017. This bill paved the way for the introduction of the Affordable Childcare Scheme (ACS) (GOI, 2017), which was partially introduced that year and by 2018 was at the second bill stage, awaiting final passing. The ACS was finally realised with a name change to the National Childcare Scheme (NCS) on Monday 11th March 2019, but was not available to families until November 2019. This scheme represented the first statutory entitlement for families to receive financial support for childcare. The objective of the scheme, Minister Zappone declared, was to improve children's outcomes, support lifelong learning, reduce child poverty, and tangibly reduce the cost of quality childcare for thousands of families across Ireland (DCYA, 2019a). Taoiseach Leo Varadkar announced the scheme as another step in 'making life easier for families', building on 'paid paternity leave for dads, increased maternity leave', 'the extension of the ECCE scheme', 'reduced income tax paid by middle income families', 'free GP available to more families and a future promise of 'paid parental benefit'. While these developments may all have benefits for parents, those relating to childcare had direct implication for ELC providers. In acknowledgement of this, the Government made available a once-off Transition Support payment, payable to all providers who participated in the scheme. The purpose of the payment was to acknowledge the administration involved in the initial transition period. This point was not missed by the ACP, which sought their membership's views on terms, including 'increased time for exceptional leave, weekly funding, weekly compliance reports, mandatory templates for roll books, funds cut after 12 weeks, etc.'. While some members felt the scheme was unfair on practitioners, others welcomed it and felt that providers' views had been responded to as an outcome of the lengthy consultation process that had preceded the publication of the scheme (ACP, 2019a). Early Childhood Ireland welcomed the scheme, but urged the government to increase investment in the sector (ECI, 2019b).

On 7th September 2018, the Quality Regulatory Framework (QRF) was published, which aimed to bring further guidance and consistency to the inspection regime, relating specifically to raising the standards of quality provision and practice (Tusla, 2018a). Minister Zappone announced the appointment of nine new TUSLA inspection roles, which for the first time would consider graduates with an early childhood background. Previously, this inspectorate was exclusive to applicants with a public health nursing background, an issue which had created considerable tension within the sector. Financial support was secured to assist ELC services meet the new standardised First Aid qualification, FAR (DCYA, 2018d).

The Quality Agenda represented strong government commitment to raising the standards of quality within the ELC sector, which was matched by both rhetoric and action. Hayes (2013, p.12) however, criticised the one-sided focus of the Quality Agenda, which she argues placed all the focus on the 'static and measurable' elements of quality, 'high visibility', rather than the dynamic aspects of quality'. For genuine quality to be realised, she argues, there needs to be an 'integrated early years strategy, a champion for the early years, collaboration between departments, particularly the DCYA and DES, an audit and support of quality and local inter agency collaboration (Hayes, 2013, p.14). This was achieved on 19th November 2018, when the Irish government launched the First 5 Early Years Strategy, which was a whole-of-government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families, 2019-2028.

The First 5 was the first strategy in Ireland that specifically focused on the under-fives. The strategy was a culmination of many years of work and built on the trajectory of ELC policy both internationally and nationally. The strategy, as Leo Varadkar claimed in his foreword, built on the positive developments already achieved in early childhood. This included a focus on strengthening families, with a clear focus on increasing parental leave, continuing to provide free GP care for children under five, establish the planned new children's hospital, provide better parenting support, and embed the concept of free preschool care (GOI, 2018c). Hayes (2019) argues, however, that this strategy focuses on parental needs, facilitating labour activation, which decentralises the child. The First 5 outlined the key objectives 'to further improve affordability, accessibility and quality' (GOI, 2018c, p. 11). Fundamental measures, including the introduction of the ACS, move 'towards a graduate-led professional Early Learning and Care (ELC) workforce', 'extension of regulations' to childminders and school-age childcare and the introduction of a new funding model to support employers 'to provide more favourable working conditions that will attract and retain staff' (GOI, 2018c, p.11). To underpin these reforms, the government promised 'a strengthened governance at national and local level' with Early Learning and Care (ELC) supporting their measures to 'tackle poverty' with 'expanded access to subsidised' childcare and 'the introduction of a meals programme in some ELC settings (GOI 2018c, p.11).

The Strategy renamed early childhood care and education, now called Early Learning and Care (ELC) (GOI, 2018c). In an interview with Early Childhood Ireland, Minister Zappone stated that she felt a name was important in terms of defining the sector and articulating the

vision for the future. She recognised the term ECEC was widely used internationally, but felt that it was a challenging term to use with all stakeholders and instead expressed that ELC helped move beyond the word 'childcare', while still being easily understandable and capturing the essence of what the sector does (ECI, 2019a).

Goal C and Goal D of the strategy had the most direct impact for early years services. Goal C was the creation of positive play-based early learning. Within this goal, there were three objectives:

- Objective 7: Positive home learning environments.
- Objective 8: Affordable high-quality early learning and care
- Objective 9: Supported transitions.

Goal D's focus was ensuring an effective early childhood system. Within this goal, five building blocks were identified as critical to this development:

- Building Block 1: Leadership, governance, collaboration
- Building Block 2: Regulation, inspection, quality assurance
- Building Block 3: Skilled and sustainable workforce
- Building Block 4: Research, data, monitoring and evaluation
- Building Block 5: Strategic investment.

A key objective of the strategy was to ensure affordable, high quality ELC. Key to developing high quality was what the strategy termed 'an effective early childhood system, with strong leadership, governance and collaboration', with implementation assured through inspections and quality assurance processes. Step 4 of the five key steps identified as central to the strategy was reform of the ELC sector. The objective to reform was articulated within the discourse of further enhancing 'affordability, accessibility and quality'. (GOI, 2018c, p.11). Key measures within this reform included 'the Affordable Childcare Scheme' (ACS), 'a graduate-led profession', extension of regulations' and the 'introduction of a new funding model' (GOI, 2018c, p.11). As Hayes (2019) observes, within this strategy quality was delineated by structural elements, with other quality distinctions overlooked.

The strategy recognised that ELC practitioners were 'the key determinants of quality' and within this vision, 'an appropriately qualified and valued workforce' was critical (GOI, 2018c, p.14). This strategy vowed to support employers so that they would be enabled to provide 'more favourable working conditions that will attract and retain staff' (GOI, 2018c, p.14). The strategy forwarded a 'roadmap', which articulated a standardised vision of developing quality 'delivered in a systematic and integrated way', 'underpinned by a strengthened governance structure at a national and local level' (GOI, 2018c, p.14), thus aligning directly to Project Ireland 2040, which had been published earlier in 2018 (GOI, 2018a).

Project Ireland 2040 identified access to affordable, high quality childcare as critical to the realisation of economic stability. Investment in the sector was identified as 'critical both as an educational support for children and as a prerequisite of job creation and labour market participation' (GOI, 2018a, p.89). The plan placed responsibility with the DCYA 'to monitor, analyse and forecast childcare demand and supply, in order to identify and plan, medium to long-term capital requirements'. This work was to be completed in cooperation with the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government and local authorities, 'to ensure access to Childcare' on 'well-located sites within or close to existing built-up areas' (GOI, 2018a, p.89-90). Goal D of the First 5 Strategy articulated the ambition of creating an effective ELC system, which was 'accessible, affordable and of high quality'. Effective planning, as Project Ireland 2040 enunciated, was critical, especially to the accessibility element, ensuring capital funding is allocated to best meet the demands of childcare. Affordability was addressed through the extension of the ECCE scheme and the launch of the NCS, while Quality within the sector is informed by Síolta, and Aistear, using the 'integrated resource, the Aistear/Síolta Practice guide' to guide improvements and support self-evaluations (GOI, 2018c, p.106). Integral to the implementation plan was providing a 'robust quality assurance regime', anchored through 'key levers', such as 'standards, regulation, inspections and self-evaluation' (GOI, 2018c, p.106). This external, top-down development of quality was further strengthened through legislation with the 2016 regulations and the publication of the QRF. Implementation was assured through the operation of two inspectorates; Tusla, the statutory regulator, and the DES Inspectorate responsible for 'evaluating the quality of provision' (GOI, 2018c, p.107). Compliance was further supported through mentoring services provided by Better Start QDS and the Access and Inclusion

Model (AIM), the National Síolta/Aistear Initiative, City/County Childcare Committees (CCC), and National Voluntary Childcare Organisations (NVCO) (GOI, 2018c, p.107).

First 5 acknowledged the complex and diverse composition of the ELC workforce, where qualification requirements are diverse and stretch from minimum qualifications to degree and postgraduate level. Equally, the expectation and scope of the work is recognised within the strategy as:

> …broad, crossing traditional and professional boundaries and organisational structures. Within this multiplicity of backgrounds and breadth of expectations, the strategy recognises that recruitment and retention within the workforce is reaching crisis point with 'high turnover' of staff impacting children's 'continuity of experience' (GOI, 2018c, p.110).

It accepts that working conditions are 'unattractive', with the ELC sector averaging €12.17 per hour, reflective of 'the historical underinvestment' in the ELC sector in Ireland. Aligned to Project 2040, the strategy proposed 'to establish a monitoring mechanism to track future spending in the sector' (GOI, 2018c, p.110; ECI, 2018b).

2.2 Early childhood policy development – A national response to the development of quality or an international directive?

Lingard et al. (2005) posit that policy does not emerge simply from a national domain, but is carved from multiple spheres of thought. Moreover, reflective of globalisation, it is progressively influenced by international agencies such as the UN, World Bank, OECD, UNESCO, the European Union, and large multinational corporations (Blackburne, 2017b). These organisations are intertwined and present a complex network of players with varying levels of political influence in different global spheres, presenting varying visions of quality and how it should be disseminated. While the World Bank and UNICEF exert dominance and influence in developing countries, the European Union, OECD, and UNESCO significantly prevail in European, and in turn Irish politics (Lingard et al., 2005).

Historically, as a nation, Ireland has generally been receptive and compliant with international influence, as ironically Ireland has used international organisations to assert its independence from England, while perhaps unwittingly subjugating its autonomy on the European and global stage (Murphy, 2019). As Laffan and O'Mahony (2008, p. xiii) propose, Ireland's awareness of its relative weakness on the global stage, 'positioned Ireland as a

committed member state and in turn the EU provided Ireland with a strong anchor in a rapidly changing world'.

The multi-level governance (MLG) that exists internationally, particularly at European level, illuminates the issue of complexity, particularly institutional and governance complexity, in what Stephenson (2013, p.817) describes as 'pluralistic and highly dispersed policymaking activity' with 'multiple actors (individuals and institutions)' contributing at 'various political levels, from the supranational to the sub-national or local'.

From the mid-1980's onwards, internationally these organisations strongly veered towards what Jenson (2010) termed the 'social investment paradigm'. This concept began to gain credence at the 18th World Conference of the Society for International Development, where UNICEF presented 'Adjustment with a Human Face'. This presentation drew international organisations' attention to the concept of providing support for young children, particularly those from significantly disadvantaged backgrounds. Policy attention on the rights of young children was further accelerated in 1989 with the introduction of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. This ignited a 'global rights-based discourse', which was reflected in the OECD's second thematic study (Mahon, 2010, p.182; OECD, 2006).

While the World Bank placed emphasis on targeted support for children in poverty in developing countries in the global South, the OECD moved towards a universal approach, persuading member states in the global North to invest in childcare. This was directed particularly towards the development of quality structures with various objectives in mind, including labour market activation, gender equality, and children's rights. The OECD's location in Paris promoted a close relationship with the EC. The aligned thinking was notable in the establishment of a Childcare Network, which under the leadership of Peter Moss, focused international attention towards a children's rights perspective as the guide for developing quality structures and processes in childcare centres. Within this paradigm, the EC Childcare Network played a prominent role in the foregrounding of the concept of quality as a process rather than a product, and as subjective rather than objective (OECD, 2017; Mahon, 2010; Jolly, 1991).

While international organisations continued their focus on quality, the subjective vision blurred and a more positive and tangible vision of policy emerged. As Sellars and Lingard

(2013, p.711) observed, the critical role that the OECD plays in global education governance was both 'a response to globalisation' and 'an attempt to control it'. In terms of ELC, the attempt to control quality development came through what Carroll and Kellow (2011) termed a 'soft power' approach. Within this approach, De Francesco (2013, p.1) observed that the OECD highlighted policy targets through the dissemination of knowledge and information in the form of country reviews and thematic analysis. In this way, they established international 'norms and standards' of quality. Sellars and Lingard (2013, p.712) argue that the OECD approaches country reviews through considered analysis and consultation with the nation, and exerts power not through sanctions, but through an ethos of 'policy learning and transfer'. Through this approach, the OECD urges and supports nations towards a specific course of action, as opposed to dictating a particular policy trajectory. Sellars and Lingard (2013) propose that the OECD brings to policy development not control, but alignment between OECD nations, along with its influence through thematic reviews and international testing.

OECD's Starting Strong publications (2001; 2006; 2012; 2015a; 2017; 2018) focus on providing 'valid, timely and comparable international information' on ELC systems, with the objective of developing key indicators of quality and supporting nations to review and redesign their current policies based on quality objectives. At rhetoric level, the OECD has consistently accepted that quality is complex, subjective and context based; it favours frameworks, with broad holistic goals, and calls for a 'participatory approach to quality improvement and assurance'. Yet in contrast, the overarching discourse focuses on 'quality control', 'enforcing standards' and 'monitoring' (OECD, 2001, p.131). The first report advocated for a 'quality assurance system' to include 'both inspection and monitoring to enforce compliance of rules and regulations and mechanisms' (OECD, 2001, p.132). This contradistinction continued through to the second report, *Starting Strong II*, which while recognising the importance of 'participatory and voluntary approaches to quality', called for 'effective government steering', calling on them to 'define, fund and enforce basic standards' (OECD, 2006, pp.125-126). *Starting Strong III: A Quality Toolbox for ECEC* provided five policy levers to guide governments in developing quality ECEC:

1). Quality Goals and Regulations;
2). Curriculum and standards;
3). Qualifications, training and working conditions;
4). Engaging families and communities;
5). Data collection, research and monitoring (OECD, 2012)

Starting Strong IV focused specifically on monitoring quality, as its title suggests (OECD, 2015a). The trajectory towards more positivist discourse relating to quality was amplified in the Start Strong 2017 key OECD indicators on Early Childhood Education and Care. This publication articulated its commitment to incorporating early childhood into comparison league tables through the Teaching and Learning International Study (TALIS) and the International Early Learning and Child Well-being Study (IELS), which would compare countries' early childhood performances (OECD, 2015b; OECD, 2016). This represented a stark contrast from the original vision of quality as subjective and contextual. The most recent publication, *Engaging with Children*, again emphasises the criticality of 'understanding and defining ECEC quality' and the 'linkages to policy levers such as standards and governance; workforce development and working conditions; data and monitoring' (OECD, 2018, p.13). While many commentators are critical of standardising quality in this way (Moss et al., 2016), the OECD (2018, p.14) remain steadfast that 'providing countries with a common language and framework' is the best way of 'working towards the ultimate goal of improving children's early learning outcomes and overall wellbeing'. The impact of the OECD on Irish ELC is evident in the consistent policy trajectory of increased control through regulations, monitoring, funding, and in the emerging discourses that increasingly draw on the concept of enhancing quality in response to children's rights (Tusla, 2018a).

UNESCO similarly employed a 'soft power' approach in raising awareness of the role of quality early education as an instrument for embedding key ideas, particularly in relation to sustainable development. Within this approach, Nikolayevich Sayamov (2013, p.348) highlights that UNESCO and other international organisations promote educational policy on the basis that 'knowledge is the most effective source and instrument of power', employing political technologies such as the introduction of 'norms', 'values' and 'critical knowledge'. In this way, ideas enter human consciousness, enhancing the impact of new directives and concepts in terms of implementation and dissemination. UNESCO has focused on the use of international data comparisons as a strategy to forward implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) and forward quality improvements in education through the International Bureau of Education (UNESCO, 2019). In 1999, the UNESCO Institute of Statistics (UIS) was established to provide 'timely, accurate and policy-relevant statistics' required in 'increasingly complex and rapidly changing social, political and economic

environments' (UNESCO, 2017c, p.3). UIS is the 'official source' used to provide 'cross-nationally comparable data', to monitor and promote progress specifically towards achieving the 'Sustainable Development Goals for education (SDG 4), as outlined in the 'Education 2030 Framework for Action' (UNESCO, 2017b, p.2), which aimed to 'ensure inclusive, equitable, quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all' including early childhood (UN, 2015, p.18).

In contrast to the intergovernmental structure of the OECD, the European Union is and has been a supranational entity, since its formation in 1957 at the Treaty of Rome. In the years since its foundation, its influence on nation states has continually increased responsiveness to EU guidance and directives, which particularly accelerated in response to the European economic crisis in 2009 (Krase, 2017). Since its inception, the EU has operated on a neo-functionalist tradition with the European Commission (EC), the European Parliament (EP), and the Court of Justice of the European Union (ECJ) acting as key players of influence on nation states' internal policies. Krase (2017) identified the European Commission as the most powerful of these supranational institutions. The controlling body of the commission, the College of Commissioners, is not democratically elected, but nominated by their Prime Minister or President. The administration of the commission are civil servants directly recruited by the institutions. The ultimate result, Krase (2017) argues, is the Commission's power to initiate all legislation within the structure of the EU. More than half of all legislation is proposed by 28 unelected commissioners. Carfaro (2015) further illuminates the lack of democracy at the supranational level. In her blog, she observed that 'supranational' does not mean nations working together towards common goals where the wishes of the majority of states are the impetus for policy development. Instead, she notes that 'a supranational organization is over and beyond the authority of states. It expresses its own will'. Her blog concludes that 'international democracy is a utopia at best, most likely an oxymoron. Global democracy is supranational, it is not democracy'. Ernest B. Hass's theory of Neofunctionalism and Stanley Hoffman's theory of Intergovernmentalism have both sought to make meaning from the processes of integration within Europe (Kleinschmidt, 2013). A key feature of Neofunctionalism was a decrease in individual state power, but also an increase in the influence of non-state actors such as the European Commission and multinational corporations, who through a process of spillover influence all facets of national policy development. The spillover process is presented in the approach thus; to satisfy goals

in one area, for example economics, actions need to be taken in another area, such as education (Kleinschmidt, 2013). Kleinschmidt (2013, p.5) argues that within this political spillover, interested groups use the supranational agency to 'pressure their national access points' and consequently this 'cultivated spillover', places the European Commission in a unique position to influence domestic and international pressures on local politics. Within this view of policy development, one area of concern would influence many other areas. This is frequently seen in early childhood discourse, where concerns of an economic nature have traditionally been given precedence in policy design deliberations.

Early childhood is viewed as an investment in the economic wellbeing of the state, the discourse of returns on investment, development of a future quality workforce, and competing within the concept of the smart state society. These concepts have all garnered currency in policy development (Hayes, 2016). Concerns for the economy and the benefits of investment in early childhood education have enhanced the visibility of the sector and illuminated concerns, not only for the economy, but for the development of quality practices within the sector. Within intergovernmentalist and supranational arenas, ECEC has climbed towards the top of the international agenda.

Increasing access to early childhood provision has been prioritised since the publication in 1992 of the Councils Recommendations on Childcare. In 2002, the Barcelona European Council outlined the target of providing access to childcare for at least 90% children between age 3 and school age and 3% of under-threes. The 2020 Strategy raised the target of providing access to quality ECEC to 95% from the age of four until starting primary school (EC, 2009). These directives to develop universal access to childcare in the year or two preceding entry into primary school were first met in Ireland after the introduction of the free preschool year (FPY) in 2009/10, where by 2012, 94% of children were accessing free preschool for 15 hours per week under the ECCE scheme (CRA, 2012). As discussed earlier, access and affordability via the ECCE scheme was extended further to all children from two years and eight months until age 5½ years or beginning school, with the latest statistics suggesting 96% of eligible children are accessing the scheme. Children with additional needs are supported to meaningfully access the ECCE scheme through the support provided through the AIM (DCYA, 2016b). Ireland has exceeded these targets, with 96% of all children now accessing preschool provision (GOI, 2018c).

The focus from 2013 onwards shifted from mere access to a clear directive on nation states developing the structures necessary to ensure quality in the early years sector. The EC (2011) identified the role of the ELC practitioner as critical to the development of quality in the sector. The Commission proposed a 'systematic approach' to the development of quality and advocated for a 'strong collaboration between different policy sectors such as education, health and social policy'. This approach has been reflected within the development of Irish policy through the creation of inter-departmental groups to work cohesively on the future development of ELC policy (DCYA, 2015a; DCYA, 2015b). As noted at European level by the EP (2013, p.9), member states were not just concerned with increasing capacity, but were 'also concerned about the level of quality of ECEC providers'.

The EU's development of the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) focused on the development of quality in ELC, particularly focusing on five key elements identified as critical to quality in the sector. (1) access/participation, (2) political, legal, and financial structures, (3) staff, (4) curriculum, and (5) involvement of parents (EP, 2013, p.9). These pillars of quality are reflected in the policy discourses that have and are continuing to emerge within the government's QA. The focus on quality was further accentuated in 2014 with the launch of the European Commission's Quality framework, which placed emphasis on 'access, professionally trained staff, child-staff ratios, curriculum, monitoring and inspection, governance and funding (Melhuish, 2015, p.6; EC, 2014). The influence of this framework was mirrored in the Irish government's development of a Quality Regulatory Framework (QRF), published in September 2018 (Tusla, 2018a). European Council recommendations consistently foregrounded the discourses of accessibility, affordability, and quality, which dominate national policy narratives. Furthermore, another discourse has entered the fray; that of inclusion as being fundamental to quality, as well as the need for a 'shared vision of quality' between member states, as illuminated in the European Quality Framework and the 2018 'Council Recommendation on High Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems' (EC, 2014; EC, 2018). This vision is equally shared within Irish policy development, with the Access and Inclusion Policy (AIM) published in 2016, together with the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines and a fully funded model of support, with the Access and Inclusion Model supporting children with disabilities to meaningfully access and participate in their free preschool years (DCYA, 2016a, 2016b).

The power of Europe is also reflected in the monitoring mechanisms put in place to capture nation states' progress on meeting specific European goals. The European Commission set up the European Semester, with the specific remit to investigate and make recommendations for improvements within each nation. The outcome of these investigations are published each year in the country-specific recommendations. In 2016, the EC recommendation for Ireland was to improve the provision of quality, affordable full-time ELC. The government addressed this with the establishment of the Affordable Childcare Scheme (ACS), which, when finalised in 2019, became known as the National Childcare Scheme (NCS). A point enshrined in the EC's Pillars of Social Rights a year later illuminated that 'children have a right to affordable early childhood education and care that is of good quality' (EC, 2017a). This scheme is strongly linked to the concept of quality, with the policy clearly stating that while the core purpose is achieving affordable childcare, 'it has strong higher-level objective of driving quality' (DCYA, 2018c, p.14). The key concepts enshrined within recent ELC policy documents consistently echo, articulated European objectives of labour market activation, improving quality and providing positive outcomes for children (DCYA, 2016b, 2017, 2018c. EC 2017b).

2.3 International and national convergence on ECE within a neoliberal landscape.

From the 1990's onwards, aligned with the almost universal signing and ratifying of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), combined with rapidly growing national economies, the spotlight veered internationally towards the advancement of childcare structures to facilitate parents' (particularly mothers) participation in the workforce (OECD, 2001). During this time, Ireland experienced large scale public investment to develop the infrastructure of the childcare sector. From the mid-to-late 2000's, a significant shift in discourse occurred internationally, equally mirrored in Ireland, marked by a change in focus from access to childcare to access to quality and affordable childcare (EP, 2013; Hayes et al., 2013; EC, 2011). Within this change, it was acknowledged that access alone did not equate to better outcomes for children, but that the quality of provision and practice was critical (Raikes et al., 2015; Bougen et al., 2013). This acknowledgement of the importance of quality education systems, particularly early childhood education, has become centralised within the discourse of the sustainable development agenda, where the vision of quality in education is consistently highlighted on both international and national platforms.

Building on the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) which placed the focus on enhancing access and quality to primary school, *Transforming our World*: The 2030 Agenda for sustainable development placed the emphasis not only across the education spectrum, but specifically acknowledged the crucial role of early education. Goal 4.2 articulated a vision to provide access to quality early childhood provision for all children (UNESCO, 2017b). With reference to a global survey undertaken by the United Nations, Lutz (2016) concluded that the key finding was that education remained the single most important factor in improving outcomes for children and citizens. This point was equally reiterated in the Action Plan for Education 2018, which identified that 'no other area of Government activity has greater capacity to change our country for the better' (DES, 2018b, p.8). The focus on quality education was further enshrined in 2017 in the European Pillars of Social Rights, with Principle 1 focusing on education, training and life-long learning, with particular emphasis on the right to quality and inclusive education. Rights to childcare and support for children was captured in Principle 11, which stated that children had a right to 'affordable early childhood education and care of good quality' (EC, 2017a).

At the G20 Summit 2017, the recognised link between financial progress and education was unambiguous. The G20 leaders joint declaration at the summit, 'Shaping an Interconnected World' stated that education was central to the implementation of the 2030 agenda and the establishment of 'financial inclusion', which cascaded benefits to 'poverty eradication, job creation, gender equality and women's empowerment'. Central to the G20 Financial Inclusion Action Plan was the UN Secretary-General's proposal to create an 'International Finance facility' for education, to complement earlier initiatives such as the Global Partnership for Education and *Education Can't Wait* (University of Toronto, 2017). In the overview of Argentina's G20 Presidency 2018, themed 'Building Consensus for Fair and Sustainable Development', education was again placed at the nexus of goal achievement. It was declared here that the future lay in the 'unleashing of human potential' and that 'Education is at the crux of this debate. Education empowers people to shape their own future. It enables them to create their own endeavours and form an active citizenship able to contribute to the development of a world that is both fairer and more sustainable' (G20 Argentina, 2017, p.4-5). At the World Economic Forum (2018) in Davos, many key speakers illuminated a world that is changing rapidly, with education systems needing to keep pace with this change for future sustainability. Similarly at national level, the discourse focuses on

the critical role that education can play in future development, articulating a vision of 'learning as a public good' with a 'critical role in the development, cohesion and wellbeing of society', positioning education at the heart of all government 'ambitions as a nation' (DES, 2018b, p.8). Sean O'Foghul, Secretary General at the Department of Education, commenting on the Irish government's ambition to make 'Ireland's education and training system the best in Europe by 2026', proposed that delivering on the Action Plan for Education 2018, (the second annual plan) would provide the best opportunity to respond to future political and economic uncertainty. The plan had systematic reviews to enhance quality across the continuum of education, including early childhood, as the central strategy in achieving these goals (DES, 2018b, p. 6). Correspondingly, Katherine Zappone, the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, acknowledged that the early years sector particularly has a 'privileged and powerful role to play in reimagining and reshaping Ireland's future (DCYA, 2016a, p. iv).

With the spotlight on education (and specifically early childhood education), attention at both national and international level focused, unsurprisingly, not just on establishing quality structures and processes in early childhood, but gaining greater control over them through monitoring and compliance initiatives. The OECD's 'soft power' approach reached a crescendo in 2015 with its tenders for the International Early Learning Study (OECD, 2015b), commonly referred to as 'Baby PISA' to provide a cross-national comparison study of ECE quality based on 'predetermined indicators' and specified outcomes for children (Campbell-Barr & Bogatic, 2017, p.1463). This move was met with a backlash of criticism internationally from some governments, academics, service providers, and trade unions. Leading countries including Norway, Sweden, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, and Germany all declared their decision not to participate (Roberts-Holmes, 2019; Moss & Urban, 2017). A consortium of academics from different international contexts expressed their opposition to and debated against the impending introduction of the IELS (OECD). They welcomed the first two *Start Strong* reports (OECD, 2001; 2006), acknowledging them for identifying 'common features and policy conclusions' while still remaining 'sensitive to the diversity and complexity of the sector'. However, they subsequently outlined their contempt for *Starting Strong III* and *Starting Strong IV*, which they viewed as a tight squeeze on the sector's autonomy in favour of regimes of compliance. They argued that this was a consequence of the emerging discourse of 'outcomes and investment' precluding an understanding for the complexity, diversity and richness of ELC settings (Moss et al., 2016, p.344). Their criticisms highlighted the alienation of those working with young children from policy development.

They illuminated that while at least 16 member-states had been working on developing the IELS, they believe 'that most working in the field' were unaware of the impending plan. Furthermore, they expressed concern with the increasing technicalisation of early education, where standards, norms and learning outcomes dominate policy direction and children become 'miniature centres of calculation' (Roberts-Holmes and Bradbury, 2016, p.600). They argued that this limited vision, driven by neoliberal global discourse, ignores complexity, diversity and equality and imposes a hyper-positivistic view of quality as a clearly defined concept, thereby narrowing the sense of possibilities and alternatives (Moss et al., 2016). Campbell-Barr and Bogatic (2017) warned against the power of this cross-comparison approach, which they cautioned wields power, leading governments to initiate change in a reactionary rather than critical and proactive manner. As UNESCO (2017b, p.7) proposed, articulating ambitions to improve quality within SDG 4 would not be sufficient. Instead, 'meaningful quantitative measures to monitor the development of education policies at national and international levels' were required. This publication title, *The Quality Factor: Strengthening National Data to Monitor Sustainable Development Goal 4*, was the second in a series and focused specifically as the title suggests on developing a framework to assist nations to monitor, gather data and report on national progress in achieving quality for the promotion of sustainable development goals. Its vision presented an onto-epistemological positivist view that conceived monitoring SDG 4 ambitions to *"ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all"* as tangible, observable, and easily monitored. 'Education experts' had developed 'a list of 43 indicators, 11 global indicators and 32 thematic indicators suitable for monitoring. Through the collection of data, UNESCO (2017b) perceived that local governments could establish data, promote accountability, produce 'high-quality cross nationally-comparable data', and 'strengthen data dissemination' to inform government policy development.

The Irish Government equally presented a tangible vision of quality that could be readily monitored in their 'Action Plans for Education 2016-2019', where they articulated that 'policy development and implementation are strongly informed by evaluation, review and benchmarked against international practice (DES, 2018b, p.11). Within these plans, the Irish government articulated their ambition to create the best education and training system in Europe by 2026. While the plans recognised the 'complex and dynamic' nature of quality in the education sector, there was also a clear ambition to control and standardise education systems, with quality development being associated with accountability structures,

particularly in early childhood. 'Action Plan 2018 - Goal 3' aimed to help those delivering a service to 'continuously improve', and directly related establishing quality to 'changes to the inspection and reporting models' and through 'workforce planning developments for early years' (DES, 2018b, p.36), thereby forwarding a hegemonic vision of quality. This vision reflected the Global Education Reform movement characterised by Sahlberg (2014) through five distinctive features: 1.) Standardisation 2.) Focus on core subjects, literacy, numeracy and science. 3). A drive for high quality at low cost provision. 4.) Corporate, particularly performance management style of governance. 5.) Accountability structures which included cross comparisons and robust inspection processes (Ball et al., 2017, p.2).
The literature review will examine these concepts and others that are emerging either intentionally or as an unintended outcome of the continually evolving Quality Agenda in Ireland, as well as that of quality development in early childhood internationally.

2.4 Summary

This chapter has captured the trajectory and influences on how ELC policy related to quality development has emerged in Ireland under the influence of international and national organisations. It presents a picture of parallel trends, noting evolving visions of the purpose of early childhood propagating from global to national policy discourse. The first section of this chapter explored the various policy theories and how they have influenced ELC policy development. The next part focused specifically on the historical trajectory of influence and policy development from the partnership approach through to the post-partnership approach, which led to the growing influence of the international community in sculpting Irish policy, including early childhood policy. This then led to a specific focus on the growing influence of globalisation and international organisations, both government and non-government, on Irish ELC policy, thereby reflecting the phenomenon termed 'the Global Education Reform Movement'. These organisations exerted their influence through a 'soft power' approach, which was significant and clearly reflected throughout the terminology and development of national policies. The section illuminates how the focus of governments internationally and in Ireland have moved from expediency in facilitating parents, particularly women, to return to the labour market, to increasingly viewing ELC within the social investment paradigm, where an increased focus has been placed on the development of quality structures and processes framed within a children's rights perspective. It highlights moves towards a more positivist approach to quality development, where governments internationally and nationally

increasingly try to control and standardise quality globally through systems of monitoring and comparative tables, leaving less space for local voices, particularly ELC practitioners, to emerge and influence a local, contextual perspective on quality.

Chapter 3 – Literature Review

The literature review intends to capture the complexity of the issues that impact on the concept of quality in early childhood. The aim is to interrogate them critically to create meaning from the many perspectives, including those of ELC practitioners internationally. Furthermore, it will illuminate the strengths and challenges facing a sector still in its infancy in terms of professionalisation, with due recognition to the fact that this research is embedded in complex, dynamic and evolving environments, identifiable through multiple lenses and values.

This literature review focuses on the key issues impacting quality development in ELC in Ireland. The first part of the review focuses on how quality has been defined internationally through a focus on structural and process elements. It then explores the overlooked element of orientation quality. The next part examines the key issues impacting on the development of quality as identified in the literature, in particular the role of the practitioner and their perspectives on quality; the professionalisation of ELC, including qualifications; CPD; value; funding; pay and conditions; leadership, and consultation.

3.1 Quality

3.1.1 Quality – structures and processes

Hunkin (2016) noted that the primary policy agenda globally in relation to education, particularly in ECEC, focuses on the structures and processes of quality. While transnational organisations such as the OECD, UNESCO, and governments have articulated that quality is complex and subjective, they tend to lean towards a positivist view of quality, where criteria for quality are viewed as tangible, universal, internationally comparable, and easily identifiable (OECD, 2001; 2006. 2012; 2017; UNESCO, 2017; Blackburne, 2016a). There are, however, a few challenges to assessing quality in this manner. Otterstad and Braathe (2016, p.81) in their assessment of the impact of what they termed ‘travelling discourses’ on Norwegian policy, claimed that these international discourses emerging from the OECD and EU were drowning out local and context-driven understandings of quality and professionalism. In alignment with these concerns Andrew (2015, p.351) highlights the critical issue of resisting discourses and instead embracing the ‘practical wisdom’ of early years professionals and enabling this to impact on contemporary policy developments. It is

difficult, however, to establish or define 'practical wisdom', as the ECE sector, both nationally and internationally, is characterised by diversity in terms of qualifications, training and roles. In recognition of diversity within the sector, Nutbrown (2012) recommended that the English government allow the diverse ECE sector to contribute to its own development. While she recommended high and achievable standards for the ECE sector, she equally urged that governments needed to take a flexible approach to allow the sector to 'work towards them' and guided the government to allow 'flexibility in how the sector may work with them' (p.5).

Bertram et al. (2016, p.19) notes that globally, the delivery of ELC practice varies considerably, leading to both complexity and diversity in identifying the distinct and dominant elements that constitute quality. They propose that the 'considerable variation' provides a complex backdrop for considering 'alternative possibilities for developing ECE policies for the future'. Penn (2011) similarly reiterates the view that any concept of quality is both complex and deeply embedded in societal constructs that are value-sculpted and dependent on social expectations and perspectives. Within this context, Penn (2011, p.xi) outlines that a vision of quality is constantly evolving, and any attempts to find one view/perspective or definition equates to a 'search for fool's gold'. However, Bertram et al. (2016, p.81) propose that clear links exist between identifiable 'quality features and later learning outcomes', as measured by their Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). The key indicators or identifiable features they refers to focused on the structural elements of quality, which included high staff-to-child ratios, higher staff qualifications, higher levels of regulations, and a government-led ECE policy strategy combined with increased investment.

A vision of quality that is confined to structural elements is a limited vision of quality. Quality is dynamic and its development has to be ongoing, enabling interested adults, together with parents, children, and other professionals, to work together to continuously reflect and debate on practice within a truly democratic community of practices (Moss, 2015; Urban, 2012; Penn, 2000). Urban et al. (2018, p.4), observed that 'quality enhancing measures' are taking root across ECE systems globally, reflected in enhanced professional development, increased capital funding and legislative frameworks. This development is not evolving in isolation, however, but across social, cultural and political systems where regardless of influence, the care and education of children is essentially 'a local practice'.

Therefore, they argue, the basic issues of developing a competent, quality ECE sector has to be through local 'democratic debate of all stakeholders within countries, and at all levels of government' (p.4).

As Mahony and Hayes (2006, p.193) observe, determining quality is complex and 'highly dependent on the norms and values of the society under examination' and within this context an Irish definition of quality is dependent on the voices of those with a stake in the Irish ELC sector. As highlighted earlier, this too is complex, as within the Irish context there are multiple stakeholders, with multiple levels and layers of influence (Walsh, 2016a; Moran, 2012), many portraying a different vision of early childhood and its purpose. The dominant vision of quality generally cascades from a top-down approach. In this context, policies are designed based on international best practice, then introduced to ELC practitioners to implement under the guidance/compliance of early childhood experts, mainly in the guise of inspectorates, sometimes mentors, and through training. The focus of striving towards compliance is quite explicit, as reflected in training opportunities provided by government, non-government organisations, and publications clearly marketed to support compliance. Kildare County Childcare Committee, for example, have provided CPD training marketed as 'Compliance - the Big Picture' (KCCC, 2019), Early Childhood Ireland have training available on 'Preparing for your DES inspection' (ECI, 2019c) and Canavan and Byrne (2019) offer training to prepare for Tusla inspections. In response to this demand towards compliance, the Dublin City County Childcare Committee (2018), supported by the DCYA and Pobal, published the ultimate guide to support services in compliance, named 'To Compliance and Beyond - A guide for Early Years Services'.

Moss (2013, p.370) advises, however, against standardising quality, which he termed 'the story of quality and high returns'. He argues this views ECE settings and quality as a logical calculation. Within this story, he argues that the investment paradigm, increased regulations, and a focus on measurement have silenced alternative visions of quality, forwarding one dominant vision that he believes overlooks contexts, complexity, diversity, and other understandings and interpretations of the word. Ozga (2007, p.66) similarly noted that the dominance of knowledge transfer and its link to 'evidence-informed policy making', was neglecting 'curiosity driven research', where she argued practitioners become 'recipients of transferred knowledge, rather than actors who mediate or generate knowledge independently'. Ball (2003) similarly argues that this approach leaves practitioners'

knowledge and understanding of quality subjugated against the understandings of regulators and inspectorates, a phenomenon occurring concurrently with the popular wave of the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM). Logan (2017, p.506) advances that a vision of quality is not static or universally defined but is subjective to multiple perspectives and evolving meanings. Quality, she argues, is 'a multi-dimensional and multi-perspectival concept' sculpted at multiple levels 'social, political, historical', therefore logic would suggest that quality reform should embrace the wisdom of these multiple levels including practitioners vision.

Historically, in the Irish context, quality has generally been defined by the structural elements embedded within the preschool regulations, focusing on measurable environmental aspects such as ratios, floor space, and health and safety (Moloney, 2011). While this continues to be the case, more focus has in recent years been placed on the process elements of quality, reflected in Ireland in Aistear and Síolta and the recently introduced Education Focused Inspections, which emphasise the importance of relationships, interactions, and the quality of learning opportunities provided (DES, 2015b; DES, 2010; NCCA, 2009).

3.1.2 An overlooked vision of quality?

Wall et al. (2015) identified that apart from structural and process elements of quality, a third area, termed 'orientation quality', is critical. Anders (2015, p.8) defines this as 'teachers' pedagogical beliefs'; their 'definition of their professional role, their educational values, epistemological beliefs, attitudes with regard to the importance of different educational areas and learning goals'. They propose that while these concepts develop over a lifetime, they are changeable, and can be impacted by the zeitgeist. This concept of orientation quality, while gaining momentum, is relatively new and unexplored (Bautista et al., 2016). Bertram et al. (2016) further note that its subjective nature has resulted in orientation quality remaining largely overlooked. However, overlooking the beliefs and attitudes of practitioners could leave a considerable gap between policy at government level and policy at implementation level.

As political discourse becomes increasingly saturated with the desire to achieve optimal quality in ELC, both at international and national levels, questions arise. Is quality within the ELC sector improving? Are we moving in the right direction, as determined by policy? Are

the current policy trajectory's aims to raise standards making any difference within early years settings? As previously noted, ELC settings are becoming increasingly complex spaces, with multiple influences impacting on daily practice from complex and sometimes contradictory policy directives, multiple drivers of compliance, a dual inspection system, and dual (complementary) regulation system. These competing and sometimes contradictory discourses give rise to further critical questions. Within the unrelenting policy drive for quality, are the messages clear? Where does the focus lie in relation to policy and are there fundamental factors being overlooked? What are the key challenges facing the sector, particularly from the practitioners' perspective and what impact is all of this having on the wellbeing of ELC practitioners? As Biesta (2015) argues, in imagining and building the future childcare systems, the questions asked should not be 'what works?', but for whom is it working and for what purpose and what is the ultimate impact on practice? As he proposes, critical to any democratic society, we need to question whose voices matter and who should have a say in responding to the improvement of quality practices.

Further reiterating this concept of developing quality from the ground up, rather than vice versa, Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (1999) forward an alternative to seeking a definition of quality and instead propose a new concept, 'meaning making'. They propose the discourse of quality is limiting and does not facilitate diversity or multiple visions and subjectivities. Instead, they propose that concepts of quality need to be interrogated. As Deleuze and Guattari, (1994, p.108), propose, criticising a concept such as quality without creating a new vision, providing it with the 'forces it needs to return to life' are basically destructive. Therefore, in terms of quality, this literature review proposes that a broader definition of quality is required beyond what is outlined within regulations and policy guidelines. Instead, an understanding of quality must imbue an understanding, from practitioners' perspectives, of what this means at ground level, incorporating not just a vision of quality, but what this vision means in daily practice. As Jones et al. (2016, p.5) posit, 'it is by wrangling and plundering this 'connection' that we are enabled to imagine sustainable alternatives', thereby going 'beyond a deconstruction of 'quality' where there are possibilities for an ethics of (re) affirmation challenges normative understanding of quality' and 'challenge the status quo'.

At the World Economic Forum (2018) in Davos, many key speakers concurred with this view, illuminating a world that is changing rapidly and that requires the development of a

culture of listening, with the ability to respond to a rapidly changing world. Minouche Shafik (2018) warned that 'Anything that is routine or repetitive will be automated'. To escape this apparent doom of the future, she irradiated the importance of developing 'soft skills, creative skills', and instead, develop the ability to make meaning from 'information, synthesise it, make something of it'. By listening to practitioners, we offer an opportunity to make meaning of policy and concepts of quality and to consider options, consider the future, consider the present, and consider the strengths of current policies and alternatives when necessary. In this way Orientation quality that respects the values, experiences and attitudes of ELC practitioners, must be responded to within the context of quality improvements. Practitioners emotional wellbeing, attitudes, 'professional engagement….job satisfaction and work commitment' are fundamental, if somewhat overlooked features of quality practice (Jeon et al. 2018, p.53).

3.1.3 Practitioners' perspectives on quality

> Informed change is political, just like any other change and people will not commit to it without engagement in its invention (McTaggart, 2001, p.5).

Inspired by this perspective, the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE), was formed by the government to develop the National Quality Framework (NQF) for early childhood in Ireland. It undertook a consultative process to seek stakeholders' perspectives regarding what features they perceived were critical to quality practice. Even though this research took place almost 20 years ago, the findings and the process are still particularly pertinent to this research.

387 participants engaged with the consultative seminars, with 166 (43%) of these identifying as ECE practitioners/primary schoolteachers. There is no further breakdown of this cohort. The key supports they considered most critical included funding, with 224 participants (58%) citing this as a critical element viewed as 'essential to allow staff wages to reflect the onerous task they fulfil, to support the training and continuous professional development of practitioners and to provide the infrastructure to allow the sector develop and prosper'. The second issue considered a critical element of quality was professional development, cited by 178 participants (46%) who called for it to be facilitated in a manner conducive to work and personal commitments. Suggestions included 'release time from work' and the provision of 'modular or part-time courses'/ There were also calls 'for ongoing training for management' and 'specialist training, in regard to special needs and diversity'. Staff training and

qualifications was the third most cited by 175 (45%) participants. Some of the points articulated included increasing access to 'training opportunities for staff at pre-service level', 'courses leading to accredited and standardised qualifications', 'increasing professional identity', 'improved access to training and qualifications', which in turn, it was argued, would lead to a 'career path', which could be fundamental in 'retaining young practitioners' and 'strengthening' professional identity in the sector (Duignan & Walsh, 2005, p.222). These key ideas have had varying impact on how ELC policy has developed, in particular the professionalisation of the workforce, with many of these suggestions never reaching fruition.

3.1.4 Constant change

The years since these consultations were undertaken have been characterised by rapid worldwide and Irish ELC policy change, which Hordern (2018, p.2) characterised as 'a pendulum swing between political neglect and policy hyperactivity' where the voices of academics and practitioners are often marginalised from the 'quest to drive through a particular solution to a perceived policy problems'. This policy shift, Urban et al. (2017, p.10) argue, has left the ELC practitioner 'subject to constant and substantial change'. Moloney & Pettersen (2017, p.5) equally posit that ECEC is currently operating in a 'legislative quagmire', where legislation continually 'changes in response to events nationally and further afield', leaving those working in the sector in a 'constant state of flux' and 'subject to ever changing roles, responsibilities and expectations'. Yet despite consistently having to respond to an evolving and increasingly complex ELC sector, practitioners remain on the periphery of this development (Dyer, 2018; O'Donoghue-Hynes, 2012). While the OECD consistently calls for a participatory approach to policy development, which the Irish government has responded to through a commitment to consultation, Blackburne (2016c) observed that these consultation processes have remained largely ineffective due to a lack of engagement by the workforce, described by O'Donoghue Hynes (2012, p.10) as 'hard to reach'.

Milotay (2018, p.20) proposes that greater policy-making attention is required in 'implementation and its associated dynamics'. In this regard, she argues, the 'human factor' and 'behavioural insights' need to be considered in order to bring about change, particularly considering that ELC is a soft policy area. She proposes that 'good communication and flow of information' are as important to stakeholders as 'autonomy and flexible resources',

concluding policy development requires 'governance structures that can handle complexity' (Milotay, 2018, p.24). As Tayler (2011, p.213) highlights, efficient implementation of reform is dependent on the capacity and willingness of the ECE sector 'to change locally' within the remit of the reform. In a call for consensus, Marco Conceptual called at G20 2018 for fairness and true and equal partnerships, where the views of all stakeholders contribute in a fair and equitable manner to policy development. Similar to O'Donoghue Hynes, Milotay (2018) acknowledges that engaging practitioners in the policy-making process is challenging, with only glimmers of light emerging from the increasing professionalisation of the sector. She believes that the increasing numbers holding educational degrees would/could engage in action research and in this way will contribute new ideas against this backdrop of constant change.

The Irish ELC workforce is becoming increasingly 'dispirited and disenfranchised' (Moloney, 2017, p.3), which is becoming apparent with growing numbers joining unions and expressing their views in online forums (ACP, 2018; SIPTU, 2018). Urban et al. (2017, pp.5-6) calls for the development of a 'Competent System' with a 'shared orientation' from the practitioner 'on the ground' to 'all professionals and institutions that together constitute the early childhood system', including 'early childhood settings, training and professional preparation', 'research, regulation and governance, inspection and evaluation'. He further contends that 'when working with young children, families and communities in diverse contexts, there will always be more than one way of understanding (knowing) or acting (professional practice)'. To understand whether true transformation and positive outcomes for children are being realised by recent policy change, it is therefore imperative that the perspectives of practitioners, who are at the heart of the implementation process and understand the daily impact of policy on practice, are captured to inform future policy development. In this way, reform in the sector can continue in a manner that is meaningful and workable within early years settings and counteract, as Arndt et al. (2018, p.97) propose, 'the global uniformity machine'. They propose that streamlining, standardisation, and accountability regimes driven by international agencies within the context of the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM) leads to a decontextualized and de-professionalised sector.

3.2 Professionalisation – an act of performing, conforming or transforming?

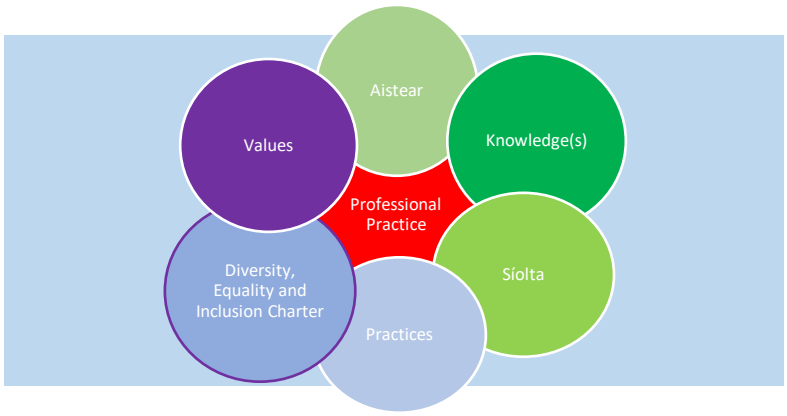


Figure 2: Professional Practice (Urban et al., 2017, p.9)

Aligned to the rapid development of ELC policy internationally, there has been an escalating move towards professionalising the sector driven by policy and practitioners themselves in a drive to enhance status, qualifications, pay, and develop a deeper understanding of the value of ELC, concentric to quality development (Moloney et al. 2018). While this discourse of professionalism infiltrates the lexicon of ECE policy focus, as Brock (2012, p.27) notes, the voice of the practitioner has been generally 'absent from debates' regarding what defines professionalism and professional practice. Just as the concept of quality is constructed from multiple perspectives, equally professionalism in the ELC sector is a much-debated construct, elusive of a clear definition (Urban et al., 2012).

Internationally, the consensus has been that quality systems are reliant on the professionalisation of the ELC sector, but exactly what that looks like or what it means is less clear (Bertram et al., 2016; Peeters, De Kimpe, & Brandt, 2016; Urban et al. 2012). The European Commission Directorate-General for Education and Culture commissioned the development of a research team, CoRE, to explore the concept of professionalisation and competence within the ECCE sector. 'An international expert advisory team', who collaborated with three European and international professional networks, Diversity in Early Childhood Education and Training (DECET), International Step by Step Association (ISSA) and Children in Europe (CiE), supported the team, who were based in the University of East London and the University of Ghent. A fourth group, Education International (EI) contributed perspectives on professionalism and competence offered by practitioners' and teachers'

unions (Urban et al, 2012). The focus of the CoRe team's research was to identify the key competencies relating to quality development and professionalism in early childhood with a view to promoting professionalism across all levels of the sector. The key elements they identified included practice, qualifications, training, management and research, enhancing pre- and in-service training, and establishing a consensus regarding the competencies required to work with young children. Research undertaken with ECE professionals in England, by Brock (2012, p.27) identified seven interrelated factors of professionalism, which in addition to those recognised by CoRE, also highlighted the importance of 'autonomy, values, ethics and rewards'. Moloney et al. (2019:1) reiterate the view that 'professionalism is inextricably linked with discretionary decision-making', which they argue is a requirement to respond to the complex contexts of early childhood, where each situation is different and no one rule applies. Moloney (2015a), proposes that the traits of professionalism are akin to knotted string, each trait needing to be untangled and opened to consider its contribution to a complex and much contested vision of professionalism. The knots are based on training, qualifications and skills, integrated systems, gender, and vested interests.

3.2.1 Professionalisation – the accountability trap

The increasing professionalisation of the ELC sector has been accompanied by increased pressure and expectations on practitioners, but not necessarily with the autonomy or discretionary powers identified as key features of professional practice (Moloney et al. 2018). Osgood (2012) noted that while enhancing professionalisation in the ECE sector, governments, internationally, were placing tighter regulations on the sector. Murphy and Skillen (2013, p.89) propose that the development of quality assurance leads to a 'paper-trail culture', where accountability places increasing pressure on practitioners to provide 'visible and tangible evidence of accountability'. This in turn is placing undue burdens on staff, who reported that documentation was leaving them with little room for manoeuvre, limiting their ability 'to make professional judgements' and was moving them away from focusing on issues directly relating to the children in their care. Murphy & Skillen (2013, p.94) further argue that accountability is complex and dynamic, as it occurs at the intersection of public and private, where practitioners are 'representing the state at its most exposed' and which accounts for governments' inclinations towards regulatory and inspection systems. However, a determination to control ECE settings is problematic, as Jackson (2015, p.515) notes; there

are ‘many ways of knowing’ and systems of accountability and compliance will need to ‘accommodate complexity and diversity of ECEC quality’. However, internationally, regulatory standards consistently champion identifiable markers of quality, rating scales, and systems that pit one service against another (Sahlberg, 2011; Ball, 2003). This is visible in the QRF introduced in Ireland in 2018, which sets out the EYI’s interpretation of the Regulations (2016) and what services must do to comply with this interpretation (Tusla, 2018a). While on the one hand these accountability structures face criticism for their limited ability to embrace the diversity, complexity and dynamics of ELC settings, they have been welcomed and recognised for bringing ‘coherency and consistency’ to the development of quality in ELC systems (Jackson, 2015, p.216).

3.2.2 Status

Despite an overarching government policy objective to professionalise the ELC sector through increasing qualifications and expectations, the status of the practitioners remains low, reflected not only in pay and conditions, but in their lack of identity and autonomy. This lack of status was evident in the report of the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (2016), Solas 2016 National Skills Bulletin. Within this bulletin, childcare was not classified as a profession like other teachers, but instead was characterised as a service alongside hairdressers, childminders, housekeepers, and home carers. This was despite the same report indicating that almost one third of those working in this sector were third-level graduates. The report did acknowledge that over half of those working in this sector worked part-time, were overwhelmingly female, low paid, and consequently subject to high turnover rates and a critical shortage of staff within the workforce (Behan et al. 2016). This report clearly indicates that despite the significant investment in the sector and awareness of the critical role of ELC practitioners, there has been no significant shift away from the traditional conceptualisation of practitioners, who were viewed as ‘nice ladies who love children’ (Stonehouse, 1989, p.61). The public perception of ‘nice ladies’, has probably been challenged by the recent RTE documentaries, ‘Breach of Trust’ and ‘Behind Closed Doors’, which depicted anything but ‘nice ladies’ working in the sector (RTE, 2019; RTE, 2013).

Duignan (2011, p. xi) identifies that the ‘ECCE workforce has arrived at a crossroads in terms of the next phase of their professional development as a distinct profession’ and argues that a ‘resolution’ to ‘issues pertaining to professional identity’ would ‘be central to the next

chapter of this unfolding story'. Yet seven years since her thesis was completed, nothing significant has happened in relation to developing a recognised professional identity for ELC workers. This is not a simple task and remains a critical challenge for the sector, bearing in mind that identity, status, professionalisation, and quality, are inextricably linked (O'Sullivan, 2015: Lyons, 2011). Skattebol et al. (2015, p.116) illuminate that any review of professionalisation in the early years uncovers 'complex entanglements and debates' regarding professional belonging, which they argue need to be resolved if high quality early childhood systems are to be achieved. Herein lie the tensions and dilemmas regarding professional identity, particularly names/titles, where Lyons (2011, p.125) argues that 'a change in the language used to describe both the job title and the workplace can alter social consciousness and even occupational status'. Defining 'professionalism' within such a diverse sector is further challenged by the reality that the Irish ELC sector is highly fragmented and void of a clear identity, which instead is represented by multiple and complex identities, representative of policy visions and personal positioning (Urban et al. 2018).

3.2.3 A profession without a name.

Concurring with Lyons (2011) and O'Sullivan (2015), Wolfe (2015) speculate that a name matters considerably. However, conferring a title on the sector is both problematic and contentious, as names/titles are not separate from meaning. A name is inseparable from status, value and fundamental to how the sector is perceived by society (Adams, 2008). For the ECE sector to be valued by society, Lyons (2011) advises to drop 'care' from the title, as it implies work that anybody could do, and instead select a name with a technicist approach, such as 'teachers', where the emphasis on skill is closely aligned with professionalism. Dalli (2008) describing the elevation of the ECE sector in New Zealand, indicates that a fundamental element of this rise was attributed to the clear identification of early years workers as teachers, a term also used within the Reggio Emilia approach from Northern Italy (Rinaldi, 2006). These debates raise many complexities; does this imply that care is no longer valued, and that children simply learn and develop within a teaching environment? On the other side, are we suggesting that care ends when children leave the early years? Is it not true that teaching at all levels, right through to university, still comprises an aspect of care?

'Early Childhood professional identities are formed, influenced and (re)shaped by theories, systems and policy agendas' (Arndt et al., 2018, p.98). The power of a name and its

influence does not go unrecognised by government departments, who consider deeply the impact of a name and title. As Arndt et al. (2018, p.97) ask, 'who benefits from the notion of distinct professional identities?' The politics behind a name is reflected through the evolving discourse, which perceives early childhood as a movement in its own right, as opposed to the traditional discourse, where ELC is viewed as a space for preparation for 'real school'. This metamorphosis of terminology is evident in the title of the ELC regulations. In 1996 and 2006, the title was Child Care (Pre-school Services) Regulations, where the focus was on care and pre-school, but by 2016, the title had changed considerably to Childcare Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations. The concept of meaning behind a name was further catapulted to the centre of social media debate after the launch of the First 5 Early Years Strategy in November 2019. Within this strategy, the government used a new term, Early Learning and Care (ELC), which would be used hereon to refer to the ECE sector (GOI, 2018c). Minister Zappone welcomed the name as a positive move forward, which she believed reflected 'the reality and aspirations of the early years sector' and equally believed it was a term that could be easily understood by all stakeholders (ECI, 2019a). Practitioners themselves did not share her views, with 3,250, representing 92% of voters, voting in favour of retaining the internationally accepted term 'Early Childhood Education and Care' as opposed to 300, representing 8%, in favour of the new term Early Learning and Care. Those who left comments on the Facebook site referred to their disappointment with 'education' being removed from the title. Aligned with Lyons (2011) perspective on naming, they felt the removal of 'education' from the term was a move to further undermine their status (ACP, 2019c).

Increasingly in Ireland, the sector is finding their political voice, being mobilised by the Association of Childcare Professionals (ACP) and two separate unions, who consistently call for better pay and conditions (Arndt et al., 2018). Following on from a survey held by the ACP, in which 46.6% respondents voted in favour of the title 'teacher', their spokesperson, Marian Quinn (2017) argued that using 'teacher' would unify the profession within one clear identity. She argues further that professionalising the sector without a clear title is challenging, articulating that status and respect are entwined within an identifiable professional title. Similarly, Adams (2008) argues that multiple titles for the early years practitioner undermines and disperses any focus on developing status. However, arriving at an agreed professional title, and the criteria for the awarding of it, is considerably more problematic.

3.2.4 Valuing the work, but not the worker

Recognising this diversity, Children of Europe's policy paper (2008, p.8), called for the sector to unite, regardless of title and instead work in a contextualised and collaborative manner to bring about the required recognition of the sector. The Dakar Framework (UNESCO, 2000, p.20) eight years earlier, referring to education in general, had identified that teachers were the 'essential players in promoting quality education'. The ninth strategy of the framework specifically focused on the importance of enhancing 'the status, morale and professionalism of teachers' (p.20). Within this strategy, they called for 'the active participation' of teachers at both local and national level 'in decisions affecting their professional lives and teaching environments, adequate remuneration, access to training and on-going professional development'. The framework further argued that teachers equally needed to 'accept their professional responsibilities and be accountable to both the learners and the communities' (p.20). The OECD (2012, pp.11-12) identified that to enhance quality in ELC settings, the working conditions of staff needed to be addressed. The key areas identified included i) high staff-child ratios and low group size; ii) competitive wages and other benefits; iii) reasonable schedule/workload; iv) low staff turnover; v) good physical environment, and vi) a competent and supportive centre manager. Equally, UNESCO (2015) noted that investing in teachers is critical to the development of quality. In Ireland, the two documents that underpin the core of quality practice in ELC settings are Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework and Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood (Tusla, 2018a). Both these frameworks recognise the critical role of adults in supporting quality in early years settings. As Forster (2018) articulates, Aistear presented two compelling images, firstly 'children as active, capable and competent learners from birth and secondly practitioners as skilful, expert professionals'. Equally one of Síolta's key principles identify the critical role that adults play in creating quality environments and experiences in early childhood, acknowledging that it was critical that 'this demanding and central role in the life of the young child needs to be appropriately resourced, supported and valued' (DES, 2010, p.8). The role of the practitioners is consistently recognised as a critical element in the development quality in the ELC sector (Urban, 2016; CECDE, 2006). Yet they remain undervalued, reflected in their limited autonomy in practice, lack of a clear identity, and consistently low levels of remuneration, which is inconsistent with the high expectations and responsibility of the role, together with a lack of pay scales and progression routes (Urban, 2018; French, 2018).

As early as the first OECD (2001, p.10) *Starting Strong* publication, it was noted that the ELC sector internationally was characterized by 'low pay, status, poor working conditions, limited access to in-service training and limited career mobility'. Moloney and Pettersen (2017, p.2) observed that despite 'numerous publications, policy initiatives and public and private discussion' and significant research, the political landscape, particularly in Ireland, has been delineated by 'under investment, lack of political will, poor remuneration and the absence of a professional identity for the sector', which they argue had 'undermined and impeded the quality agenda' in Ireland. Ring (2018), in her blog on wellbeing, also referred to the early years practitioner as 'the Cinderella' of the education system. She argues that through 'poor working conditions', characterised by low salaries and limited autonomy, practitioners were seeing their professionalism being consistently eroded from 'policies stemming from the global reform movement'. French (2018), further echoing this argument, expressed her disillusionment that despite the increase of graduates and the increasing expectations on practitioners, this is not matched by appropriate salary scales, conditions of employment or status. Furthermore, she argues that no framework exists, such as a teaching council, to promote professionalism in the sector or a distinctive name, which contributes to a lack of identity for workers. She concludes her blog by reiterating the criticality of addressing issues of ELC professionals' rights to 'pay, conditions, status, standards, identity and qualifications' and only through this will we enable their capacity to 'deliver high quality education and care and develop professionally'. As she noted, many in the sector not only have a degree, but a growing number have Masters Degrees, a difficult situation to equate with the minimum wage (French, 2018).

3.3 Qualifications and other issues influencing quality reform

This concept of professionalisation and quality being dependent on high levels of qualifications is consistently documented in research into quality systems (Fukkink & Lont, 2007; Herzenberg et al., 2005; Sylva et al., 2004) and has entered both global and national policy discourse with vigour, being pursued by governments internationally through both incentives and regulation (DES, 2019; Miller & Cable, 2011). Bertram et al. (2016) allude to the considerable evidence supporting the multiple benefits that arise from a highly qualified ELC workforce, which they highlight enhances children's cognitive, social and communicative competencies. In Ireland, there has been a consistent ELC policy trajectory

moving towards a qualified workforce. In 2002, The Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development in the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector (DJERL, 2002), set out the occupation profiles based on the qualification levels of ELC practitioners. The framework defined the level of expertise and professional status associated with each qualification, from the minimum Level 5 qualification, required to be a room assistant, to Level 10, which represents those holding a doctorate in ECE. The importance of a qualified workforce is reflected in Síolta and in the ECCE scheme, which in particular, incentivises degree-level status through providing higher levels of funding for graduate-led rooms (DCYA, 2018f; Neylon, 2012). Acknowledging the link between qualifications and quality in the ELC sector, the Workforce Development Plan aspired to raise the skills and qualifications of those working in the sector (DES, 2010b). The 2016 regulations made qualifications mandatory for all ELC staff, not just those working in the rooms delivering the ECCE scheme, who had been contractually obliged to be qualified since 2010 (GOI, 2016). In 2016, a survey was undertaken to consult with ELC practitioners to explore how their qualifications and training experiences aligned with the expectations of their role in practice. Two years later, the First 5 Early Years Strategy set out the government's ambition to have a 50% graduate workforce by 2028 (GOI, 2018c). Aligned to this vision and responding to the 2016 consultation and considerable research, the DES published the Professional Award Criteria and Guidelines for degree-led programmes in Ireland (DES, 2019). This document sets out the criteria and standard that training providers have to reach for their qualification awards to be recognised by the state.

Peeters and Vandenbroeck (2011, p.100) however, challenged a vision that focused purely on qualifications, arguing it was naive to suggest that higher qualifications alone resulted in higher levels of quality. They proposed that students with higher qualifications often naturally chose to work in higher quality settings, as opposed to generating quality within these settings. They further argued that support from management to implement change was critical, as was appropriate remuneration to support retention of staff. In reality there are many factors that contribute to quality practice, including a teacher's attitude, skill, values, etc. Early et al. (2007, p.577) argue that 'teachers do not work in a vacuum, but instead are part of a larger educational system', where 'even the most highly skilled teachers' require support in terms of 'materials, curricular support, skilled assistants' and appropriate environments. A focus entirely on qualifications often overlooks the contribution provided by

experience working in early childhood, which is a crucial factor in delivering high quality experiences to young children (Phillipsen et al., 1997; Early et al., 2007).

Dyer (2018, pp.348-349), adding another layer of complexity, forwards that even a vision of professionalism identified by a 'unique' set of knowledge, together with 'autonomy and agency in practice' is too simplistic and ultimately problematic. By its nature, ELC practice is multidisciplinary, drawing from 'health, psychology, education, sociology, leadership…management and business'. Furthermore, practice needs to draw from practitioners' emotional abilities as effectively as their cognitive capacity. Similarly, to view ELC professional status as having a single purpose is a misconception, as practitioners are required to respond to multiple purposes and expectations from various stakeholders. Yet, despite the complexity of their role, ELC practitioners generally are afforded limited agency and have not contributed to the debates or policy development that are coming to define professionalism and their role. In Ireland, reflective of the situation in England, there is a system where government funding has resulted in facilitating governments to determine practitioners 'qualification, registration and regulation' (Dyer, 2018, p.348) and incentivise a graduate workforce (DES, 2019). Therefore, rather than having a sense of autonomy, practitioners often feel controlled by external forces such as government agents in the form of inspectors and mentors within the government's remit of developing quality assurance within ELC settings. As Dyer (2018, pp.348-349) questions, have higher qualifications

> …empowered these practitioners to claim a professional status arising from specialised knowledge and the agency to improve practice and raise quality, or have they instead reinforced compliance with an externally regulated, political led conception of what early years should be?

Year on year, ELC practitioners' qualifications have increased, as evidenced in the Annual Early Years Sectoral Profile Report (Pobal, 2017; 2018; 2019). In the latest report from 2018-2019, 94% of all staff held a qualification, 67% held a Level 6 or higher, and 25% were graduates (Pobal, 2019). The consistent rise in the numbers qualifying has been rapid and possibly unprecedented in any other sector, determined largely through policy initiatives such as the ECCE scheme, which was made mandatory through the 2016 regulations and in response to the increased expectations of the sector (GOI, 2016; DCYA, 2019d).

Madden (2012, p.67) in her research with ELC practitioners in Ireland, notes that 'all 24 participants equated 'training and qualifications' with professional status. Participants

highlighted how ‘a certain level of qualifications’ was fundamental to be ‘able to discuss and speak on a professional level’ and bearing in mind the importance of the ELC practitioners’ work in ‘nurturing the future of the country’, ‘professionally qualified’ staff were required and all agreed ‘a true professional has a degree’. In her research, 83% of participants concurred that ‘a graduate led and experienced workforce is a key constituent of a profession’. Moloney (2010, p.180), observed ‘the most significant factor’ cited by primary school teachers was that ‘people know we are trained, they accept that we know what we are doing, that says it all’, ‘as long’ as their ‘training keeps abreast of changes’ they viewed they would always be recognised as professionals. In contrast, the ELC practitioners interviewed at the time, prior to the mandatory requirement to be qualified, illuminated their frustration at the lack of qualifications within their sector and how they believed this undermined them as professionals; ‘if we want to be professional, we must be trained. We won’t be taken seriously unless everybody who works with a child is trained. Then we’re all singing from the same hymn sheet’ (Moloney, 2010, pp.181-182). ELC participants expressed further frustration with what they perceived to be the ad-hoc approach to training and qualifications in the ECE sector, which they believed was ‘holding back practitioners from being recognised as professionals’. Five years later, Moloney (2015b, p.325) again identified the quality of the ‘educator’s education and training’ is critical to enable them meet the demands and attain the high skills required to work within the dynamic and complex spaces that comprise of the ELC sector in Ireland.

3.4 Continuous Professional Development (CPD)

International recognition of the importance of high-quality staff with access to ongoing training has affected ELC policy developments globally and in Ireland. It has led to a focus on not only increasing qualifications within the sector, but also embedding the concept of continuous professional development (CPD) as a critical element of quality practice (Peeters et al., 2016). This drive towards constant upskilling is situated within the global drive towards the development of smart economies. Within the EU, this was framed by the Education and Training within Europe 2020 Strategy (EC, 2013). This strategy placed education as the ‘essential driver for growth and a key instrument for addressing’ wider societal issues such as ‘unemployment’, ‘globalisation and the knowledge economy’ (EC, 2013, p.1). This strategy focused on all levels of education, particularly highlighting the importance of ELC as a foundation for all future learning, articulating that across

employments ‘up-skilling of adults is necessary for a productive workforce’ (EC, 2013, p.1). The European Quality Framework (EC, 2014) proposed that quality in the ELC sector relied not just on initial training, but on CPD throughout their professional lives. Ireland has and continues to be committed to raising qualifications, with the objective of attaining a 50% graduate workforce by 2030 (GOI, 2018). In the Professional Award Criteria and Guidelines for Initial Professional Education (Level 7 and Level 8) Degree Programmes for the Early Learning and Care (ELC) Sector in Ireland achieving graduate status was not viewed as the ‘end of training’, rather a ‘milestone of achievement’ to be built on through both formal and informal learning throughout the ‘educator’s career’ (DES, 2019, p.11). In her opening foreword to the document, Minister Zappone articulated her perspective that ‘all professions’… ‘need continual support and access to high-quality CPD opportunities and initial professional education’ (DES, 2019, p.4). CPD was not viewed as optional, but instead, ‘a commitment’ to ‘ongoing professional learning’ needed to be ‘inherent’ in the ‘attributes and formation of an early years educator’ (DES, 2019, p.11). This commitment to supporting ongoing professional development has been a consistent facet of government policy since the announcement of the Quality Agenda. There were regulatory requirements for practitioners to have First Aid training, Manual Handling, Food preparation, Fire Safety training to mention but a few (GOI, 2016; GOI, 2005). CPD intensified in 2016, with the launch of the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM). Level 3 of this model focused on ‘training courses’, specific to children with disabilities, starting first with the establishment of LiNC (DCYA, 2016, p.11). LiNC was a year-long Level 6 training programme to prepare students to undertake the role of Inclusion Coordinator in their settings on completion. The places were fully funded by the DCYA and a €200 bursary was available to candidates to cover any costs (LiNC, 2020). Training was to be ‘informed by a baseline survey of training needs’, with the objective of providing ‘a practical, tailored response to the particular needs identified in any given geographic area or in relation to any specific issue’ (p.11). To date, training has comprised of LiNC and the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) training. In 2018, Hanen, Lámh and Aistear and Play training opportunities were provided by Better Start on behalf of the DCYA, all qualified for financial reimbursement under a pilot scheme set up by the government to incentivise CPD opportunities, where the government funded attendance up to 18 hours per learner (DCYA, 2018b). Online training in Sensory Integration has been made available since autumn 2019 (DCYA, 2019c).

The Oireachtas (2017) report on the workforce noted that many barriers exist which hinder practitioners from using CPD opportunities. These included costs, family commitments, and second jobs, which many practitioners require to supplement the low income they receive from childcare. Furthermore, it noted that practitioners were frustrated with having to attend at their own personal expense, without any formal accreditation on completion. CPD in the Irish context has been predominantly targeted towards staff working in the ECCE funded rooms, with fewer opportunities available for those working with children under three. Furthermore, a significant amount of CPD focused specifically on supporting compliance, which as Moss (2018) notes below, reduces practitioners' creativity and innovation, as the focus is on complying rather than transformation.

Globally, initial training and CPD are frequently saturated in the discourse of delivering 'desirable results' internationally, measured by 'children's learning and developmental outcomes' (Waters and Payler, 2015, p.161), rather than responding to the needs of the workforce. Oberhuemer (2013, p.103) called for 'regionalisation, virtual e-learning and workplace re-contextualisation of knowledge' and developing CPD in collaboration with ECE settings, higher education and CPD providers so that practitioners could take 'greater control' and ensure training was relevant to their daily practice. Internationally, CPD has formed part of government reform initiatives, aligned to this argument and context Oberhuemer (2013, p.104) called for a 'systemic, planned, coordinated, sustained and funded bottom-up approach towards CPD', that was participant-driven. Moss (2018, p.84) equally advises against externally driven CPD. He argues, 'applying an external programme', drives a culture of compliance, where educators 'conform' to 'predetermined standards'; therefore CPD becomes another 'means of better managing education by acting as a continuous form of control'. This concept of control, he proposes, 'is enhanced', where CPD is linked to the 'concept of quality', which he argues has become a term used to increase 'managerial control' and create a culture of 'conformity to norms', reducing ELC to 'technical practice'. As an alternative, he advocated the approach advanced by Malaguzzi in the municipal schools of Reggio Emilia, where CPD arose from peer collaboration and reflection. This in turn opened opportunities for educational experimentation, extension of pedagogical knowledge, and supportive reflexive practices (Moss, 2018). The vision that guides CPD in Italy was inspired by Malaguzzi, who noted that professionalism was inadequately accounted for in 'initial preparation', where training tends to be 'theoretical and preachy'. He advocates that 'professionalism needs to be formed – or rather re-formed within in-service professional

development' (Malaguzzi 1993, p.86, cited in Lazzari et al., 2013, p.136). As Lazzari et al. (2013, p.136) observed, the Italian word used to refer to CPD is *formazione*, which suggests 'the idea of progressively taking shape by engaging in a process of personal and professional growth'. Within this context, they argued that the focus should be on CPD practice, as opposed to externally imposed training separate from practice. Referencing the Italian approach to CPD, they argue that collaborative reflection is the most effective in supporting context-based educational practice.

Within the Italian municipal ELC schools, CPD was viewed as 'both an obligation and a right for ECEC staff'. Consequently, considerable time was allocated to practitioners to enable them to participate in ongoing work and specific training in response to specific requests that emerged (Lazzari et al., 2013, p.136). Moss (2018, p.83-84) observed considerable differences between the Italian model of CPD and those emerging from more neoliberal, managerial approaches to CPD. In the Reggio Emilia context, teachers were valued based on the concept of 'a rich educator for a rich child'. Therefore, teachers received 'proper pay: non-contact time' and all staff were included, where 'non-hierarchical relationships and 'collaborative' relationships provided a 'support system based on the role of the pedagogista', thereby creating a 'culture of learning, creativity and evolution'.

3.5 Funding and its impact on pay, conditions, recruitment and retention.

Funding for the ELC sector remains a critical challenge for the Irish government, particularly ensuring this funding is directly used to support the development of a professional workforce. Farquhar (2010) observed in New Zealand that global investment in ECE was resulting in the sector relenting control to governments over their operation and financial future. Moloney and Pettersen (2017, p.6) similarly noted two outcomes of the continuous policy initiatives in Ireland. The first was that government was 'determining the financial viability of services' while equally placing 'exceptional demands and pressure' on practitioners. Secondly, by 2017, the impact of underfunding of government schemes, combined with the introduction of a mandatory FETAC Level 5 qualification, was resulting in a spiralling recruitment crisis (Oke et al., 2019; Moloney, 2018a; ECI, 2017a). Herzenberg et al. (2005, p.1), referring to the USA ECE recruitment and retention crisis 1979-2004, stated 'parents can't afford to pay, teachers can't afford to stay, there's got to be a better way'. This dilemma continues to be

replicated globally and in Ireland, where policy rhetoric repeatedly focuses on 'access, affordability and quality', but with little attempt to address practitioners' pay and conditions. This has escalated the challenges of recruitment and increased disquiet amongst the workforce. This unrest has become visible in the mobilisation of the workforce in Ireland, through the activity of the ACP and two separate unions, which reached a crescendo in February 2020, when 30.000, ELC providers and practitioners took to the streets to demand better pay, conditions and consultation (ACP, 2020; Arndt et al., 2019). The Pobal 2018-2019 Sectoral Report indicated a staff turnover rate of 23.4%, marginally down on the previous year of 24.7% and from a high of 28.2% in 2017. The sectoral report indicated 39% of the turnover left the sector and 37% went to a different setting. 93% of those who left the sector had qualifications of Level 5 or higher and 31% were graduates (Pobal, 2019). While not the biggest cohort, losing graduates from the sector is concerning. Moloney's (2015b, p.325) research indicates that many ELC graduates did not perceive a future for themselves working directly with the children, but viewed it as a 'stepping stone' towards 'alternative career pathways'. The main reason cited by graduates for leaving the sector was that despite the level of 'education we have and the responsibility, the wages are terrible' (Moloney, 2015b, p.330). Minister Zappone, since her appointment in 2016, has consistently agreed that greater investment was required. At the ECCERA conference, she acknowledged that training and retention of a highly qualified workforce was dependent on government investment, acknowledging that 'the current terms and conditions do not accurately reflect' practitioners role supporting children 'at the most crucial time' in their lives. She personally committed to 'fight at cabinet for adequate and appropriate pay and conditions for the professionals working with children in Ireland'. Two years later, at the Open Policy debate in the Aviva stadium, she confirmed government spending on childcare had increased by 80% with future intentions focusing on continuing investment to 'compensate providers so that they can deliver early childhood care and education on a sustainable and high-quality basis' and enable them to 'attract and retain a well-qualified workforce'. The objective of the First 5 Strategy, she announced, is to 'radically reform' the current funding model through the development of an 'independent, international, expert panel' that would 'make recommendations' on how to 'deliver accessible, affordable, high-quality childcare'. As a follow-on, a two-tiered funding model was announced in the First 5 Strategy, wherein services that opted to 'meet agreed quality criteria' would receive additional funding. The impact this will have on practice and staff morale remains to be seen and whether 'optional' really means optional. What is clearer is that three years after initial commitments to increase

funding, the statistics demonstrate that there has been at best moderate improvements in pay, with recruitment and retention in the sector remaining a growing concern (Pobal, 2019; ECI 2019d). Early Childhood Ireland (2019d) noted in their research that 91% of respondents highlighted that recruitment and retention of staff was affecting the viability of their service. This marked a 5% increase on a similar survey held in 2017. Furthermore, 65% of respondents reported difficulties retaining staff, an increase of 16% on the 2017 figures. Pobal's annual survey noted a 10% increase in respondents experiencing challenges recruiting suitably qualified staff (Pobal, 2019). The ECI (2019d) survey also indicated that pay and conditions were taking a 'toll on staff wellbeing and professional development', with respondents articulating that they would be paid more in a supermarket, without any qualification expectations. They further expressed the adverse effects their employment terms had on their personal life, where they cannot afford to be sick due to loss of pay; lack of financial security, and inability to get a mortgage. 47% of those working in the sector only had part-time contracts, aligned with the 38-weeks-a-year capitation provided by Government for the operation of the ECCE scheme, leaving staff for the most part having to sign on the live register as unemployed for the summer months (Pobal, 2019; O'Regan, 2017), a situation not replicated in any other profession. As Funchion (2017) noted, the unintended consequence of quality measures had frequently exacerbated the staffing crisis, where aligned to Moloney's (2015b) findings, childcare was and has continued to be an increasingly less attractive career, requiring significant levels of qualifications, high expectations, but no equal offset in terms of remuneration or status.

Minister Zappone articulated that resolving pay and conditions was complex, as the state is not the employer of the workforce and therefore does not have direct responsibility for remuneration (O'Regan, 2017). She has however articulated that a Sectoral Employment Order (SEO), developed through the Workplace Relations Commission (WRC) or the Labour Court, could be the way forward for employers and employees to achieve a settlement agreeable to all (O'Regan, 2017). Trade unions equally are calling for an SEO. The Big Start campaign has called for the workforce to join SIPTU, with one-third of the ELC sector required to enable the union to approach the Labour Court and request that it examine the terms and conditions of employees in the sector. An SEO, they promise, will ensure 'mandatory terms and conditions including pay, pensions and sick leave above the statutory minimum are provided for the sector' (SIPTU, 2020). However, despite consistent campaigns on the ground and through social media, the unions remain short of the required one-third

membership. The reasons are not clear as to why practitioners are slow to join the campaign. This may be reflective of the complex ELC landscape where the workforce is comprised of both employers and employees. An SEO without sufficient funding could thus threaten the sustainability of many services.

3.6 Leadership

Traditionally, the role of leadership and management has been placed at the periphery of policy development in Ireland. However, since the introduction of Síolta in 2006, the Education-focused inspections in 2015, the Childcare Act (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016, the Quality Regulatory Framework (QRF) 2018 and Goal D Building Block 1, First 5 Strategy all focus on leadership as a centralised element of quality reform. Síolta's stated objectives were to develop professional leadership within the sector, through support for 'individual professional practice and development' with a 'focus for teamwork and team development' together with providing a 'tool for management, strategic planning and policy development' promoting professional reflection and interaction' amongst a 'team of professionals' (DES, 2010a, p.5). It is not surprising, therefore, that a quarter of Síolta's standards focus specifically on leadership and management. These include standards 10, 11, 12, and 15, which focus on Organisation, Professional Practice, Communication, and Legislation and Regulation (DES, 2010a) respectively. This strong focus on leadership reiterates the view that it is inextricably entangled with quality development. The Quality Agenda also placed a strong focus on a top-down approach to the development of quality processes in the ELC sector through robust inspections. A further angle was introduced with the Better Start QDS, which focused on mentoring as a means of improving quality through a strengths-based partnership (Rogers, 2014). The Early Years Education-focused inspections also employ a strengths-based approach, with specific emphasis on inspecting process rather than structural quality. The EYEI inspect four areas of practice, with Area 4 specifically focusing on management and leadership for learning (DES, 2018a). ELC policy placed significant emphasis on the development of a corporate managerial style of leadership, which focuses on managerialism, strategic and documented planning, clear lines of authority, team development, appraisals, and support and supervision. This emphasis aligned ELC more closely to the language of the business sector rather than education, which has been characteristic of the broader Global Education Reform Movement (Tusla, 2018a; GOI, 2016, Sahlberg, 2011; Ball, 2003). The 2016 regulations provided legal status to this type of leadership in Regulation 9 (Management and Recruitment) where ELC settings were required

to have ‘a clear management structure in the service that identifies the lines of authority and accountability’ where ‘all employees, unpaid workers and contractors are appropriately supervised and provided with appropriate information, and where necessary training’ (GOI, 2016, pp.12-13). The QRF brought further clarity in relation to these expectations, stating that supervision and staff training were a requirement of all ELC settings, with area 1 of section 2 focusing on governance (Tusla, 2018a). As the concept of leadership in ELC is relatively new, particularly in terms of policy initiatives, there is a dearth of research available on whether this corporate-style leadership is beneficial or limited in supporting quality development (Moloney and Petterson, 2017; Kaz and Wilcox, 2017). Many questions arise, such as does this style of leadership create leaders or managers? Could such leadership undermine practitioners’ autonomy, in favour of compliance and accountability or is it empowering? The response to these questions will probably be context based and dependent on the personalities, education and experience of the managers/individuals involved. What has emerged from scoping the literature on this topic, particularly in the Irish context, is that it is an area that requires further exploration. Kaz and Wilcox (2017) in their study on System Leadership in the UK, which advocated for a distributed type of leadership, acknowledged that while their study was limited, a ‘system leadership was appropriate, supportive and validating’ in a cascading manner, benefitting all in a top down way of distributing leadership. Dyer (2018, p.348), in contrast, argued that compared with other professions such as medicine, law etc. that have developed a sense of professionalism ‘from a within’ model where the profession itself sets the standards, ELC professionalism is externally driven by politicians ‘who control early years funding’ and therefore impose the ‘professional agenda’. She argues this ‘from above’ approach has led to the ‘imposition of managerial control’ to ensure a compliance agenda, to meet regulations and the ‘needs of government policy’, whilst being disguised as an approach to ‘empower practitioners through access to higher level qualifications and autonomy over their day to day practice’ (p.348). Within this realm, Penn (2019, p.2) argued that ‘conformity or at least some appearance of it is a necessary survival strategy’ leading further to a view that this type of leadership should be treated with significant caution. A further concern that arises from this corporate managerial style of leadership is the debate that is gaining momentum on whether or not the ELC sector is on a trajectory towards being owned and managed by corporations who prioritise profits over children’s rights (Penn, 2019; Kilderry, 2006). Kilderry (2006, p.80) argued that neoliberal reform in Australia had ‘created market conditions favourable for large corporations to provide childcare within Australia’, which raises the question of whether neoliberal policy

reform of the ELC sector has equally contributed internationally, and in Ireland, to a move away from small providers towards childcare chains. If so, what implications does this have for the development of quality in the ELC sector in Ireland? Urban (2018) proposes that the ELC sector needs to move away from private sector ownership if national and international governments are serious in their commitment to quality development. While this option appeared remote, newspapers leaked on 8th April 2020 that state childcare was part of a proposed document in the possible formation of a future government being agreed between Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil (O'Connell, H. 2020; Kelly, 2020). This came just one week after they announced that in response to Covid19, they would pay childcare workers €350.00 for a 12-week period as part of a wage subsidy scheme (DCYA, 2020). The final published proposal for government formation between the parties merely referred to affordable childcare with no move currently towards a public model of childcare (FF & FG, 2020). While childcare remains primarily privately operated, it inevitably leaves early childhood, as Press et al. (2018, p.328) argue, 'more commodified and subject to the market than any other area of education'.

3.7 Consultation with the ECCE sector

Irish governments have consistently articulated a strong commitment to the processes of consultation, evident first with the commencement of the Partnership approach during the late 1980's (Moran, 2012). In 2014, Ireland became one of 70 countries to join an Open Government Partnership, which committed both internationally and nationally to a more transparent means of government, which amongst other objectives, included empowering citizens to be more active in the development of policy (DPER, 2016). In response to this commitment to a fairer and more open means of Government, the Irish Government published its first Open Government Action Plan (2014-2016) making a commitment to draw up implementation plans every two years, with the second published at the end of 2016. To date, there has not been a third action plan. In December 2016, the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Pascal Donohue, in the Foreword to 'Ireland's Open Government Partnership Action Plan (2016-2018), welcomed this form of government stating 'complex policy issues cannot be solved by government alone. When citizens are engaged in public policy making it leads to more informed decisions' (DPER, 2016, p.3). Minister Zappone reiterated this pledge to processes of consultation at the launch of Early Childhood Ireland's survey on pay and conditions in the sector, 'Doing the Sums', where she stated, 'Your voices are important to the debate and I welcome your contribution'. Duignan and Walsh (2004,

p.211) posed a rationale for consultation in development of Síolta as based '…[u]pon a belief that the best interest of the child can only be served by policy and practice that has been informed by the consensus arising from the interface of the multiple perspectives that characterise early childhood in Ireland'.

Consultation processes are often initiated directly from government departments, as in the formats mentioned above (DCYA, 2015a; 2015b; DES, 2015a) and through government agencies such as Tusla and Pobal. The Early Years Inspectorate that operates under the governance of Tusla set up an Early Years Consultative Forum in 2015 as a means of consulting with the sector in relation to the development of the Quality Regulatory Framework (QRF) (Tusla, 2018c). Pobal have become synonymous with their annual Early Years Profile Reports, which are conducted online and yield a very high response from the early Years Sector (Pobal, 2011; 2016; 2017; 2018; 2019).

Despite a consistently articulated commitment, supported by tangible initiatives to consult with the ELC sector, practitioners articulated that they 'felt side-lined' when it came to consultation. Furthermore, they felt that when their views were sought it was merely as 'a box-ticking exercise' and that 'their views and submissions were not seriously considered' (Oireachtas, 2017, p.16). Supporting this view, they highlighted the introduction of the second free preschool year, where the ELC sector felt that their advice against its introduction until a full survey of the first year had been undertaken had been completely disregarded (Oireachtas, 2017, p.16). The sense of being voiceless was also commented on by a crèche manager who attended the Early Years Forum in November 2017 as a representative of ECI: 'as an early years educator working on the ground, I often feel very removed from the panels and working groups in the early years space' (ECI, 2017b, p.16). Echoing this sentiment, an early years provider at the preliminary consultations in the development of a National QRF stated, 'this is the first time I've ever had an invite to come and speak directly with regard to any consultative process' (Tusla, 2018c, p.23). While another noted that, 'we're being expected to come to this meeting, that meeting...and there's nobody listening to us' (Tusla, 2018c, p.23). This frustration at a lack of consultation with the sector was reiterated in the research of Oke et al. (2019, p.286), where practitioners articulated: 'There is not enough consultation between any policymakers at any level. We seem to be the only sector that does

not shout when it's been told to jump. If you say boo to a nurse there is a strike, if you say it to a teacher there is a strike'.

The need to be heard was vocalised by ELC practitioners during Tusla's consultation processes in developing the QRF:

> The one overwhelming message that we'd like to get across is just to listen to the people doing the job. That's all we are asking. We are not asking you to involve us in the decision making; we're just asking you to listen. We are asking you to consult on what is practical and what isn't' (Tusla, 2018c, p.23).

The participants at this consultation, articulated how organisations that attend consultation processes to represent the sector, do not adequately represent their views, but instead have 'their own focus' (Tusla, 2018c, p.24)., 'They're a lobby group and they're looking for primarily funding in Ireland for full time care for children….They do not think about sessional. They do not think about early education'. (p.23).

The Oireachtas (2017, p.16) Report on Working Conditions noted practitioners held 'the view that some early years stakeholders were the primary sources of consultation, while providers, staff and students were not sufficiently brought into the conversation'. This raises the question, who is consulted and how much space is provided for ELC practitioners' voices within these consultation processes?

To explore this further, an examination of the consultation processes for four key policy initiatives aimed at increasing quality will be examined with the objective of exploring how these policies have committed to the processes of consultation and why the ELC sector continue to feel isolated from policy development. The four policy initiatives investigated are the development of Síolta (2006), Aistear (2008), the development of the Quality Regulatory Framework (2018) and the First 5 Early Years Strategy (2018).

The objectives behind the consultation processes in the development of Síolta was 'primarily to tap into the accumulated knowledge of stakeholders in ECCE regarding the development of national quality standards' (Duignan & Walsh, 2004b, p.21). The commitment to consultation was rationalised on the belief that embedding

> …a common set of understandings regarding the nature of quality' needs to be relevant 'for and to, the society in which the child is growing and developing', while also 'taking account of the dynamic nature of systems which continue to evolve and change over time (Duignan & Walsh, 2004b, p.16).

The team acknowledged the challenges of consulting with a sector that was 'complex, dynamic and diverse' (Duignan & Walsh, 2004b, p.16). To capture this diversity, six consultation seminars were held nationwide, and one was conducted through the Irish language. A nationwide publicity campaign advertised the seminars, and a reflection was undertaken after each seminar to identify gaps in participation and to consider approaches to remedy it. After the first three seminars, attendance by primary school teachers was observed to be low, therefore primary schools were specifically targeted in the publicity campaign for the second series. Renewed efforts were placed on publicising the seminars through the media, in particular newspapers and local radio stations. Yet despite this campaign, there were only 387 participants in total. 43% of these represented teachers and practitioners. How many were ELC practitioners remains unclear (Duignan & Walsh, 2004b).

The format of the seminars was designed to provide all participants an 'equal opportunity to participate' and 'have their views and opinions recorded' (Duignan & Walsh, 2004b, p.16). To achieve this the consultations were broken into small groups and each group was allocated a facilitator, chosen from various representative organisations. Afterwards, the facilitators briefed the CECDE on the outcomes and findings of the small group work. The key approach to guiding these consultations was Action Research, which was chosen due to its alignment with the panels view that together with the participants they were 'co-constructors of knowledge' working together to develop a NQF. The research focused on three predetermined questions: 1. What does the term 'quality' in early childhood care and education mean to you? 2. In your opinion, what are the most effective ways of assessing quality in early childhood care and education? 3. What supports do you need to receive in order to achieve and maintain quality in early childhood care and education?

Many positives were evident in this format of consultation. There was a clearly articulated belief that listening to all stakeholders was critical to policy development. There was also reflection evident on how best to encourage participation. The participants that did attend commented favourably on the seminars as an opportunity to listen and share experiences. Ultimately, attendance was low and participation in terms of the overall sector was miniscule.

The consultation processes used in the development of Síolta significantly influenced those used in the development of Aistear. Unlike the development of Síolta, the NCCA had prepared a consultative document based on international research and the current primary school curriculum. This was used as the focal point within the consultations with the ELC

sector. The rationale behind the consultation articulated was: 'To be effective, the Framework for Early Learning must be grounded in the realities, the challenges and the complexities of early childhood care and education in Ireland' (GOI, 1999) (NCCA, 2005, p.7).

The consultations took the format of:

- Using response forms available on the NCCA website and in hard copy.
- Regional Seminars organised and hosted by the NCCA, which consisted of a presentation, followed by discussions on the document.
- Sectoral briefings on the request of organisations and networks
- Written submissions were invited from early childhood organisations, agencies, bodies and networks (NCCA, 2004, p.85).
- An invitational seminar was held in autumn 2004, where the findings of the consultation process was launched. 'The seminar' was viewed as an 'opportunity to learn from early childhood experts on issues central to the development of the framework.

An Early Childhood Committee was established, with membership from the early childhood sector. The work of the committee was to 'support NCCA in developing the Framework for Early Learning' (NCCA, 2004, p.32).

4,000 copies of the response form were published. The form was distributed by post to key organisations and to personnel working in selected early childhood settings ensuring geographical spread and diversity of setting', creating 'a consultation broadly representative of the early childhood sector' (NCCA, 2005, p.8). The information obtained from the response forms was largely quantitative, with the first part of the form dedicated to providing background information on the participant and the second part consisting of a Likert Scale, which allowed participants to respond to nine key ideas from the consultative document. There was a comment box also available. 115 responses were received. 37.8% of these respondents identified as a being a practitioner.

The seminars that followed 'were advertised through letters to national organisations, agencies and networks, county childcare committees, third level institutions and the education partners' with the invitation 'extended to all those working in the sector (NCCA, 2005, p.9). They consisted of a presentation and discussion, again based on the consultative document. 197 participants took part across the regions. While the majority of participants

identified as managers, it was not clear what they managed. Furthermore, there were no childcare practitioners identified from the breakdown of seminar attendees.

There were 506 participants at the briefing meetings. All participants represented organisations with some link to childcare, including representative organisations, academic institutions, childcare committees, primary teachers' organisations (INTO) and the National Disability authority (NDA). Similarly, while 23 written submissions were received, there was no submissions from any early years practitioners. The lack of representation from practitioners in terms of written submissions and attendance at briefings was possibly a consequence of them being issued by specific invitation to education partners and organisations representing the ECE sector only.

The invitational seminar similarly was on an invite only basis, with 80 places being issued to 'various organisations in early childhood care and education' (NCCA, 2005, p.33). 22 of these participants identified as practitioners/teachers/lecturers. The actual breakdown was unclear (NCCA, 2005).

While the consultation for the development of Aistear was quite extensive, it was only one of four elements that informed the final publication. Furthermore, the voice afforded to early years practitioners working on the ground with children was considerably limited, as they were not invited to all elements of the consultation process.

The journey to the development of a Quality Regulatory Framework (QRF) specific to the early years began in 2015. The development of the QRF was undertaken through a 'comprehensive, systematic, participative approach that involved wide ranging consultations with key stakeholders' (Tusla, 2018c, p5). In preparation for a consultative process on the development of the Quality Regulatory Framework (QRF), finally published on 7th September 2018, a draft was prepared which set out 'the regulators' interpretation of the Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016 and the amendments on these regulations in the same year (Tusla, 2018c). The objective behind the development of the QRF arose from research undertaken by Sinead Hanafin on behalf of Tusla, which indicated it was necessary to further standardise the regulations, so that there could be more consistency across the inspectorate (Hanafin, 2016; Tusla, 2018c). The development of the draft QRF was based on three processes. Firstly, a review of national and international policies, strategies, standards and legislation. Secondly, through bilateral consultation with national and international experts in areas relevant to the regulations, such as behaviour

management, infection control, internet safety etc. Finally, consultation with key stakeholders including providers and parents, took place over two time periods, January-February 2017 and November 2017-January 2018.

The preliminary consultation included 'face to face meetings as well as the completion of a pre-formatted template relating to the specific content of the document' (Tusla, 2018c, p.7). The second and final 'consultation was based on a revised document' based on the findings of the earlier consultation. 'All registered providers, national organisations and other key stakeholders were invited to take part' in the second consultation. In addition, a number of submissions were made from national and international organisations (Tusla, 2018c, p.8).

The preliminary consultations comprised:

1. Early Years Inspectors 46 participants 9th January 2017
2. Parents 2 participants 28th January 2017
3. Providers 42 participants 28th January 2017
4. An Extended TUSLA Early Years Representative Consultative Forum 3 participants 31st January 2017
5. The Department of Education and Skills 2 participants 9th February 2017

The objective of the consultation was to provide 'the inspectorate with an understanding of key stakeholders' views on the overall approach being adopted to the QRF' (Tusla, 2018c, p.10). While 43 providers were represented, the largest group was the inspectorate, with 46 participants. Participating was not open to all providers, but they were instead 'identified through City and County Childcare Committees' (Tusla, 2018c, p.10).

Each consultation opened with an introduction to the consultation by the National Manager, followed by a PowerPoint presentation on the purpose of the QRF discussion points and questions to be addressed. Participants were not provided with drafts of the QRF in advance of the consultations, which were only provided on arrival. Consultations were guided, so that only discussion opportunities would be available on broad issues and no specific details would be discussed. The consultations focused on four key areas, a general view of the QRF, (gathered through a show of hands and individual comments on post-it notes). Potential

benefits arising from having a QRF, challenges, solutions and supports required were all gathered through (small group discussion and feedback) (Tusla, 2018c).

Within the consultations, participants were quite articulate, particularly in relation to the challenges posed by having a Quality Regulatory Framework, which were published in the consultative documents. Participants were asked to give their overall views of the document, to which many providers indicated their frustration at not being issued with the document earlier, stating they were 'unfamiliar with the document', 'had no time to read QRF' 'why not have emailed it to us and pointed out it was not a final draft?' (Tusla, 2018c, p.12). The issues raised by the participants were concerns relating to 'implementation', 'length and format of the QRF and the need for consultation' (Tusla, 2018c, p.12). Potential benefits highlighted included, increased 'clarity', 'provides an evidence-informed resource', 'supports standardisation and consistency in service delivery and inspectorate', increases accountability' and brings a common language across the sector' (Tusla, 2018, p.13). The Early Years Inspectors and Tusla representatives, with 61 and 17 respectively, dominated the Post-it-notes on challenges, length and format, consultation, assessment of compliance and other. Providers and parents provided 40 and 13 respectively.

As noted in the report, only 'a small number of providers' made positive comments 'the concept is good…the amount of regulations is overwhelming', with the 'main focus' of their comments, 'related to the challenges' (Tusla, 2018c, p.15). Every consultation framework was noted to take place in 'the context of a number of new initiatives', where providers were 'overwhelmed' and 'overloaded' by the quantity of initiatives 'being thrown at them', 'a lot of them are just weary of all this new stuff coming' (Tusla, 2018c, p.16). It was anticipated the QRF could be 'overwhelming for providers', 'providers will not be enthusiastic about it – more rules' and 'it's intimidating for providers' (Tusla, 2018c, p.16). Providers also expressed their concern that much of it was 'irrelevant' to their service and 'administrative heavy'. Equally, a lack of time to engage with the document concerned providers 'When do we read a 165-page document?'…'I get paid for three hours a day. Who's going to pay me for the hours it's going to take to read this?' (Tusla, 2018c, pp.16-17). The document is impractical, as one provider highlighted in relation to Regulation 19, 'there's 144 indicators'. Further impracticality was highlighted where providers protested 'We're not allowed to use Tippex. We're not allowed to use black pens', which she argued was merely the regulators' 'interpretation' of the regulations. Others questioned the legality of the document requesting

all staff be immunised (Tusla, 2018c, p.18). Many found the concepts of 'quality' and 'regulatory' as contrasting, arguing that quality and compliance are not the same thing and that in this context, quality becomes reduced to a tick list. Practitioners expressed their frustration at the lack of information on the purpose and processes of the day and others on its publication expressing they 'only heard about the consultation on social media' (Tusla, 2018c, p.22).

The final consultation consisted of an online survey and invited written submissions. There 956 responses to the online survey with 752 responses from Early Years Providers. The QRF, which was 'circulated to a number of national and international organisations for feedback and submissions' (Tusla, 2018c, p.51). It was not stated that this circulation was forwarded to private providers, however, in accounting for submissions received it was noted that 'private providers (e.g. Giraffe) made submissions'. Whether this means only Giraffe (a childcare chain) made a submission, or whether other providers made submissions, is not clear. In addition to these 'formal consultations, bilateral consultations and discussions about the QRF took place with a number of national organisations and international peers' (Tusla, 2018c, p.55). 'The feedback and views' from the consultations 'were incorporated as considered appropriate by the Inspector into the QRF throughout the development'. The final draft in 2018, 'was circulated and discussed with, Tusla Early Years Representative Consultation Forum, Childminding Ireland and representatives from the Inspectorate for any final comments prior to publication' (Tusla, 2018c, p.56). The Tusla Early Years Representative Consultation forum had childcare representatives on the committee, but no actual early years providers (Tusla, 2018c).

The consultations were not merely an exercise in communicating with stakeholders, as the recommendations led to 'substantial revision of the QRF', such as 'the development of different documents for different sectors', a substantial reduction in the length of the document', 'design and formatting of the document' and 'removal of references' (Tusla, 2018, p.56). While these reflect a responsiveness to the consultations, the changes are merely stylistic changes. There was no reference to any change in the content or additional provisions to support providers in meeting the requirements.

In October 2013, the then Minister for Education convened the Expert Advisory Group, 'Right from the Start', to advise on the development of an Early Years Strategy. The group comprised a 16-member panel, including the chair Eilis Hennessy (DCYA, 2013a). This panel included:

- 2 representatives - CCC's.
- 2 representatives - academic institutions
- 2 representatives' inspectorate teams.
- 4 representatives - Early Childhood advocacy organisation (NGO)
- 1 Public Health Nursing Consultant,
- 1 representative - St. Ultan's Cherry Orchard
- 1 representative - Deansrath Family Centre.

The work of this group has been fundamental and was specifically cited within the final publication of *First 5, A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028,* as being a key element in its formation (GOI, 2018). Yet there was no direct representative from a private provider or practitioner on the panel. Further contributions to the development of the strategy arose from consultations with young children, two open policy debates, and from submissions from organisation and groups with an interest in the formative years (GOI, 2018). An inter-departmental group, chaired by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, where 'detailed bilateral engagement took place within this group and with other Departments and State Agencies' (GOI, 2018, p.22), undertook the final work on the development of the strategy. As articulated by the then government, consultation played a considerable contribution to the development of the strategy. However, questions remain over how many practitioners working on the ground were involved in these consultations.

In the first of the two Open Policy Debates, over 80 experts, practitioners and stakeholders were involved. There was again no clear indicators regarding who the experts, practitioners or other stakeholders were. The attendees of the second open debate was not available (Merrion Street, 2016; Merrion Street, 2018).

These analyses indicate that yes, the government is consulting with the sector, but how effective these consultations have been in connecting with ELC practitioners and how much their voices have contributed to policy development remains questionable.

The positioning of the ELC practitioner within the structures and processes of the Quality Agenda. Are there alternatives?

The position of the ELC practitioner within the structures and processes of the Irish Quality Agenda, as this chapter illuminates, is weak in comparison to other stakeholders, despite the fundamental role they play in terms of raising quality within their settings. This chapter raises many issues relevant to the Quality Agenda in Ireland and the multiple dilemmas, paradoxes and barriers that mitigate against the development of quality in the sector. Most difficulties can be related back to the overlooked vision of quality, that of Orientation Quality, which highlights, if true quality is to be realised in the ELC sector, the values, experiences and attitudes of ELC practitioners must be recognised as fundamental to quality development. Moreover, within this context ELC practitioners need to be respected as professionals. The historical trajectory and contemporary reality of the ELC sector in Ireland enlists a litany of issues impinging on the development of a professional ELC sector, which include low status, low salaries, difficulties with recruitment and retention, the double-edged sword of accountability and inspectorate regimes and the clear lack of a name. This leads to the question; is there an alternative and a resolution to these dilemmas? Finland provides some lessons which could be worthy of reflection in terms of raising quality in the ELC sector through valuing and respecting practitioners. Finland's structure has many parallels to Ireland, sharing a similar population and a similar balance in terms of graduate ELC professionals. Furthermore, approximately one third of all staff working in the ELC have a degree, although all ECE lead teachers must have a degree in either ECE or other recognised discipline (Happo et al., 2013). The Finnish system has, however, approached the development of quality quite differently. ECEC is highly valued by Finnish society and a holistic approach is undertaken where instead of education and care being seen as separate, but an 'educare' approach has been taken (Heikka et al., 2018). ELC is viewed as a multidisciplinary profession and teachers are graduates not only from the discipline of early childhood, but also from social care and nursing (Heikka et al., 2018). Sahlberg (2011) highlighted that teaching in Finland is a highly esteemed profession. Similarly, Heikka et al. (2018) argue that in Finland ECE teachers are viewed as the most pedagogically qualified. Both note that as a consequence, teachers at all levels enjoy high levels of autonomy in developing their own curriculum and teaching practices. As with other inspirational international pedagogical approaches such as Reggio Emilia, there is no ambiguity regarding

the name/title of early years professionals, they are teachers (Kindergarten teachers). This represents an equity of respect between the ECE sector and primary schools.

Pedagogical leadership has emerged in Finland as a key element in the development of the multidisciplinary practice which has become a key element of early childhood. As a consequence, early childhood teachers 'are expected to provide ECE pedagogical expertise to around 70% of centre staff from diverse disciplinary backgrounds other than ECE' (Heikka, 2018, p.144). Early childhood teachers are valued as the key strength of the Finnish ECE system. Moreover, early childhood teachers themselves valued the breadth and depth of education their degree programmes provided and the collaborative approached used in ELC settings, which allow teachers from different disciplines to learn from each other (Happo et al., 2013). In the research undertaken by Happo et al. (2013, p. 279) ELC teachers valued their 'individual development plans', but ultimately appreciated their 'work has become more and more collegial' and that this 'is necessary to expand a notion of individual expertise into the realm of collaborative and socially shared expertise'. Teachers' personal and collective development focuses on 'critical reflection skills' (Happo et al., 2013, p.277). Within this context, quality is being developed at local level and not from a top-down approach imposed by external organisations. Key to quality development is the autonomy individual settings have in developing their practice collaboratively with other teachers, parents and children, where schools are viewed as professional learning communities. As Happo et al. (2013, p. 277) argue, critical to this approach is critical reflection amongst staff, positive attitudes and 'professional skills and super-professional qualifications'. Interestingly, when Finnish teachers were asked by Sahlberg (2011, p.106) what would drive them away from teaching, it was not pay or conditions that were cited, but instead a reduction in this autonomy. They articulated that if 'external pressure regarding testing and high-stakes accountability' were introduced, they would consider leaving the sector. The problems facing the Irish ELC sector such as low status, recruitment and retention, a focus on compliance and high stress levels are not issues in the Finnish system. Perhaps, therefore, it would be worthwhile to have a closer look at the Finnish model as an inspiration to address issues in the Irish ELC sector.

Summary

Quality is a complex concept and the development of quality in the ELC sector is multifaceted and multi-layered. This review, similar to research undertaken by Basford

(2019, p.779) in the English context, argues that any 'research' into the development in the ELC sector must 'take into account the whole sector'. The literature, therefore, suggests that governments, including Ireland, need to listen and value the unique contribution that ELC practitioners can make to contextual quality development within the sector. In this regard consultation processes need to meaningful and have the capacity to facilitate ELC providers and practitioners contribute to policy development. Establishing a valued, appropriately paid and clearly identifiable properly funded professional ELC sector is critical. This requires supporting practitioners to pursue graduate status and to engage in contextualised CPD that is meaningful to their unique ELC setting. Leadership was also identified as a key area that is critical in the development of quality within the sector. The literature also suggests that the impact market-orientated leadership approaches, modelled on the business sector, may need to be interrogated to consider what the long-term impact these approach may have on the development of quality within the ELC sector. The Finnish approach to pedagogical leadership, which focuses on mentoring and collaborative practice and the development of professional learning communities within preschools, was explored as a potential model from which to develop leadership in the ELC sector in Ireland. The review demonstrates that regulations, inspections and pursuit of compliance need to be balanced against providing practitioners with autonomy and discretion to allow them to transform, rather than merely conform in their practice, so it is contextual and meaningful to their unique setting.

Chapter 4 – Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodology used in this research project. The objective was to select appropriate methods for sufficient data to be gathered and collated in response to the research questions. The primary question focuses on exploring how recent policy initiatives, which have emerged since the announcement of the quality agenda in 2013, are impacting on practice in early years settings from practitioners' perspectives. The fundamental objective was to seek early years practitioners' views regarding which policies they believed were contributing to the development of quality in their settings and which policies they found less helpful. The second question arose in part from the overarching rationale of aspiring to bridge the gap between policy at development and design stage and policy at implementation stage, by bringing the voices of the ELC practitioners to the policy table. The principal question arising from this objective is: 'How can ECE practitioners' experience of policy at practice level be heard and influence the development of policy at design stage? This research is framed by complexity theory, which advocates that many voices and perspectives contribute to policy development and while the principal objective is to seek the voices of early years practitioners, this research has complemented this objective by also eliciting the voice of a policymaker. While online methods were chosen to capture the many voices of early years practitioners, an interview was used for the discussion with the policymaker.

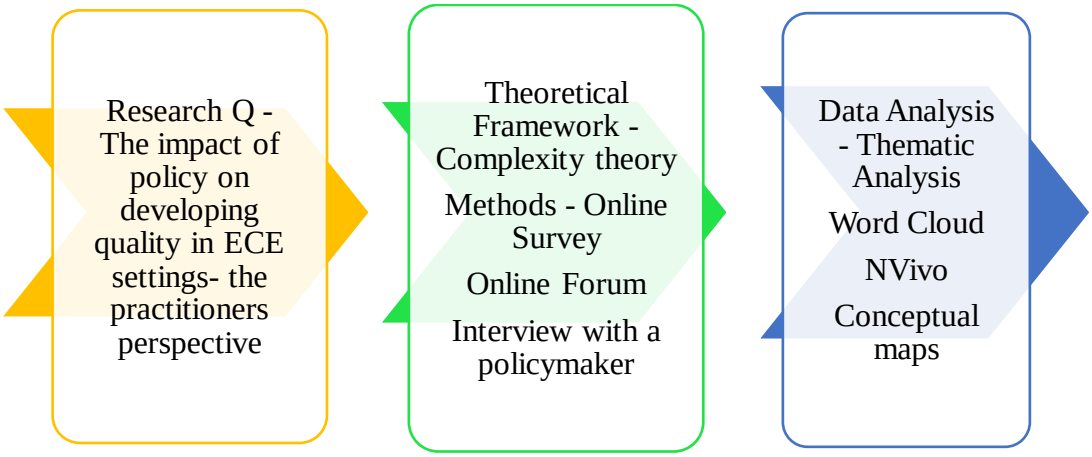


Figure 3: Research Design

4.2 A methodology to capture complexity

The methodology has been informed by complexity theory, which is the overarching theoretical framework employed in this project. Complexity theory enabled the exploration of practitioners' perceptions on the impact of policy in developing quality practices in ELC settings. This theory appreciates that these views will be multiple. It facilitates the opportunity to investigate the interplay of the complex dynamics which sculpt individual practitioners' perspectives on quality (Davis & Samura, 2006). The diversity of experiences and practices that exist in the ELC sector in Ireland has emerged both as a result of policy and reflective of powerful discourses (Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009). Discourses, in the Irish context, have emerged from the complex and fractured ELC system, which has been sculpted under the influence of multiple actors, including nine government departments, an array of NGOs, business interests and trade unions, and international influence (Arndt et al., 2018, p.107).

The early years sector in Ireland is dynamic and rapidly evolving in terms of both policy and operating context and is increasingly demarcated by numerous 'initiatives and announcements, relating to new funding arrangements, programme modifications, and roll out of new initiatives' all focusing on supporting the enhancement of quality in the sector (Pobal, 2018, p.15). The Irish government, aligned with international governments, is and has been committed to ambitious and rapid reform of the ELC sector. This commitment was encapsulated by Minister Zappone in her press release on 28th December 2018, where she declared '2019 is going to be one of the most significant years in our efforts to transform one of the most expensive childcare services in the world into the best'. While this makes it an exciting time to research, it is also extremely challenging to research in the midst of the constant change that has become characteristic of the early years sector, both internationally and in Ireland. Therefore, the chosen methodology and methods had to be flexible and dynamic enough to collect data within this context of constant change and flux within both policy and practice.

Complexity theory is particularly compatible not only with capturing data within this dynamic landscape, but also with my personal ontological perspective, which recognises that while clear features of quality in ELC settings have been repeatedly identified through research projects, quality remains subjective, contextual and uniquely experienced in each ELC setting (Moss, 2015; Sylva et al. 2008; CECDE, 2006). Yet despite the perspective that

complex systems produce complex visions, I hope that the methodology and methods selected will allow for exploration of the issues and identification of key elements that support or restrict the development of quality in ECE settings.

The methodology approach primarily sits within the qualitative-interpretive paradigm. Although not the primary concern, some quantitative data will emerge from the data collection in terms of analysing the respondents and their responses. This will help to visualise how position and lenses can impact on perspective. This will be particularly pertinent to the use of an online survey, which sought both quantitative and qualitative data.

4.3 Qualitative-interpretive approach

Qualitative-interpretive research recognises that researchers are inescapably located within the influences and constructions of the social worlds in which we study. Schwartz-Shea and Yannow (2012, p.25), forward that researchers frequently return to 'places familiar', 'in which they draw on previously acquired cultural knowledge (such as places where they previously worked, lived or studied)'. This reflects my connectivity with this research, as an owner, manager, practitioner, a student, and currently a mentor with Better Start. This connection, therefore, requires a methodology that not only recognises my position within the research, but one that requires 'constant, reflexive questioning' (Schwartz-Shea & Yannow, 2012, p.17). This study is embedded in political processes, as it explores the impact of policy on practice. This world of policy is 'complicated, confusing and controversial', raising 'conflicting arguments and interpretations' (Halperin & Heath 2017, p.1). A qualitative interpretive approach in keeping with complexity theory not only allows, but welcomes the embrace of these messy worlds, in the belief that the understanding of any phenomena 'must start with an investigation into the meaning that people give' to these events (Fujii, 2018, p.vii). While discovering the visions and perceptions that participants had of how policy has impacted their own practice, it was necessary to constantly question my own 'projections, predilections and situatedness' (Fujii, 2018, p.viii) to ensure it was the participants' voices and not my own that I was hearing.

4.4 Iterative research design

An iterative research design was selected, consistent with the reflexive process employed within the overarching qualitative interpretive approach. Srivastava and Hopwood (2009)

describe iteration as a process in keeping with reflexivity, where a process of analysis of one section of the research informs the design of the next part of data collection. Using an iterative framework, the research becomes a 'process of continuous meaning making' leading to 'progressive focusing' on future design through 'analysis processes' (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009, p.77). As Berkowitz (1996) proposes, 'data collection and data analysis' are not distinct stages, but in contrast 'as the first pieces of data are collected', 'the process of making sense' begins. This becomes a 'loop-like pattern of multiple rounds of revisiting the data', and as the data is reflected on, new questions emerge, new connections are unearthed and more complex formulations develop along with a deepening understanding'. Using iteration 'as a deeply reflexive process' enables each stage of the research design inform the next stage (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009, p.77). In this way, the online survey informed the design and questions of both the survey and online forum, which developed the questions that framed the semi-structured interview with the policymaker. This process of iteration supported the 'visiting and revisiting of the data', which produced new insights into a topic I was already familiar with, leading to continual refining of the focus and understanding within this research (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009, p.77). Through revisiting the first phase of data collection, gaps could be identified, which could then be addressed in the second and third stages of data collection.

Figure 4: Data collection process – iterative research design

4.5 Online research methods

In order to bridge the gap between policy aspirations and the realities of transferring these ambitions to practice, or in the words of Bond and Messing (2015:64) 'To understand the relationship between elite ideology and beliefs of ordinary citizens, we need measures of ideology that allow us to place ordinary citizens and elites in the same ideological space'. With this view in mind, an online survey, followed by an online forum, were used to capture practitioners' views and opinions on emerging policies aimed at developing quality. This was followed by an interview with an elite policy actor. This facilitated the sharing of the practitioners' voices with the policymaker through extrapolating the views and opinions of the policy-developer on the findings from the survey and forum, thereby hearing the policymaker's perspective on the ambitions and ideology that lie behind policy design. Creating this balance between the practitioners' and the policymaker's views through the use of online and traditional methods was important, as all research approaches have benefits and potential drawbacks. Using both approaches allows for some offset against possible negative outcomes from the research process.

4.5.1 Social media as an appropriate platform

Social media has 'revolutionized how people communicate and share information' and is increasingly presenting as a platform suitable for 'political communication' (Smith et al. 2013, p.236; Bond & Messing, 2015, p.64). With the ubiquitous use of social media as a process of connecting with others, keeping informed and sharing ideas, both Facebook and Twitter are increasingly used by society and ELC practitioners to stay up to date about policy direction and to read, respond and participate in the array of online forums that exist (Coletto et al., 2017; Lichterman, 2015). Consequently, social media users are observed to be both influenced by and contributors to public opinion on policy decisions as they arise. Political bias presented in online forums is being shown to 'play a significant role in shaping public opinion towards (or away from) certain perspectives (Kulshrestha et al., 2018, p.1). Conflicting discussion has been arising on whether online forums increase or decrease democracy. One argument forwards that democratisation is enhanced by providing voice to ordinary people (Seamaan et al., 2014). However, in contrast, another argument suggests that social media is responsible for polarising public opinion in favour of or against policy through reinforcing bias, as users tend to follow and communicate with sites and people compatible with their current thinking (Del Vicario et al., 2017). Studies have also

highlighted that social media users tend to avoid or remain uninfluenced by discussions with forums or users that are not like minded (Del Vicario et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2013).

While social media presents unique opportunities to 'inform, engage and mobilize people easily and rapidly'; it also can 'misinform, manipulate and control public opinion' (Del Vicario et al., 2017, p.1). Social media sites are particularly susceptible to 'informational cascades' where site users are particularly vulnerable to 'confirmation bias'. This arises where the power of online voices enables false information to be accepted and dissenting voices ignored (Del Vicario et al. 2017, p.1). Yet Parmeggiani (2015) argues that if used appropriately, social media sites such as Facebook can also be used to bring accountability to political issues. Being aware of these challenges was fundamental to the methodology and methods chosen.

Participants engaged with the online survey individually, which counteracted the pressure of group influence that can occur online. The researcher's voice was present within the online forum, providing the opportunity to pose questions that could challenge any emerging 'confirmation bias' and also could draw participants to focus on personal experience, as well as any contemporary discourses that could be shaping their views.

An earlier paper completed in Part 1 of this EdD illuminated the power of social media to spread and share ideas rapidly. The same paper, in contrast, noted that governments globally were becoming increasingly disenfranchised from society as they struggled to keep pace with the rate of change being propelled by globalisation and e-communication (Blackburne, 2016c; Leask, 2012). Leask (2012, p.53) proposes that traditional research methods are inadequate in capturing the complexity and diversity of opinions and issues. Consequently, traditional methods were increasingly considered incapable of producing 'significant or impactful' contextual research and therefore were increasingly being considered irrelevant. In contrast, Bond and Messing (2015, p.62) argue that data gathered on social media represents a 'useful resource for testing models of legislative and individual-level political behaviour and attitudes'.

The threat to traditional research methods by modern technologies, in particular the internet, correlate with what Gage referred to in 1989 as the 'paradigm war', where interpretive researchers attested that the methodologies and methods employed by modernist and positivist approaches were inconsequential to the teaching community. Ironically, interpretivism is now finding itself aligned to positivism, with both approaches considered

dated and limited in terms of practical application (Blackburne, 2016c). Woodfield et al. (2013, p.3) cautions researchers to be aware that a 'rapidly changing world', requires 'methodological adaptability' together with continual reflection on 'research paradigms, methodological approaches and ethical issues'. With this in mind, online research methods were selected on the basis that they would not be geographically bound or limited by the practitioners' experience, qualifications, position, age or gender, and could connect with large numbers of the population simultaneously, often in rapid response to policy developments. While cognisant of the ethical challenges and potential bias posed by online forums, the speed of online communication and its ability to keep pace with the rapidly evolving policy landscape that has become characteristic of the ECE sector made online research the appropriate choice for this research project.

In keeping with complexity theory, an online mixed-methods approach was used, which would allow both the breadth and depth of practitioners' perspectives to be explored. It was also critical that this research, selected methods that could, as Edwards and Talbot (2014) suggest, collect sufficient, relevant and reliable data, contextualised and representative of the views of the community central to the research focus (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). With online research presenting multiple benefits in connecting with diverse members of the population, employing an online survey and online forum became the central methods employed to listen to practitioners' perspectives on how policy was impacting their practice and what they believed to be critical in the development of quality within the sector.

The research aspires to explore practitioners' vision on what policies are effective and what needs to happen to support the development of quality in the sector. When the data from the online survey was collected and analysed at a preliminary level, a Facebook online forum was developed, with the objective of exploring ideas raised in the survey at a deeper level with the participants who agreed to take part in the forum. Finally, to provide a balance to the argument, the findings were shared with a key policymaker within the DCYA to gain their perspective on what was driving current policy development, focusing specifically on the development of quality in the ELC sector.

4.6 Phase 1 data collection - online survey

Defining an ELC practitioner is as complex as defining the sector itself, comprising of owners, owner/managers, room leaders, assistants, all with varying qualifications and length

of experience and multifarious pathways that brought them to work in the early years sector. Therefore, when seeking practitioners' perspectives, it was important to capture this diversity of views and opinions within the chosen methods of data collection. The methods selected needed to enable practitioners share their visions and experiences of which policies were supporting the enhancement of quality in their practice, which were less helpful, and to identify what needed to be addressed to embed quality practice in ELC settings. The research also required methods that could reach practitioners who worked in geographically disparate locations. With the objective of opening the research to as many perspectives as possible, an online survey was chosen as a suitable option to connect with the maximum number of practitioners regardless of their geographical location or personal time constraints. The online survey facilitated a breadth of views, experiences and perspectives to be heard from a wide audience. As Sue and Ritter (2012, p.xv) propose, 'ubiquitous computing' together with 'the widespread adoption' and 'sophistication of mobile devices' together with the 'availability of software and web hosts' present multiple ways of 'developing and disseminating surveys', creating both 'opportunities and challenges' for survey researchers.

Swain (2017) forwards that surveys were traditionally considered to be a quantitative method of research aligned with an objectivist approach, i.e. one which presumes 'real social phenomena' can be captured. This is contradictory to my personal epistemology and ontology, which sits instead within the interpretivist paradigm and in the belief that this research does not present one vision, but anticipates multiple and often contradictory beliefs. It is, however, partially true that I perceive certain commonalities and themes will emerge, despite the myriad of personal experiences and responses that participants had regarding their engagement with policies and government agencies. Participants' views may be diverse, built on disparate experiences and values, but equally the participants are not isolated from contemporary discourse. The survey was dispersed through social media sites, which have become increasingly powerful in both connecting people and spreading hegemonic discourses, as discussed earlier (Klein & Muis, 2018). As the surveys were completed individually by participants, the challenges of bias are reduced, but the impact of discourse cannot be eliminated. The questions were phrased to direct participants to consider their personal experience as opposed to considering topical issues.

4.6.1 Survey Monkey

Collier et al. (2005) promote Survey Monkey as 'commercial web-based electronic survey' suited to creating online surveys, both professionally and easily. Survey Monkey presents many functions, felicitous to the purpose of this research, stretching from survey design, to conducting, circulating the questionnaire, and finally to analysing the data, all at a reasonable cost. Survey Monkey presented many advantages in this research to support the developing and dissemination of an online survey. Survey Monkey provides a 24-hour online support service, which I found helpful in responding to my novice enquiries. Equally, it proved versatile in terms of survey design, enabling multiple choices, graded responses, and both quantitative and qualitative options. The expediency extended to support data analysis. The quantitative data that provided the background information on the participants was automatically analysed in terms of graphs, percentage, and number breakdown relating to responses. While analysing qualitative data was more complex, Word Cloud was available, which highlighted the words and phrases that occurred most frequently in the respondents' answers, making it easier to see key and recurring concepts and themes (Survey Monkey, 2018).

The online survey consisted of both quantitative and qualitative questions. The survey provided minimal risk in freely expressing views, as these could be provided in a confidential manner and unless the participants wished to participate in the second part of the research, they did not need to provide any information that would reveal their identity. This allowed them to respond to the research questions without fear of judgement. It was evident that those who agreed to participate in the online research had higher qualifications, reflecting perhaps a higher level of confidence to engage in deeper conversations. It was critical that the survey did not just gather quantitative information, but that there was also a qualitative element to enable the participants to freely express their opinions and reveal the nuances of their personal experiences in responding to policy change.

4.6.2 Piloting the survey

The survey was piloted with five participants. One was a preschool manager who had just completed a degree in early childhood. The second participant had worked in two different settings and also had recently acquired a degree in early childhood. Two other participants in the pilot project had completed Level 6; one had worked continuously in the sector for over 10 years and acted as assistant manager, and the other had just returned to the sector after a

leave of absence of approximately 19 years. The final participant had worked for the past five years in the sector and had no formal qualification in childcare, but under the government's qualification remit is grandfathered until 2021. I knew all the participants in the pilot project. It was hoped this would assist them in providing feedback honestly, but I recognised that our personal connection may have prevented them from being overly critical. The feedback highlighted that commenting on many policies was considerably difficult due to the fact that the participants did not feel familiar with these policies. While I reflected on this difficulty, I decided that as this research sought practitioners' views on the impact of recent policy on their practice, it was important to include a section that directly elicited practitioners' views on specific policies. The survey was amended to include an additional section that first checked participants' familiarity with the policies before enquiring about the impact of these policies on practitioners' practice. The success and dissemination of policies will be reflected by practitioners' indication of their familiarity with these policies, while the actual response to their impact can be assessed in the second section. Otherwise, no changes were made to the original survey.

4.6.4 Recruitment

Participants were primarily recruited through Facebook. Various ELC forums were contacted and asked if they would be willing to share the survey on their Facebook page. All, apart from one forum agreed to share the survey. A number of CCC's were also contacted, with all agreeing to share it on their Facebook page and one Committee agreeing to send it by email to early years practitioners. A lack of time placed a limit on the number of CCC's that could be contacted. A training college also shared the survey on their Facebook page and through emails. In line with ethical considerations, responding to the survey was optional and no reward or payment was provided for participating.

Challenges recruiting

Recruiting participants for the online survey was not without its limitations. A considerable factor was personal time, as this research was completed solely by myself in addition to working full-time. This placed a limit on the range of forums that I could contact to request them to host the survey. Therefore, the most prolific early years organisations with the highest presence on Facebook were contacted. Only publicly open Facebook groups were contacted. Closed Facebook groups were not. Similarly, only six CCCs were contacted out of a possible 31. While two colleges were approached to share the survey, one requested that an application be made to their ethics committee and again the issue of time dictated a decision

not to proceed with this option. Aligned with the observations of Lee et al. (2008:11), citing both Couper (2000) and Tourangeau (2004), there appears to be increasingly low levels of response rate to online surveys due to the 'proliferation of web surveys' as a research method. They argue that the bombardment of survey requests has resulted in many avoiding all requests rather than selectively choosing some. It was my view that this was a factor, as some links received no response at all, but fortunately, in contrast, others yielded a high level of response. The survey distributed through the college and those emailed by the CCCs received a high level of response.

4.7 Phase 2 - Online forum

Social media provides a communication hub for social contacts and is increasingly becoming a 'forum for political communication' (Bond & Messing, 2015, p.64). The 'ascendency of information technology (IT)' is leading governments to reconsider traditional ways of governing, leading to e-government and increasing engagement with social media (Balutis, Buss & Ink, 2011, p.3). In reality, we live in a 'network society' encapsulated within the overarching 'global information society' which is continually driven by the omnipresent use of smartphones and handheld devices (Lee et al., 2008, p.4). Facebook, as Hooley et al. (2012, p.2) propose, is not creating 'an alternative online community', but instead has become a part of contemporary society and as such, places a responsibility on researchers and politicians to utilise online research approaches to keep pace with 'rapid social and technological change'. Linders (2012, p.446) outlines that the possibilities arising from social media calls for 'a new social contract that empowers the public to play a far more active role in the functioning of their government. Social media, he proposes, enables society to be co-producers rather than recipients of policy. Balutis, Buss and Ink (2011, p.xi) equally propose that future governments need to reinvent and to govern through networks, using 'powerful 2.0 social networking, collaborative technologies' to develop 'citizen engagement' and 'co-production', changing in essence 'the nature of government'. This move towards utilising social networks to listen and connect with society, provided strong legitimisation for using an online forum to meet the objective of this research to explore the impact of policy on practice, but also to explore social networking as a dynamic way of connecting with the early years workforce. Social media presents ordinary people with opportunities to engage in online discussions thereby gaining the power to shape 'political discourse' (Klein & Muis, 2018, p.1).

On social media platforms, the balance of power in terms of political mobilisation of discourse does not sit exclusively with government, but is increasingly snowballing from early childhood organisations and unions who use social media platforms to disseminate powerful discourses (ACP, 2019b; SIPTU, 2017, 2018). Consequently, this research anticipates that the findings will probably be influenced by some of these discourses.

The ubiquitous use of the internet by 'ordinary citizens' opens opportunities to abate the increasing 'disengagement' of society with 'established politics' (Lee et al. 2008, p.2). Furthermore, online forums such as Facebook open opportunities to share ideas, bring clarity to issues, and to develop a collective sense of identity (Hine, 2005) and provide 'potential' to 'identify' and respond to 'issues in real time' (Kavanaugh et al. 2012, p.480). Buchannan (2013) predicates that political success relies on the ability to activate political mobilisation on key ideas and discourses through harnessing the power of social media to spread key concepts. The purpose of the online forum, and indeed the online survey, was to harness the power of social media to listen to and analyse the issues influencing practitioners' daily practice rather than to spread ideas.

In contemporary society, a substantial percentage have access to unrestricted, computer mediated, online interactions (Himelboim, 2011). This view is consistently consolidated by bi-annual statistics released by IPSOS MRBI Omnipoll service, which indicates high levels of societal connectivity on social media sites. The Central Statistics Office (CSO) (2019) reported that 91% of Irish households now have internet access. Furthermore, Facebook, the chosen social network platform for this research, recorded in August 2017 that 1.695* million adults aged 15+ in the Republic of Ireland were using the site on a daily basis (IPSOS, 2017). Facebook was the most popular social networking site in August 2018, where 66% of the adult population had a following. Instagram had 39%, followed by both Twitter and LinkedIn at 33%. Daily usage statistics showed that Facebook again was the most popular site, with a daily engagement of 66%, marginally above Instagram at 65% and Twitter at 43%. While Instagram and Twitter have made gains in terms of daily usage, Facebook remains not only the most widespread in terms of account holders, but also in terms of daily activity, therefore presenting as the most suitable in terms of a host site for this research. The presence of early years practitioners on both public and closed Facebook pages is increasing year on year. On 25th July 2016, ECI had a following of 16,577. By 24th March 2020, their following had risen to 30,492. The Montessori Alliance similarly had 11,622 rising to 16,105 and the ACP, which

started at 9,590, rose to 21,666 (ECI, 2020; 2016; ACP, 2020; 2016; Montessori Alliance, 2020; 2016). A number of closed groups are also increasing their membership. Montessori and Early Childhood Professionals as of the 24th March 2020 had a membership of 6,356. Big Start, the union representing early childhood, had a following of 6,766 on 15th December 2018; by 24th March 2020 this had risen to 12,373 (Montessori and Early Childhood Professionals, 2020; Big Start, 2020). Social media - and Facebook - have embedded themselves as an integral part of society, thereby extending a myriad of opportunities for research that would not be available using traditional methods (Garcia et al., 2009).

4.7.1 Recruitment and participation in the online forum

39 participants indicated an interest in participating in the online forum, representing 36.11% of those who responded to this question. Those that responded were requested to leave their email address so that they could be contacted at a later stage and invited to join the forum. 24 participants left their email address, three left phone numbers, and eight left their names. All those that left their email address were contacted by email. The participant information sheets were forwarded to them and consent forms. Those that left their name were searched for on Facebook and, if a clearly identifiable person, a private message was sent, indicating the reason for the message. If they confirmed their identity and continued interest in participating in the forum, they were requested to share their email address so that the participant information sheets and consent forms could be sent to them. This was the same for those that left their phone numbers. Those that had not left a name or telephone number or could not be located on Facebook were discounted from the study. Those that did not respond to the messages were not considered further. Those that did agree to participate were added to the private Facebook forum. In total, there were 16 participants in the final forum. 12 participants contributed to the online forum discussion and four did not. Not all participants contributed to all discussions. Some comments received no responses.

4.7.2 Policy development from an insider's perspective

'All aspects of politics are affected by governments' and emerge from 'political processes that operate across levels or at multiple scales' (Halperin & Heath, 2017, p.4). As noted earlier in this research, ELC policy in Ireland has and continues to emerge within the context of multiple layers of influence, where the voices of early years practitioners have limited imprint. An objective of this research was to raise the levels of influence that the practitioners at the nexus of policy implementation have on policy processes. In order for research to be

useful, it needs to be in a position to affect those who have the power to listen and implement ideas. This only occurs when opportunities of interaction arise between those within the private and public sectors (Braun et al., 2006). Therefore, when I was presented with the opportunity to interview a policymaker in relation to this research, I felt an ethical duty towards my participants to have their views explored further from the policy development perspective. Equally, I felt a responsibility to have my research heard, so that it may make a difference and contribute to opening up the possibility for greater direct consultation with early years practitioners.

A semi-structured interview was selected as the most appropriate method. This would enable me to elicit responses from the policymaker to issues that were highlighted by the participants in both the online survey and online forum that were directly impacting both positively and negatively on their ability to support the development of quality in their ELC settings. The semi-structured interviews would also allow the policymaker a level of freedom to explain the rationale behind why current policies relevant to the ELC sector are being developed and highlight what the future priorities are therein for policy development. Evans (2012) highlights that semi-structured interviews support the researcher to elicit responses relevant to the research focus, while also providing the freedom to the participant to respond and expand on topics that they consider important and relevant. Therefore, by having a semi-structured interview schedule, I was in a position to address the issues that had been raised through the online survey and forum with the policymaker. Evans (2018) points out that having a schedule not only ensures a focus on the relevant issues, but also opens the opportunity for new and different perspectives to bear on the research process, thereby bringing a depth that otherwise would not have emerged. Although the overall research project has been guided by the framing research question, the specific question for the interview, as Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest, have been developed and refined as a consequence of the research process. Through use of the iterative approach to research design and analysis, the questions that guided the interview were formulated to reflect the views articulated by the participants of the survey, some of whom furthered their visions of how policy was impacting on quality within their settings in the online forum.

Direct interactions with policy developers, Braun et al. (2016) argue, have a direct correlation with policy design. Similarly, the levels of influence that various agencies and groups exert on, and with the policy actors, has an influence on the outcome of policy (ibid). Therefore, this opportunity to interview a policy actor presented two key benefits to this research

project. As mentioned above, it presented the opportunity to bring the voices of ELC practitioners directly to the policy actor and in this way ethically responded to my participants by enabling their voices to be heard. Secondly, this presented an extra dimension, a contrasting lens to the issues raised by the practitioners. In this way, the perspectives of both sides of the policy process could be heard, thereby bridging that gap between policy design and implementation. In order for this research to have an effect, it would need to be shared with those that have the power to consider and reflect on it. Therefore, when provided with the opportunity to interview a policy actor, this provided the opportunity, as Bradley (2011, p.1) phrases it, to access those working within 'the inner sphere of ECEC policy making'

4.8 Phase 3 - Semi-structured interview with policymaker

The framework offered by Kallio et al. (2017) provides a five-phased systematic approach that guided the processes of undertaking the semi-structured interview. The five phases included:

> (1) identifying the prerequisites for using semi–structured interviews; (2) retrieving and using previous knowledge; (3) formulating the preliminary semi-structured interview guide; (4) pilot testing the guide and (5) presenting the complete semi-structured interview guide (p.2954).

They posit that having a rigorous and systematic guide to undertaking semi-structured interviews contributes to 'the objectivity and trustworthiness of the studies', thereby making the 'results more plausible'. The process of using the five stages was necessary to support the reflexivity of the research, thereby enabling me to try to take some distance from my own personal perspectives and the influence of my professional position(s) and within this research process. It was necessary for the interview to respond to the previous data collected from the online survey and forum and be sufficiently systematic to ensure that the one opportunity I had to interview a policymaker was useful.

4.8.1 Piloting the interview

In advance of the interview, a pilot interview was undertaken with an actor who, while not in the inner circle of policy development, has considerable connections and experience in working directly and influencing policy development. This person, therefore, was well positioned to respond to the questions. The questions were sent to the pilot participant in advance, so that they would be familiar and comfortable with the questions posed. A 30-

minute slot was allotted for the pilot interview. The first learning point from the interview was that ideally, more time would be required. Furthermore, the semi-structured interview format provided the required flexibility to allow the interviewer to change the format, as the interviewee provided answers to many of the questions just through the first question. The interviewer ran out of time to question the interviewee on the final question on consultation.

4.9 Ethical considerations and ethical approval

As with all research, ethical considerations permeated all aspects of the research process from the development of the research questions, the methodological approach, the choice of methods, through to analysing the data and presenting findings (Brooks et al., 2014). This research project was guided ethically by the Nuremberg Code (1947) and the University of Sheffield's guidance on ethics. In undertaking research in any discipline, the University of Sheffield (2018a, 2018b) guide states that 'rigour, respect and responsibility - integrity as well as intellect' are required throughout the project. The University of Sheffield's ethical guidance is based on six key principles, (i) Consent, (ii) Deception, (iii) Debriefing, (iv) Rights to withdraw from the investigation (v) Confidentiality and/or anonymity and (vi) Protection of participants from physical and mental harm during the investigation (University of Sheffield, 2018a). Not surprisingly, there were many similarities in terms of principles between those held within the University of Sheffield guidance and the Nuremberg Code (1947). The additional principles drawn from the Nuremberg Code (1947) include the requirement that the research 'yield fruitful results' that can benefit society (British Medical Journal, 1996).

The primary objective of this research aspires to contribute a deeper understanding of how policy transfers, or not, to the development of quality in ELC settings. Ethically, this responds to the Nuremberg Code (1949) in that this research's aspiration is to benefit policy makers, practitioners working in early years settings, and fundamentally, the children who are most impacted by policy at the point of implementation, by highlighting which policies and ideas are working and those that are not. The research was also motivated by an ethical drive to bring the voices of practitioners to the forefront of policy development, which had hitherto been limited for reasons outlined earlier.

Ethics approval for this research was sought and received from the University of Sheffield's ethics committee. This is a rigorous process and requires the researcher to have addressed all ethical criteria required by the college. In order to gain informed consent, Participant Information Sheets were created (Appendix 1). Participants were informed of the purpose of the research, their right to participate or decline and to exit the research at any point. This ensured that there was no deception, as all aspects of the research were clear and transparent. The researcher and supervisor's contact details were provided should participants have any further queries. Any risks of participation, although none were identified, were made explicit. Participants were also assured of confidentiality at all times and the limitations on this promise of respecting confidentiality. How the data was stored and what happened to it after the research was also made clear. Participants were also informed of the research methods used; as they were both online, further emphasis was placed on how confidentiality and anonymity would be maintained online. The interview with the policymaker was shared with the online forum participants and they were invited to critique it before deciding on the final format. The outcome of this interview was also shared with the participants of the online forum and they were made aware that the overall findings of the research would be published publicly, so all that had contributed to the online survey could also have access to the findings.

Using online research methods as the primary method of accessing practitioners' voices presented many ethical challenges beyond those that occur using traditional research methods. However, as Lee et al. (2008, p.10) suggest, too frequently, tradition and familiarity with existing methods can 'act as brakes on innovation'. Yet they equally advise against unbridled enthusiasm for new methods, through 'over-claiming of potential benefits, and under acknowledgement of potential problems'. Ethical reflection required careful consideration of the potential difficulties in using internet forums and how they can be addressed, so that the ethics are as rigorous as those that can be applied to traditional research methods.

Survey Monkey was used to disseminate the survey. As a platform, Survey Monkey provides protection for personal data as it is password protected; therefore, only the researcher can access the data. Once research was complete, the account was locked and the data destroyed. Questionnaires are completed confidentially, with names only revealed if participants choose to respond to the invitation therein to participate in the secret online Facebook group.

The online forum was set up on a secret Facebook group. A secret group provides maximum online privacy. The group is invitation-only, not searchable on Facebook, and only members can see posts. Participants can only join when invited by the researcher/administrator. Only group members have access to the data generated within this forum and the only way it can be shared is if members copy and paste it to their personal walls. Consequently, participants were informed that a condition of involvement would require them to agree to respect the confidentiality and privacy of the other participants and any breach in confidentiality would result in removal from the group. Once the data was gathered and the research process completed, the group/forum was deleted. Deletion is permanent and the group or its data cannot be retrieved (Facebook, 2017).

The face-to-face interview with the policymaker followed the same ethical format as above, with the participant receiving an information sheet, consent form, and the questionnaire in advance of the interview. The interview was held at a time convenient to the policymaker and was audio recorded. The findings from the interview were shared with the interviewee to check for accuracy of interpretation before they were used in the research.

4.10 Data analysis

Complexity theory is the overarching theoretical framework that informed the data analysis process. This theory accepts that there is no one story to tell and no one all-embracing view that will represent all perspectives. In contradistinction, it acknowledges there will be multiple insights, based on the multitude of experiences, complex dynamics, which build on practitioners' viewpoints of which policies are helpful and which are not (Cilliers, 1998). The objective of analysis was to garner a myriad of visions, as Bradley (2011, p.107) suggested, disentangle 'the complexities and murkiness', with a view to uncover commonalities and recurring themes. In this way, an aspiration of this research is to provide a platform where ELC practitioners can share their perspectives and experiences on how policy affects their practice, thereby enabling them to contribute to future policy development.

4.10.1 Thematic analysis

It was with complexity theory in mind, together with the qualitative-interpretive research paradigm, that Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis (TA) approach was selected to support the process of analysis. Clarke and Braun (2017, p.297) offer TA as an approach to analysing qualitative data. They propose that TA is particularly adept for 'identifying,

analysing and interpreting patterns of meaning', across data sets in respect of participants 'lived experience, views and perspectives, and behaviour and practices'. They argue that the key element is TA's flexibility, which is not bound by theoretical commitments. In contrast, TA works 'across a range of theoretical frameworks' with the ability to support meaningful analysis of data, regardless of the 'research question, sample size and constitution, data collection method, and approaches to generating meaning' (p.297). Furthermore, they highlight TA's ability to analyse both large and small data sets. This was particularly pertinent to this research, as TA could respond to the extensive data generated through the survey, online forum and interview, while also reflecting 'experience', 'perspectives' and 'behaviour' (Clarke & Braun, 2017, p.297). Boyatzis (1998, p.vii) proposes that TA provides a mechanism capable of systematically organising, coding and creating themes and identified that 'thematic analysis expands the possible audience for the communication and dissemination of ideas and results'.

4.10.2 Using NVivo to support thematic analysis

Technological advances have significantly influenced qualitative research and data analysis (Bergin, 2018). As this project applied online research methods to gather data, it was appropriate that a Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis (CAQDA) software programmes would be employed to support the TA processes of data analysis. The online survey had generated 114 responses; equally, the online forum engendered an extensive quantity of qualitative data. A further angle and dimension to the data was generated in the policymaker's interview. NVivo was the natural choice due to its ability to support with rigour the analysis of large data sets (Houghton et al. 2017; Leech & Onwunegbuzie, 2011).

Bazeley and Jackson (2013, p.xiv) promote NVivo as a CAQDAS which has kept pace with the rapid development of digital research approaches and communication. They believe it has adapted 'to the new modes of digital communication such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter and YouTube', which was pertinent to the online research methods used in this study. NVivo had tools designed to support multimedia research and consequently had the software to support analysis of all data sets. Leech and Onwunegbuzie, (2011) advocate that CAQDAS such as NVivo enables greater depth and breadth of analysis, which would not be possible with manual analysis. NVivo presents 'a more sophisticated filing system' (Harding, 2019:169), to support the recording, storing, indexing, sorting and coding of the research efficiently, and within the time span available (Bazeley, 2007).

Thematic analysis was conducive to the overarching framework of complexity theory and to the qualitative interpretive methodology selected. Interpretive research, as Klein and Myers (1999, p.68) argue, is adept in understanding 'human thought' and has the potential to 'produce deep insights'. Building on this view, Rowlands (2005, p.81) highlight interpretive research's acknowledgement of the world as socially constructed, where an 'intimate relationship' exists between the researcher and their research. Braun and Clarke (2006) equally argue that in TA, the researcher plays an active role in identifying themes. Citing Ely et al.(1997, pp.205-6), they forward 'if themes 'reside' anywhere they reside in our heads from our thinking about our data and creating links as we understand them'. In this regard, the researcher can never be separate from their research, as the internationally renowned Irish poet W.B. Yeats (1926, p. 291) proposed: 'How can we know the dancer from the dance?' With this research being unambiguously positioned within the interpretive paradigm and aligned to my personal social constructivist vision of the world, an approach that acknowledged my role, position and my values within the research was critical. Despite attempts to view this research from an outsider and critical standpoint, it was impossible to remove myself from the deeply personal nature of this research, inspired by my strong belief that a bridge between policy design and practice needed to be built, and rapidly.

4.10.3 Reflexivity

Essential to the TA approach is for the researcher to make implicit their position and influence on their research, as argued by Braun and Clarke (2006, p.84); 'researchers cannot free themselves of their theoretical and epistemological commitments, and data are not coded in an epistemological vacuum'. While TA is flexible and presents 'theoretical freedom', respectful of epistemological and ontological perspectives, it is also rigorous, with the potential to 'provide a rich and detailed, yet complex account of the data' (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.78). Therefore, a reflexive stance was taken throughout the analysis process, with consistent reflection on my presence in the research processes and potential influence on the findings. Reflexivity accepts that while positionality does not 'exist independently of the research process', it does not 'completely determine it' (Palaganas, et al. 2017). Through consistently challenging my perspective and assumptions, I was questioning, but not denying my impact on the research. Reflexivity also accepts the impact of values, experiences and discourses on the participants' contribution to the research. Research cannot be value neutral (Eisner, 1993). As Agee (2009) proposes, through continual questioning, a greater

understanding unfolds of the perspectives and lives of others, which was the central objective of this research.

Using complexity theory within the context of a qualitative interpretive approach presented a guiding framework to underpin this research, encouraging reflexivity and conscious awareness of researcher influence. Furthermore, Braun and Clarke's (2006) six stages of data analysis complemented by Attride-Stirling's (2001) concept of thematic networks supported consistency, reflexivity, and coherence by providing a structure to assist in organising and making meaning of the extensive data. As Attride and Stirling (2001, p.387) propose, while 'thematic analyses seeks to unearth the themes ', thematic networks aim to facilitate the structuring and depiction of these themes. Aligned to the objectives of this research, which recognised that multiple perspectives on the impact of policy on practice would arise, thematic networks assisted in 'understanding of an issue or the signification of an idea' as opposed to attempting to 'reconcile conflicting definitions of a problem' (Attride-Stirling (2001, p.387). The six phases of thematic analysis that followed were: 1. Familiarisation with the data, 2. Generating initial codes 3. Searching for themes. 4. Reviewing themes, 5. Defining and naming themes, 6. Producing the report (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.87).

Braun and Clarke (2006) offer two approaches to thematic analysis, one which is data-driven (inductive thematic analysis) and one theory-driven (theoretical data analysis). In the theory-driven approach, the researcher keeps their analysis within the 'pre-determined theoretical framework' (Ho et al., 2017, p.1760). The objective during the analysis period was to ensure the analysis was data-driven; this approach remained compatible with complexity theory, which had the flexibility not to place constraints on the researcher.

Boyatzis (1998) highlights a critical element of the first stage of data analysis as being the need to sense themes as you familiarise yourself with the data. Returning to the earlier point that the researcher exists within their research, the sensing of themes began before data was even collected. After working intensely in the sector for over 10 years, as a provider/manager/practitioner, a tutor/lecturer in ELC, a student, and more recently as an early years specialist (EYS), I already had a sense of the themes that could emerge from this research. I did, however, have to try to put my expectations aside and instead simply sense

the themes from the raw data. Through the technique of immersion in the data, I hoped that the voices of the practitioners could be elevated above my preconceived expectations.

Familiarising myself with the data started by reading responses as they were posted. Responses were read carefully, then copied and pasted into a word document which facilitated scanning and re-reading of participants' responses. The online survey and forum were open for the entirety of the research, to enable the researcher return to the context and timing of each response. As the responses were pasted into the word document, I played with the responses by colour identifying key ideas. Using the highlighting tool available in MS Word, I was able to change the font colour or use bold or underline to differentiate the concepts emerging. Although this was time consuming considering the sheer volume of data, as it was completed over a long period, it was not as onerous a task as it might have been. This process created a colourful myriad of concepts, which created a visual means of supporting the process of familiarisation with the data. This process was further extended through using Word Cloud on Survey Monkey, which enabled me to highlight the recurring words in each response.

Consequently, at phase 2, the coding using NVivo was easier due to my familiarity with the data. Codes are defined by Boyatzis (1998, p.63) as 'the most basic segment, or element, of the raw data or information that can be assessed in a meaningful way regarding the phenomenon'. Coding was undertaken using NVivo. After uploading the survey online and creating cases for each participant's responses, their responses to the qualitative data were coded through the creation of nodes. This allowed the coding to be primarily data driven. No response was dismissed and all responses were coded. The online forum was copied and pasted into a document and then uploaded on NVivo. This was then coded to the tree node already created for the survey.

Kromrey (1993, p.24) defines data analysis as the process of 'separating information in the data from the noise'. Coding, Glaser and Laudel (2013) propose, is the first step in distinguishing the data from that noise. Guest et al. (2014) suggest that when the coding is done (not complete, as coding and theme development is a recursive process) then the process of theme development begins. Themes were identified based both on their frequency and how they responded to the overarching research question about how policy was impacting on practice and which policies EYP felt contributed to enhancing quality in their

settings. The focus of the analysis was on the entire data set, using, as Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest, an inductive bottom-up approach, listening to the data, identifying codes, and then combining similar codes together to identify the key themes. This inductive approach enabled the raw data to emerge without being shaped by my own preconceived perceptions or theoretical assumptions. Using Guest et al.'s (2014, p.57) theme identification questions, this process was guided by three questions: 'What does this text mean?', What specific instances of meaning exist in this text?' and finally 'Are there patterns of relationship among the instances of meaning in this text?' Thematic mapping, as outlined by Attride-Stirling (2001), was particularly useful at this stage, where the visual representation allowed patterns to emerge and relationship between themes became evident. The tree node created by NVivo during the initial coding stage represented the first such map. As Castleberry and Nolen (2018, p.812) forward, thematic mapping enables the 'researcher to place the themes in the context of the larger landscape of the phenomenon'. Guest et al. (2014, p.57), citing Gibson and Brown (2009, pp.128-129), highlight that this enables the researcher to address 'the three general sets of aims in thematic analysis', those being 'examining commonalities, differences, and relationships', therefore allowing the researcher to move from 'basic description to explanatory analysis'.

After identifying themes, the next phase consisted of reviewing and revisiting these themes, where again, I found thematic mapping was useful. Castleberry and Nolen (2018, p.812) note this as the point where the process of compiling, disassembling and reassembling takes place. Here, as Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest, I reviewed the themes, which consisted of removing, merging and breaking them down. Before final decisions were made, Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommend returning to the raw data to verify and validate the identified themes. These were then mapped for the purpose of visual display. The next stage returned to the data 'to extract excerpts' and 'view them in relation' to the themes, to assist in the interpretation process (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018, p.812).

The fifth phase, as highlighted by Braun and Clarke (2006, p.92) focused on defining and naming themes, which occurred after a 'satisfactory thematic map' was developed. This then merged with the final part producing the report. The objective of my findings and report section was to present the participants' complex views on how policies emerging from the quality agenda have impacted on their practice and illuminate their views on the overall success (or otherwise) of the quality agenda in a 'concise, coherent, logical, non-repetitive

and interesting account' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.93). In this section, the themes worked to provide both structure and clarity to assist in presenting the findings. The excerpts extracted from the raw data brought the participants' voices to life within the report and presented the themes with validity and relevance. The excerpts extracted functioned to illustrate key points and arguments that emerged in response to the overarching research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

4.10.4 Concept mapping - thematic maps

ELC policy consists of an elaborate web of policy connections, inclusive of a wide range of actors, including policymakers, people from industry and child advocacy groups, and ELC practitioners. Within each sub-group lies further complexity, particularly in terms of ELC practitioners, who remain divergent in terms of status, qualifications, experience, and position. The complexity is further accelerated by the rapid development that has taken place in ECE policy both nationally and internationally. Bradley (2011, p.98) posits that as policy 'shifts from government to governance' the level of complexity increases and the array of actors and policy networks multiply. The data gathered in this research represents multiple perspectives, reflective of the participants' different contextual backgrounds, which were diverse, geographically and in terms of positions, years of experience, qualifications, and personal ontological and epistemological perspectives. The data also represents two sides of the policy divide, from that of the policymaker representing the current government's view, to those of ELC practitioners who receive and are charged with the implementation of policy at ground level. This heterogeneity presents a complex space, representing multiple outlooks, making the research backdrop and emerging data almost impossible to understand and navigate without conceptual maps (Walsh, 2019; Bradley, 2011).

Within this complexity, Bradley (2011, p.98) offers concept mapping as a methodical means of incorporating multiple perspectives, 'within constraints of time and resources' which can 'assist in the depiction and analysis of complex processes'. Concept mapping aligns effectively with complexity theory, the theoretical framework, and TA. As Ebner et al. (2006, p.636) show, concept mapping presents 'a tool for understanding' and addressing challenges that arise from 'complex processes, resources and people involved', while also 'identifying potential gaps' in 'order to address them'.

Thematic maps evolve and change, as the themes and their relationships are reflected and built upon, and new data emerges (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This was particularly the case in

this research, which was built on an iterative approach, where, as ideas were visited and revisited, the maps changed both form and focus. Castleberry and Nolen (2018, p.812) note that 'visual representation' provided another 'level of analysis in TA' in that it enables the researcher to place the themes in the 'larger landscape of the phenomenon'. This was important in this research, as the themes were contextually situated within the contemporary landscape of early childhood. Therefore, the ideas that emerged from the data were not necessarily new ideas, but ideas that already existed. The analysis facilitated in illuminating issues that existed implicitly, but now through this research a microscope had been placed on them, so they now existed explicitly.

Using Survey Monkey and NVivo made visualising the data through graphs and concept maps easier. As mentioned earlier, Survey Monkey automatically graphed the quantitative data and NVivo automatically placed qualitative data in visual tree nodes, so thinking in terms of graphs was already supporting the analysis. PowerPoint and Word were then used to develop concept maps to present the process of developing, refining, and finally presenting themes and sub-themes.

4.11 Conclusion

The methodology and methods selected facilitated the capture of the multiple perspectives and experiences practitioners held in relation to how policy was impacting on their practice and how both policy and experience had influenced and formed their views on quality within the ELC sector. The iterative design promoted a reflexive approach, with each research stage informing the next phase of the process. The online research approach not only facilitated the capture of both the breadth and depth of perspectives, but also allowed the research to return to the participants at certain junctures where new policies were introduced to the sector, to capture up-to-date responses. The data were gathered and analysed from the practitioners using Braun and Clarke's (2006) TA, NVivo, and the tools available on Survey Monkey. The iterative research design presented an approach where the views of the participants could inform the content and questions posed to the policymaker during the semi-structured interview, thereby presenting two angles on how policy impacts on the development of quality in the ELC sector. The next chapter will present the findings from all research methods as analysed through thematic analysis, NVivo, and Survey Monkey.

Chapter 5 – Findings

While this was primarily a qualitative-interpretive study on the impact of ELC policy on early years practice, the online survey also contained a quantitative element. The quantitative data provided an overview of the survey participants' contextual backgrounds and summarised overall whether participants believed contemporary policy was enhancing or reducing quality in the early years sector. It also highlighted the level of familiarity participants had with contemporary policy and illuminated which policies were enhancing the quality of practice in their settings.

The Survey Monkey tools automatically calculated the responses numerically and by percentage which simplified analysis of the quantitative data. The qualitative data was analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis (TA), where the information from the quantitative data was blended in to contextualise the research and to present a deeper meaning to the data, which emerged through the qualitative questions and forum discussions. NVivo was used to support the analysis of the qualitative information, first through coding the data from the survey and the forum, then these codes were used to develop the key themes. After refinement, the key themes were employed to support the write-up and display of the main findings. Concept maps were used to support this analysis and to provide a visual representation of the findings where appropriate.

5.1 Data collection period and its consequences

The survey opened on 1st June 2018 and the last response was posted on 11th October 2018. The survey remained online, but there were no further responses. The survey yielded 114 responses. The information gathered from the data was rich, clearly articulated, and far-reaching, reflecting that practitioners have a clear vision of the issues currently supporting and hindering the development of quality in the ELC sector. Many of the responses were anticipated, reflecting contemporary discourses currently emerging from early childhood online forums (ACP, 2020; ECI, 2020). Responses were generally reflective, expressing both positive and negative experiences with the multitude of policies emerging since the announcement of the Quality Agenda. Some responses referred back beyond the commencement of the Quality Agenda in 2013 to the development of Síolta (2006), Aistear (2008), and the ECCE scheme in 2010. This was appropriate, as both frameworks, and the

ECCE scheme, have significantly influenced and continue to evolve within the context of the Quality Agenda. The first element of the survey focused on the participants' demographic information, which facilitated participant profiling and voice distribution across the TA framework. The second part focused on gaining quantitative information in relation to familiarity with policy and an overarching view regarding whether policy has contributed negatively or positively to quality development. The final part focused on open-ended questions to gather participants' views and perspectives in relation to what criteria they believed were fundamental to quality development.

The online forum commenced on 18th November 2018. This group consisted of 17 members, which represented a reasonable cohort, however some did not participate or engage in any online discussions. While not active for the entire duration of the research period, the forum remained open, as this allowed me to return at important junctures of the research to invite the participants to contribute or provide clarity in terms of their views on my interpretation of the data. In this context, I returned to the forum to share the preliminary findings from the data, share the proposed semi-structured interview with the policymaker and seek the forum's input beforehand, and share the findings afterwards. The Quality Agenda, as mentioned earlier, commenced in part as a response to RTE's airing of the programme *A Breach of Trust*, which highlighted extremely poor quality in a range of Dublin crèches. Somewhat ironically, towards the end of this research, a second RTE documentary, *Behind Closed Doors*, again presented distressingly poor practice and multiple breaches in regulations. While this was based in one Dublin crèche, it again sparked national outrage and criticism of the Irish Government's Quality Agenda, particularly the regulatory system. Consequently, having the forum open facilitated inviting the participants to return and contribute their views.

The final element of the iterative approach to the data collection consisted of an interview with a policymaker, which enabled the findings to be shared with a government representative to garner their response and vision in relation to plans to further augment quality within the ELC sector. This data was gathered through a semi-structured interview, which enabled the interviewee to respond and expand on questions relevant to the Quality Agenda and the practitioners' perspectives. This facilitated an extra dimension and provided a mechanism for the findings to have greater potential to influence future policy development, as was an objective of this research project.

The purpose of this chapter, as Braun and Clarke (2006, p.93) suggest, 'is to tell the complicated story' of the data, firstly contextualising the research through sharing the quantitative findings, then after careful analysis and developing of themes, using TA to present the themes in a 'concise, coherent and logical' manner.

5.2 Quantitative findings

5.2.1 Demographics and Participants' Profiles

Length of service

As shown in Figure 5, the majority of the participants had worked in the sector for a considerable period, with just under 50% of participants having worked in the ELC sector for over 10 years and a further 25% indicating they had been in the sector for over 15 years. These demographics, while somewhat reflective of the figures presented by Pobal's Annual Sector Profile, presented a higher level of participants with over five years' experience. Less than 3% of participants had under a year's experience, a figure considerably lower than Pobal's survey, which indicated that 19% of the workforce had been in the sector for less than a year (Pobal, 2018). It was significant that the participants were experienced, as this meant that they had a deeper understanding of how policy has influenced their daily practice over a period of turbulent policy change. 75% of participants had worked in the sector throughout the period of rapid change, a characteristic element of the sector since 2009 and accelerating again in 2013.

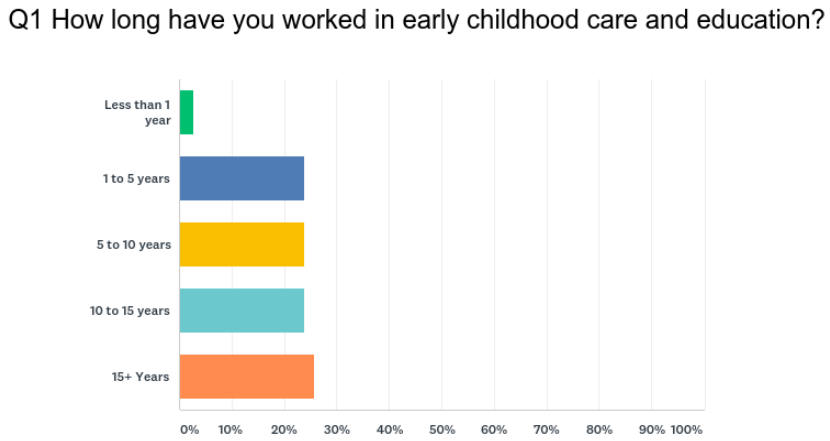


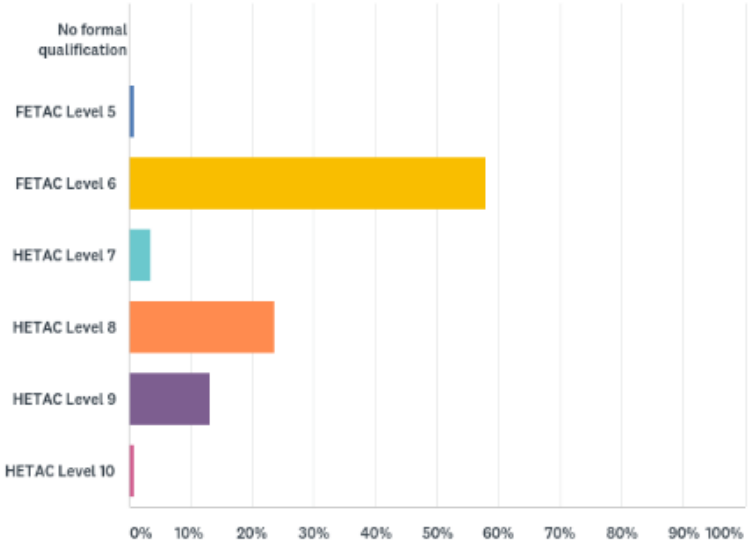
Figure 5: Length of service

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Less than 1 year	2.65%	3
1 to 5 years	23.89%	27
5 to 10 years	23.89%	27
10 to 15 years	23.89%	27
15+ Years	25.66%	29
TOTAL		113

Qualifications

The respondents were all qualified in childcare, with just one participant holding the minimum FETAC level 5 qualification. 66 participants held a FETAC Level 6 award, representing the predominant qualification at 57.89% of all participants. Four held a Level 7 degree; 27 held a Level 8 degree, 15 held a Masters, and one participant had a doctorate. Participant qualifications in this research were significantly higher than the national norm, as indicated by the Pobal's (2018) survey in which 15.5% held a Level 8 or higher, in contrast to almost 38% in this research. This is noteworthy, perhaps indicating that those with a higher level of qualification are less likely to accept the status quo and more willing to contest it. Aligned with this view, Davis (2014) found that graduate practitioners in England were more confident and empowered in expressing their views on the status of early childhood.

Q2 What is the highest level of qualification you have achieved in early childhood education and care?



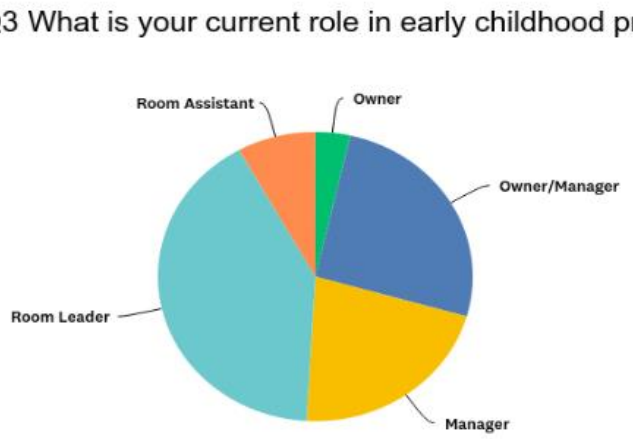
ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
No formal qualification	0.00%	0
FETAC Level 5	0.88%	1
FETAC Level 6	57.89%	66
HETAC Level 7	3.51%	4
HETAC Level 8	23.68%	27
HETAC Level 9	13.16%	15
HETAC Level 10	0.88%	1
TOTAL		114

Figure 6: Qualifications in the sector

Occupations within the ECE sector

As Pobal (2018) noted, roles in early childhood can be fluid. This section required participants to select the role that they felt most represented their identity in their settings. The highest percentage of participants identified as room leaders, with 46 participants (just

over 41%). The next largest group were owner/managers at 29 participants/almost 26%. 24, or just over 21%, identified as managers and 9 participants/approximately 8% as preschool assistants. The smallest group, at just 4 participants and under 4% of the total participant pool, identified as owners. This was significant as over 96% of participants had on-the-ground experience of the impact of policy on practice.

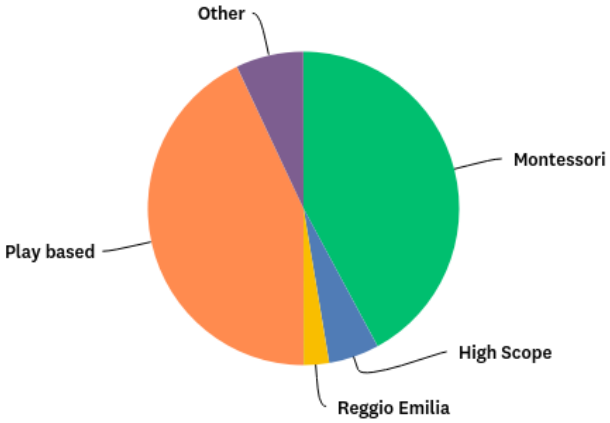


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Owner	3.57%	4
Owner/Manager	25.89%	29
Manager	21.43%	24
Room Leader	41.07%	46
Room Assistant	8.04%	9
TOTAL		112

Figure 7: Occupations in the sector

Pedagogical approach

Play-based and Montessori were the most frequently cited pedagogical approach, with 42.98% (49 participants) identifying as play-based and 42.11% (48) as Montessori. Other approaches cited included High Scope, Reggio Emilia, and Steiner.



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Montessori	42.11%	48
High Scope	5.26%	6
Reggio Emilia	2.63%	3
Steiner	0.00%	0
Play based	42.98%	49
Other	7.02%	8
TOTAL		114

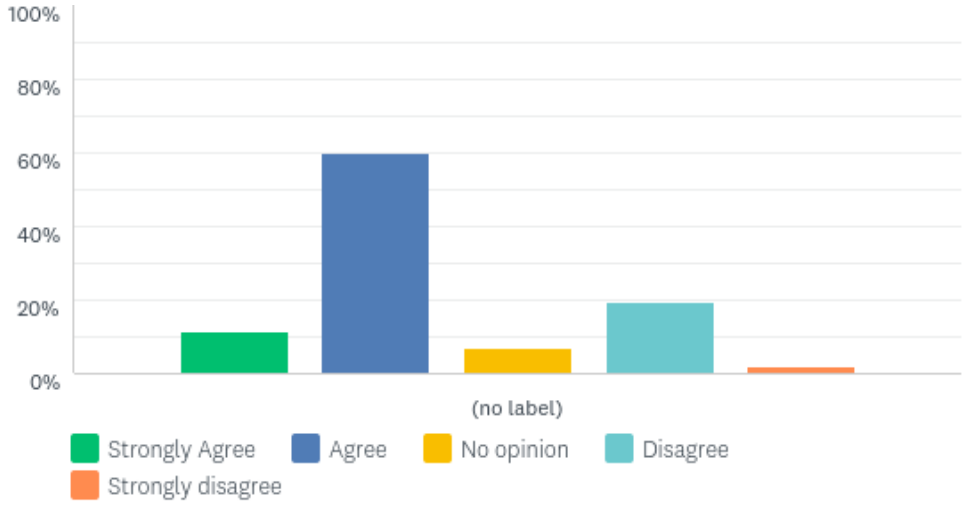
Figure 8: Pedagogical approaches

5.2.2 How policy has impacted on practice

This part of the questionnaire remained grounded in quantitative information and consisted of three questions. The first question concerned participants' overall view in relation to whether contemporary ELC policy was enhancing or reducing quality. The second question focused on participants' familiarity with recent policies, and the final question explored participants perspectives on the impact of these policies on enhancing quality practice, with participants being requested to grade policies in terms of quality development as 'significantly enhanced quality', 'enhanced quality', 'no impact on quality', or 'reduced or significantly reduced quality'. Participants were also asked whether they believed the Quality Agenda had been successful in raising quality in the sector.

Overarching opinions on the success of the Quality Agenda

There was a general consensus that the Quality Agenda was a success, with 80 (71.43%) participants indicating quality had improved and 24 (21.43%) participants disagreeing. 8 (7.14%) had no opinion.



	STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	NO OPINION	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE	TOTAL	WEIGHTED AVERAGE
(no label)	11.61% 13	59.82% 67	7.14% 8	19.64% 22	1.79% 2	112	2.40

Figure 9: Has the Quality Agenda improved quality in early childhood settings?

Awareness and familiarity with contemporary policy.

Participants generally indicated familiarity with most current policy initiatives. The policy participants indicated they were most familiar with extending children's age eligibility for the ECCE scheme, with 106 (96%) indicating familiarity and 5 (5%) indicating little awareness. Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) was the next well known, with 97 (86%) indicating familiarity. The areas where participants indicated limited familiarity were in relation to available funding. The least familiar policies were the government's decision to fund attendance at CPD training and in relation to capital funding. Participants showed a higher level of awareness with the policies that directly affected children, as opposed to policies that provide opportunities to access funding to enhance their practice.

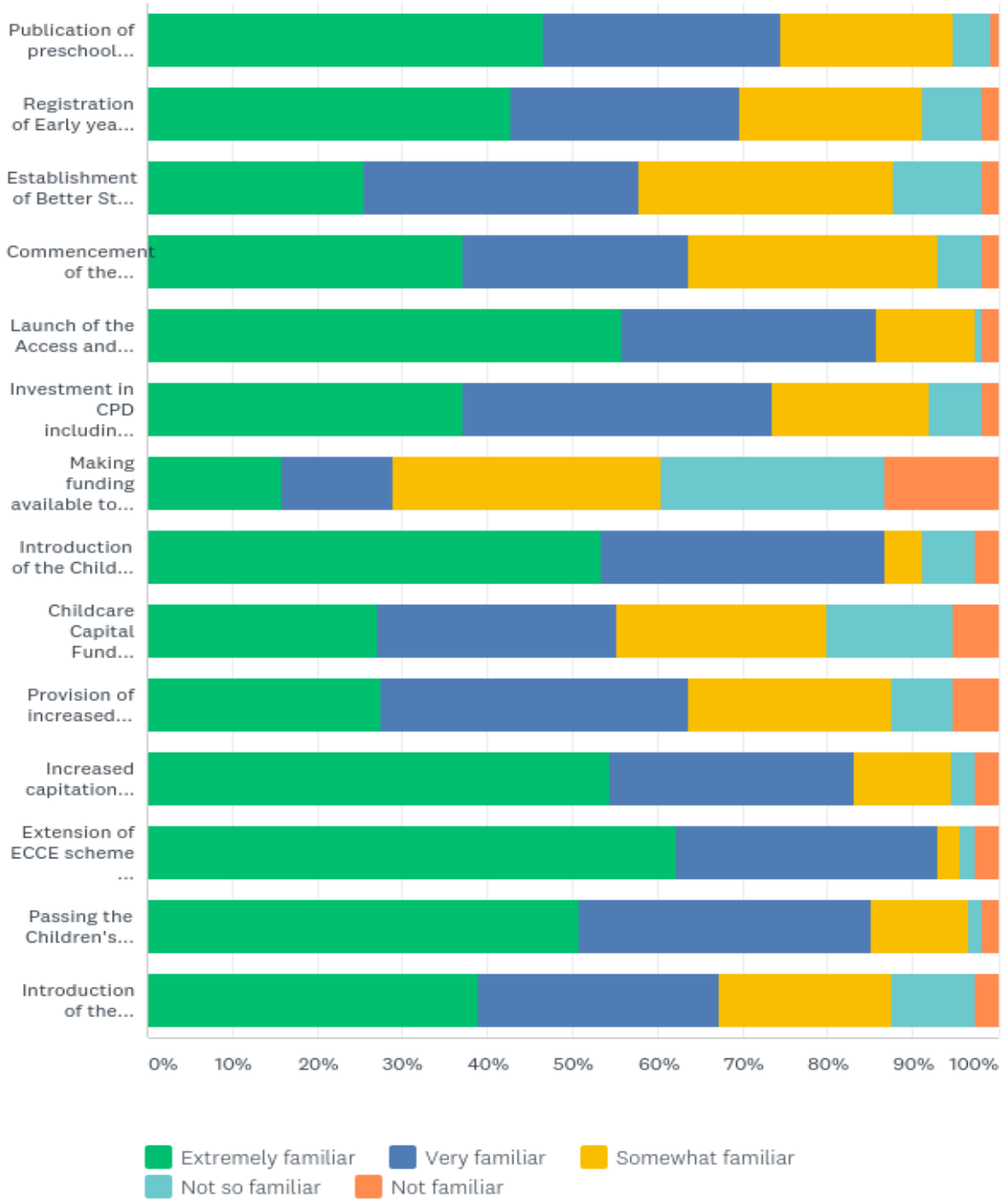


Figure 10: Familiarity with government policy

5.2.3 Policies considered significant in supporting the development of quality

The quantitative findings presented a broad dispersal of positivity towards the policies practitioners found most beneficial to practice, as displayed in Figures 11 and 12 below.

Aligned to the positivity asserted towards the QA, participants were also generally positive towards the actual policies.

Participants viewed the AIM as the most significant policy in supporting the development of quality, with 90 (76.4%) participants agreeing it had enhanced quality and 45 (38.2%) indicating strong agreement. However, 15 (13%) participants indicated it had no impact and 4 participants (3%) felt AIM had reduced quality. Continuous Professional Development (CPD) was perceived as the next most noteworthy policy to augment quality, with 85 (75%) participants signifying agreement. In contrast to AIM, the majority of participants viewed these policies as improving, rather than significantly improving quality. 82 (72.56%) concurred that higher capitation for graduate-led ECCE settings increased quality, with 2 (1.77%) disagreeing. The policy that received the most negativity was the extension of the ECCE scheme, which extended eligibility for children from the age of 2 years and 8 months until they commenced school, 20 (18%) participants indicated that this would reduce quality. This policy only commenced in September 2018 and with the survey completed towards the end of October, it is possible this was a predicted belief rather than one based on experience. The Affordable Childcare Scheme (ACS), which had not yet been introduced, raised the next highest level of negativity with 11(10%) indicating negative beliefs. The Education Focused Inspections (EYEI) were welcomed as increasing quality, with 76 (67.25%) indicating positivity, yet 8 (7%) perceived they had reduced quality. The quantitative findings indicated a general satisfaction with the governments' Quality Agenda, with most indicating that policies had increased or significantly increased the overall quality of provision in the sector.

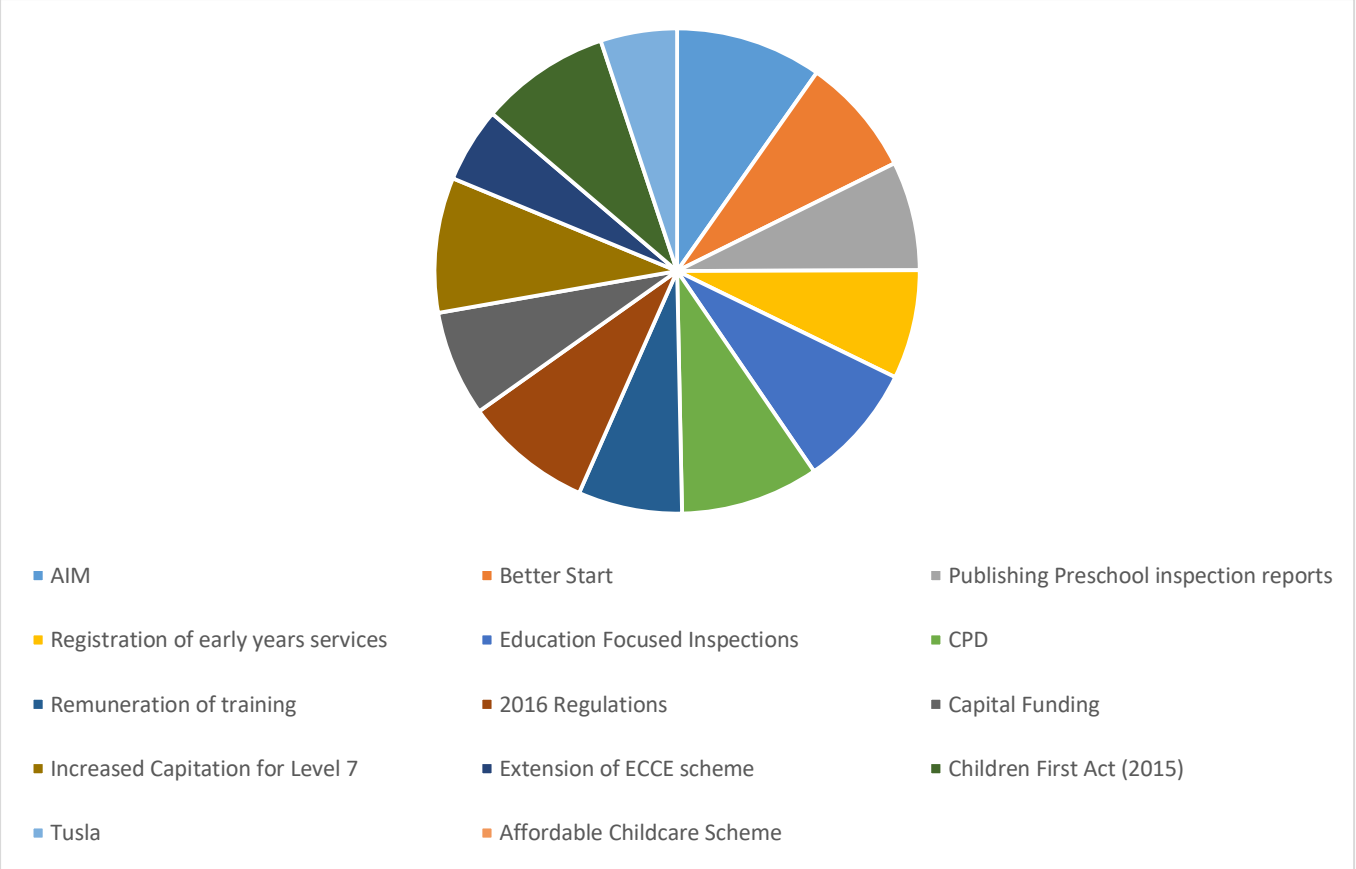


Figure 11: Policies that have enhanced or significantly enhanced practice – quantitative data.

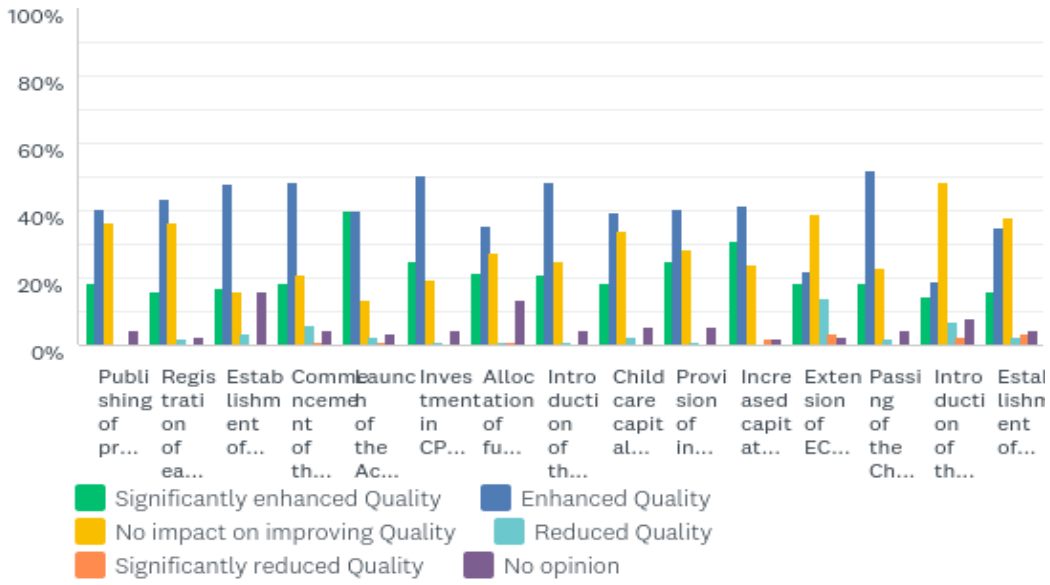


Figure 12: Policies considered most significant and those considered insignificant in supporting the development of quality

5.2.4 Overarching views on policy development

Participants were provided the opportunity to comment on their overall view of policy development. There were eight comments, some negative, with one participant stating, 'None of the above are helping', it is 'the staff who are …improving the quality on a daily basis'. A second participant shared her personal experience on the impact of policy on her business, directly attributing contemporary policy to its closure:

> Early years services have suffered greatly …..as a result of the ECCE scheme and inspections by multiple departments requesting a lot of paperwork most of which was unnecessary …… Funding from the ECCE scheme was so poor it didn't cover the cost of delivering any sort of a quality service let alone a good quality service that I owned! I have just closed my doors after almost 12 years and had no choice! You can't pay peanuts and demand a platinum standard service! The stress of managing the paperwork (which we were not paid to do) plan curricula (which again we were NOT paid for) manage staff and bills and parents on top of working directly with the children was all too much! Especially when we suffered losses money wise year after year! (Online Survey, Owner/Manager)

More positive comments highlighted 'Better Start, Brighter Outcomes' the National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014-2020, as a policy worth thinking about, another stated Department of Education, another indicated 'County Childcare Committee' was 'very important to quality services'. Finally, a participant suggested 'Tusla (the regulatory inspectorate) still need a lot of improvement, more staff and more availability'.

Key ideas supporting the development of quality

As a consequence of contemporary policy, in particular the establishment of Aistear and Síolta, the National Frameworks, which guide contemporary practice in ELC settings, a number of strong discourses arose. A number of these were listed in the online survey and participants were asked to grade them based on the extent to which they believed they were contributing to the development of quality in their settings. Participants could also leave comments at the end. The concepts highlighted included: Planning, Assessing and Documenting; Continuous Professional Development (CPD); Partnership with Parents; Collaborative practice with outside agencies; Inclusion; Child led, Child-Centred Practice; Degree-Led ELC Sector, and Network Meetings. The Aistear-Síolta Practice Guide is an online working document, which promotes practitioners to use these concepts to enhance quality within their setting.

Participants were considerably positive towards the concepts that have become commonplace as indicators of quality practice. Participants highlighted CPD as the most important element of quality development, with 108 (94.74%) participants indicating this as important. Child-led practice was second most significant, with 104 participants supporting this. Partnership with parents, the Aistear-Síolta Practice Guide, Inclusion, Qualifications, and Planning/documenting were all viewed as positive, with only a small percentage of participants indicating the view that they reduced quality.

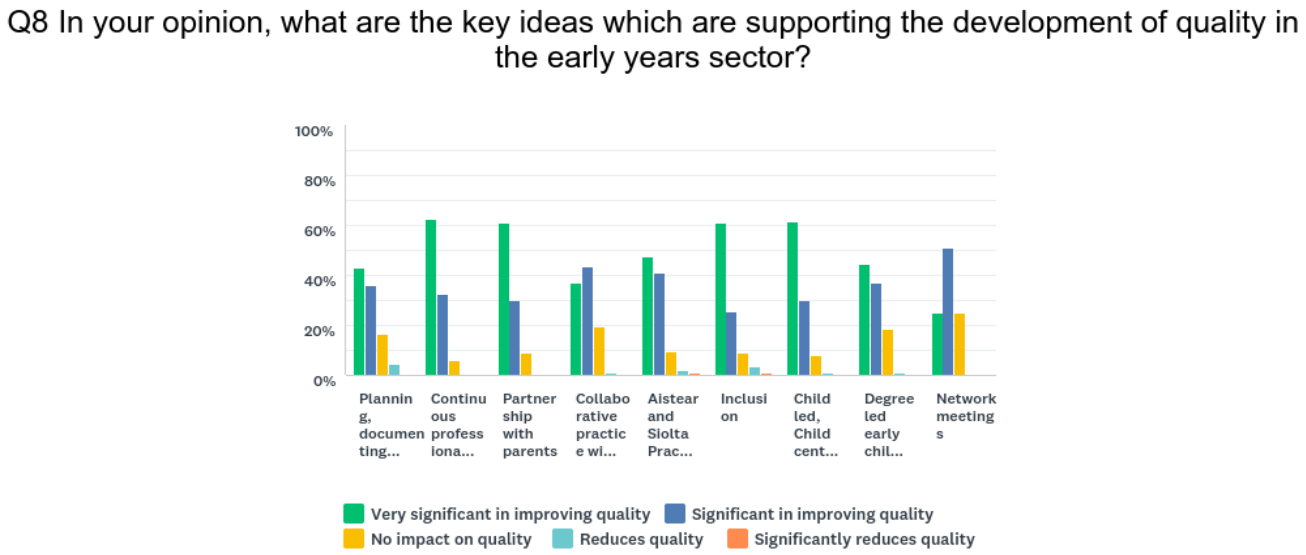


Figure 13: Key concepts supporting the development of quality in ELC

5.3 Qualitative findings

The qualitative findings emerged from the survey, online forum, and the semi-structured interview with a policymaker. The data gathered was considerable; consequently, NVivo was utilised to support thematic analysis (TA) using Braun and Clarke's (2006) TA framework and concept maps.

The impact of policy on the development of quality practice from both the practitioners' and policymaker's views are multi-faceted and complex, influenced by experience, interpretations, and personal ontological and epistemological perspectives. The findings from this section of the data are presented conceptually under three main themes with sub-themes, which emerged as a consequence of using TA. The main aspect of this research was to provide a platform for participants to express their views and interpretations on how policy

was impacting on the development of quality practice in their settings, consequently their voice in its authenticity is presented in extracts so that their views can be heard. After familiarisation with the data, developing initial codes and searching for themes, the process of reviewing and refining themes thus began to present a view of the key qualitative findings.

5.3.1 Reviewing, defining and naming themes

With such significant data gathered across a spectrum of issues which impact daily on the development of quality in ELC settings, bearing in mind the complexity of perspectives and positions, it was challenging to order this into a manageable number of themes. This is where the thematic maps and NVivo coding system were helpful, where at a glance, key ideas could be viewed which allowed for reflection on how these ideas could sit within six initial central themes (Concept Map 1).

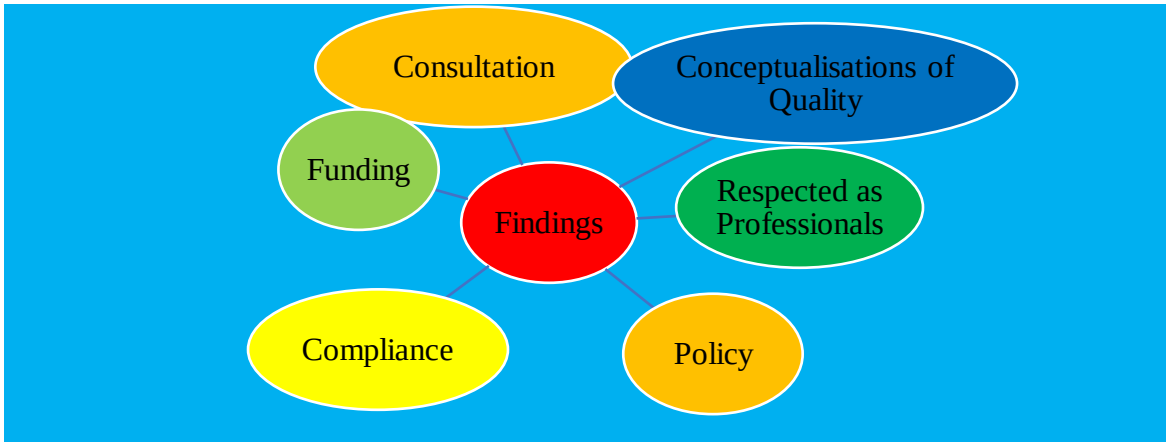


Figure 14: Concept Map 1: Initial themes

The six central themes which emerged were: Conceptualisations of Quality, Policy, Respected as Professionals, Funding, Compliance, and Consultation. On reflection, these six themes were further reduced to three key themes, which were Conceptualisations of Quality, Respected as Professionals, and Policy (Concept Map 2).

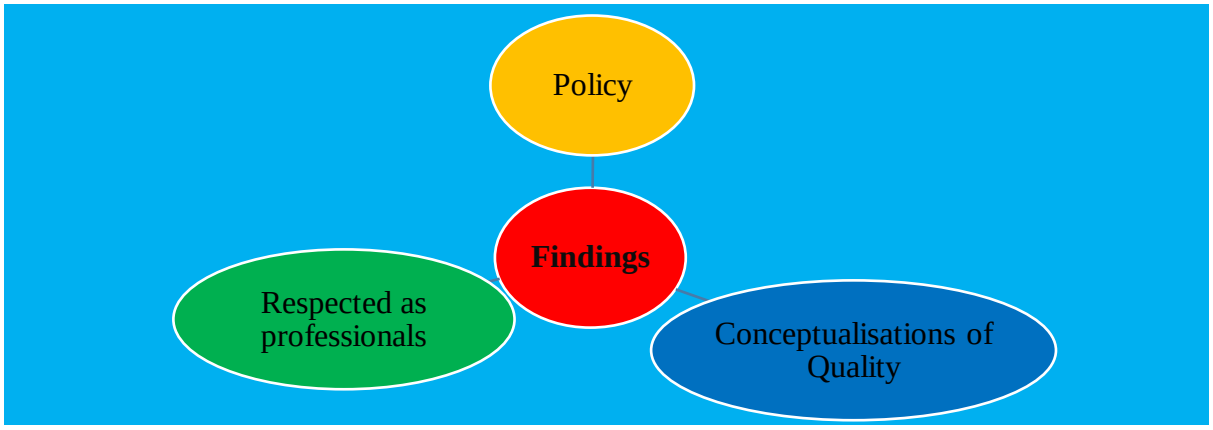


Figure 15: Concept Map 2: Final themes

'Funding' and 'Consultation' became sub-themes merged within the overarching theme of Respected as Professionals. Compliance was linked to this theme, but was a significant pillar of contemporary policy development. While these three themes were selected to present the findings, the data did not necessarily sit neatly in compartments and many of the views articulated by participants often had relevance to two or more themes. The themes are ultimately interconnected and interdependent (Concept Map 3).

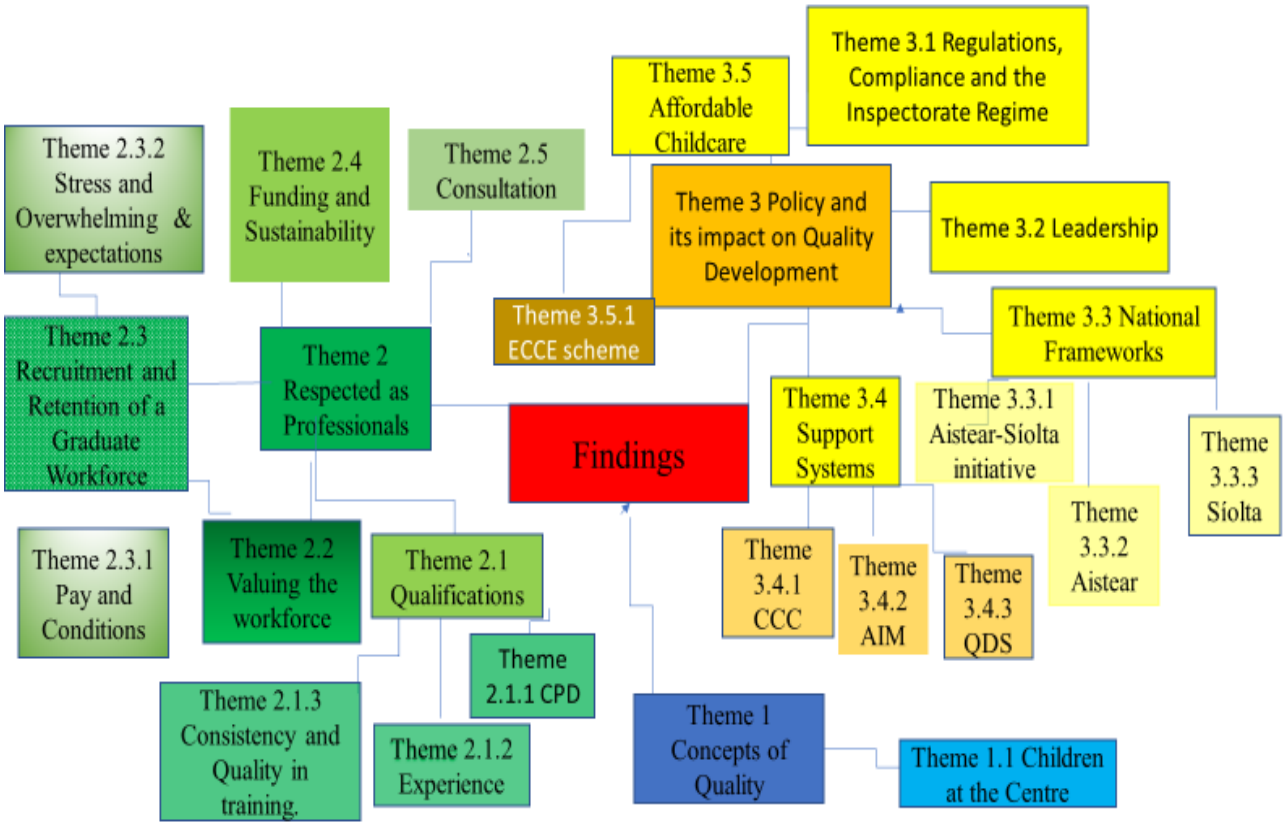


Figure 16: Concept Map 3: Themes and sub-themes

5.3.2 Verifying the final three themes against the initial coding - phase 1

An early sense of the themes emerged during familiarising with the data (phase 1) and was confirmed again during the second phase, developing the initial codes. The map below returned to the codes when the final three themes had been decided, to check the relevance of the themes in terms of initial coding. This confirmed that being respected as a professional was viewed as the fundamental factor in the development of quality practice, with remuneration as the most significant element of this. AIM was viewed as the policy most beneficial in enhancing quality practice, while 'children at the centre' was perceived as the central discourse (Concept Map 4).

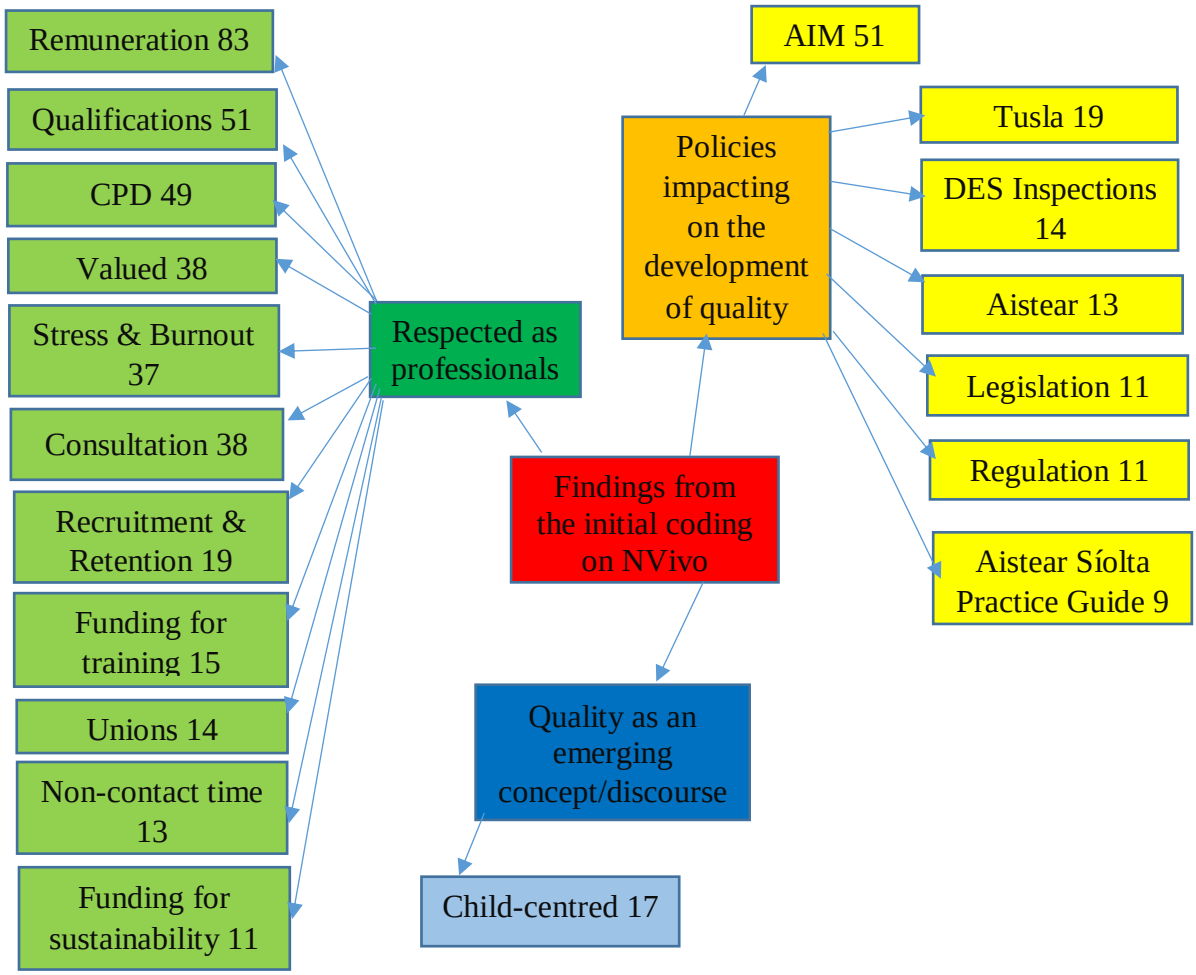


Figure 17: Concept Map 4: Verifying the themes against initial coding

5.3.3 Theme 1: Conceptualisations of quality

As the focus of this research was to explore how effectively policies emerging from the Quality Agenda were in raising quality in ELC settings, every element of this research related to practitioners' conceptualisations of quality. Figure 18 represents the practitioners' overall response to quality development within the qualitative data generated in the survey and forum. The numbers represent the amount of direct references to each area. The meaning behind many of the responses were open to interpretation, so the coding in part was my interpretation of these responses.

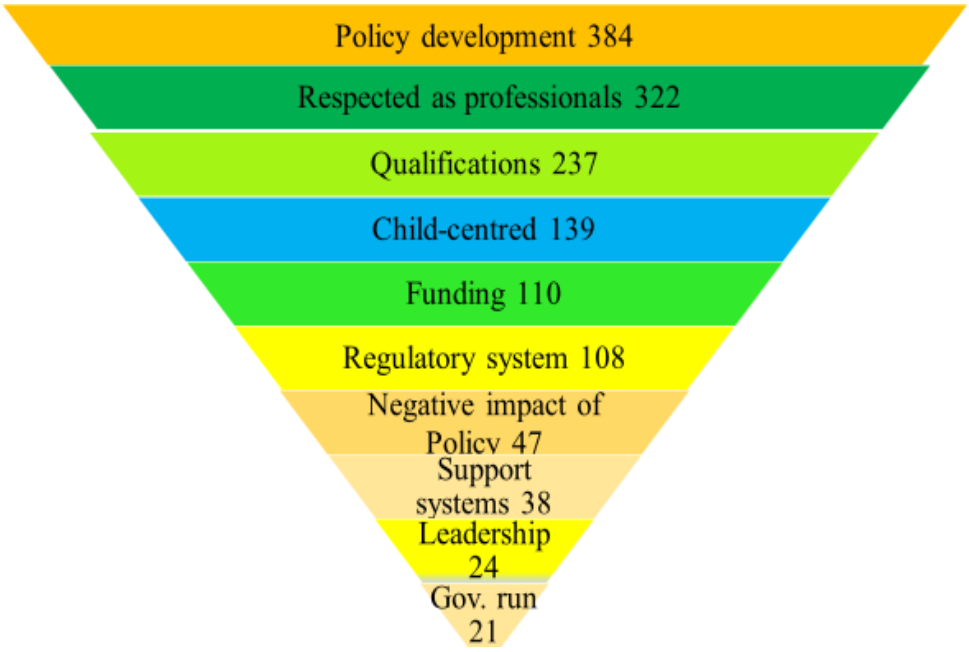


Figure 18: Phase 2 TA – Searching for themes

The impact of policy on quality development not surprisingly dominated discussions, with 384 references. Similarly, being respected as professionals was prolific, with 322 references. Consequently, these both emerged as central themes. Many of the other leading ideas were merged within these overarching themes. 'Regulations/inspections/compliance', 'support systems', and 'leadership' were categorised under 'policy development', and 'qualifications' formed a sub-theme of 'respected as professionals'. These are all conceptualisations of quality. The focus of the theme 'conceptualisation of quality', however, highlighted the emergence of discourses on quality. Internationally, there are many discourses defining the concept of quality in ELC settings, many of which emerged in this research. The sub-theme 'children at the centre' was considered the most useful for organising these concepts beyond those that could be categorised under the other two themes.

Theme 1.1 Children at the centre

The globalisation of ELC has resulted in child-centred practice discourse entering the lexicon of early childhood curriculum frameworks, including Ireland's Aistear (Campbell-Barr, 2019; NCCA, 2009). As Cottle and Alexander's (2012) findings revealed, quality as it is pursued in government discourse is mirrored in the perspectives of practitioners. This research concurred and similarly noted how practitioners negotiated these discourses based on their own personal experiences and values. It was therefore unsurprising that contemporary concepts such as

'children at the centre', 'the emergent curriculum', 'documenting', 'outdoor play' and 'affordable childcare' were viewed as critical to quality development. 'Children at the centre' was articulated by practitioners as a fundamental element of quality practice, which emerged within NVivo as a theme in its own right initially (Figure 19).

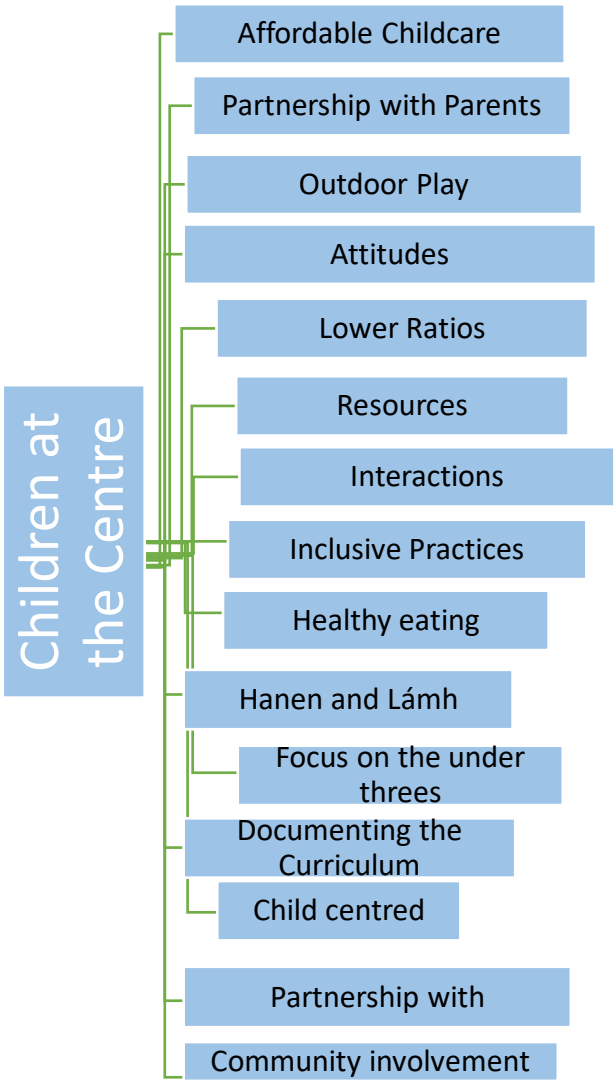


Figure 19: Children at the centre

Child-centred

The need to develop a child-centred approach was cited 20 times, as one participant explained; '…child led is important…...you learn and appreciated what the children …like to do and what their interests are so that can help to enhance those interests'.

Documenting the curriculum

'Documenting the curriculum' was cited 15 times. Participants offered mixed views on documentation. Some believed the focus on compliance detracted from time with the children. Others, however, argued that documentation was fundamental to a child-centred approach. One participant desired to 'spend less time swallowed in paperwork' so she could have more time 'to really listen and focus on the children's interests and enjoy them'. This theme recurred throughout the data. Another felt that to be 'child-led', 'assessment' needed to be used 'as a basis for learning'. Another participant articulated a desire to be compliant with documentation, but required 'better guidelines on what is needed in terms of paperwork and observations'. Aligned with the need to meet the expectations of documentation, 'non-contact time' emerged as a sub-theme, with 11 direct references.

Non-contact time

Practitioners welcomed and sought increases in the governments' funding of paid non-contact time, attributing it to providing more time to plan, document and reflect on children's learning, as one participant foregrounded, 'making payment for non-contact time compulsory - thereby sufficient time is spent on planning in line with children's interests etc'.

Attitudes and child-friendly

Aligned with the concept of orientation quality, participants referred 12 times to the importance of practitioners' attitudes in quality practice. Participants articulated that practitioners needed to be 'child-friendly, loving what they do', 'well-trained and happy', 'employing staff who want to be there', 'committed' with 'job-satisfaction', ultimately 'teachers who are continuously improving practice and open to change'. This links directly with the argument forwarded in the literature review by Wall et al (2015) that orientation is fundamental to quality development.

Seven participants cited the importance of interactions, while there were six references to outdoor play, partnership with parents, five to using Aistear-Síolta and an emergent curriculum, four to equipment and resources, three references to affordable childcare, healthy eating, inclusive practices, and lower ratios, while other elements highlighted above were referred to only once.

5.3.4 Theme 2 - Quality depends on respecting practitioners as professionals

In her synopsis of quality, Hayes (2011) notes that a striking point regarding quality is that it always reverts to the quality of staff. Conceptualisations of quality in this research equally cited the critical role practitioners play in the development of quality practice. Participants highlighted the importance of valuing the ELC workforce through pay, conditions and consultation. Capturing the essence of this section, a participant in the online survey forwarded, 'recognising staff as professionals and paying them accordingly will go a long way in enhancing quality in early years'.

Concept Map 5 displays this theme and initial sub-themes. Regulations and leadership have a significant impact on how practitioners identify and value themselves, thereby have significant relevance to the overarching theme 'respected as professionals', yet they are also major policy initiatives and consequently are discussed under the 'policy' theme.

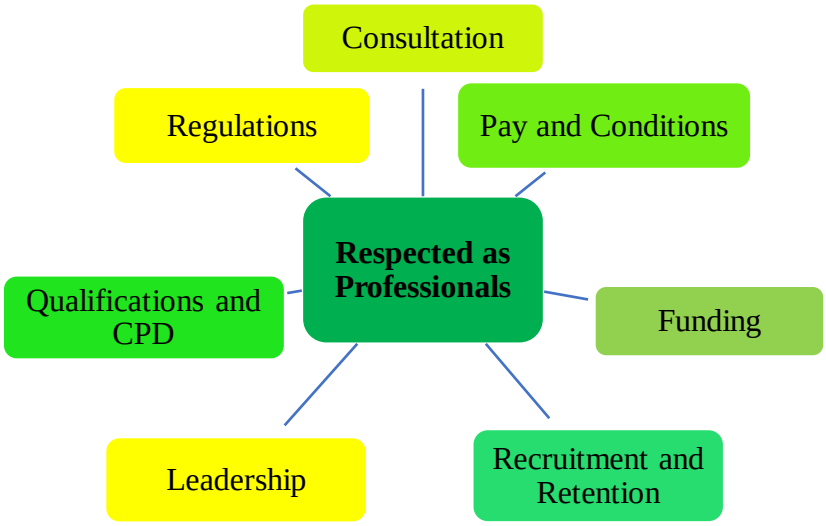


Figure 20: Concept Map 5: Theme 2 - Respected as professionals (Phases 4-5)

The findings from this section are structured as follows 1. Qualifications, 2. Recruiting and retaining a graduate workforce, 3. Pay and Conditions. 4. Stress and Overwhelming expectations. 5. Funding and sustainability, 5. Value and Lack of professional identity. Concept Map 6 displays this theme and final sub-themes.

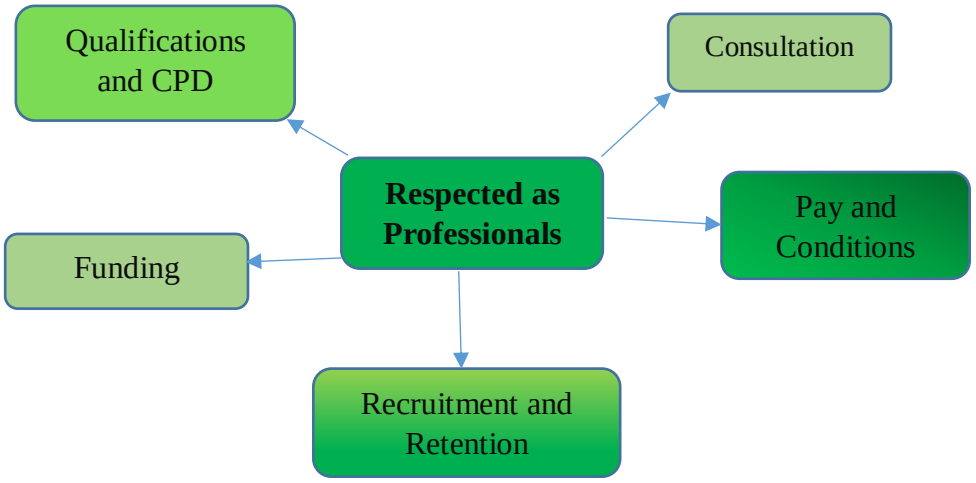


Figure 21: Concept Map 6: Theme 2- Respected as professionals (refined)

Theme 2.1 - Qualifications/degree-led sector

High levels of staff qualifications, as the literature review noted, have consistently been identified as a critical element of quality practice (Pascal et al.2013: Urban et al. 2012, Brock, 2012). Participants in this research equally identified a qualified workforce as critical in quality development in the ELC sector. In the online survey, where participants were enabled within the quantitative section to comment on what constituted high quality ELC, from the 21 comments, 14 referred to developing a highly qualified professional ELC sector. Raising qualifications in the sector continued to be echoed in the survey, forum, and policymaker's interview. Analysis of the qualitative data using NVivo indicated that participants in the survey and forum referred to qualifications 237 times. Participants called on government to incentivise practitioners to gain higher qualifications through increased funding and appropriate salaries. Appropriate funding of the sector was viewed as fundamental in developing and sustaining a graduate workforce. The factors participants identified as fundamental to the development of quality included 'All teachers should be of BA Honours degree level', 'Graduate and well-remunerated and respected staff', 'Qualified staff, working with parents/families'. One participant forwarded: 'Definitely professionalising the sector with CPD and perhaps mandatory degree level room leaders with remuneration to match this, with a proper career path' (Online Survey).

Policymaker's vision of quality, qualifications, and CPD

Aligned with the vision forwarded by practitioners that qualifications mattered, the policymaker, in the opening overview on the government's drive to raise quality standards, discussed investment, particularly in relation to qualifications and providing CPD opportunities:

> Over the last 5-10 years there has been an ever-increasing amount of investment …there is an ever-increasing range of tools to promote and support the understanding of quality and support practitioners to get qualifications, get CPD and upskill.

Theme 2.1.1: Continuous Professional Development (CPD)

The First 5 National Strategy not only targeted enhancing 'initial training', but also sought to increase 'CPD opportunities' (GOI, 2018, p.162). Goal D, Action 3B outlined the Government's plan to develop 'a national programme of CPD opportunities for the ELC workforce to be delivered through Better Start Quality Development Service', with the long term objective that 'over time, this will develop links with the national structure for CPD of primary school teachers' (GOI, 2018, p.163).The strategy also planned on ensuring practitioners were 'supported to undertake regular CPD' (GOI, 2018, p.163).

Within the factors outlined by participants as fundamental to enhancing quality, 31 of 106 responses referred to the need for CPD: 'In my opinion improved quality comes through CPD and sustained, supported networking and collaborative practice' (Online Survey)

Recent government-funded CPD opportunities were viewed by some participants to have had a positive impact on their practice. These include LiNC, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) training, Hanen, and Lámh, which were all aimed at supporting inclusion under the AIM Policy: 'CPD including Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, Hanen and LiNC. They educate and challenge us, while providing invaluable tools for working with children'.

While higher qualifications and CPD were recognised as clear characteristics of quality practice, the participants also articulated a sense of being overwhelmed by the continual expectation to engage in CPD, often in their own time and at their own personal cost.

> First Aid, Manual Handling, Fire Safety, Children First, Lámh, ABA, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, Healthy Start, Yoga for children, Parents and Management training, it's always good to upskill, but burnout in the field is a reality (Forum).

> I have a training evening in my setting on Tuesdays on Behaviour Management from 6-9pm, after working from 9am. We do not get paid. I feel as practitioners in relation to CPD, there is so much expected, so much expected from our working day. By the time I leave…I will have been there 12 hours' (Forum).

Aligned with the sense of being overwhelmed by the level of CPD resulting from recent policy initiatives, many practitioners highlighted that they sought courses to assist them to be compliant with regulations:

> The CCC runs programmes in the evenings to further understanding of Aistear and Síolta with a focus on inspections. I have signed up as I want to be ready for our DES inspection. These courses are in the evening and unpaid (Forum)

Policymaker's perspective

With a clear plan to extend and raise the expectations for practitioners to participate in CPD outlined in the First 5 strategy, not surprisingly, the policymaker indicated government's clear intent to focus on CPD. The policymaker articulated awareness of the challenges facing practitioners' upskilling in terms of time and cost: 'there are challenges for practitioners in terms of time to take part in training, particularly if it's not funded and its only recently, we've started piloting the funding of participating in CPD'.

CPD was viewed by the policymaker as an opportunity to raise and balance skills sets among the diversity of ELC practitioners:

> CPD is extremely effective in impacting on process quality…particularly valuable in a sector where there is a lot of variation in the levels of initial training…CPD has particular importance in helping everybody to upskill.

Aligned to the First 5 objectives, the policymaker indicated that the Government have been piloting funded programmes to support practitioners to engage more frequently in CPD, as reflected in the Aistear and Play, Hanen and Lámh trainings, which if successful, could be extended more broadly. While the intention to extend the programme is planned, the policymaker indicated it has to first be evaluated.

Apart from funding, the policymaker articulated that the government's current focus is on building a national structure for CPD, with the emphasis currently on seeking effective ways of providing training. While currently there are no regulatory requirements to engage in CPD, the policymaker indicated that CPD may become a requirement in the future:

> We certainly don't want staff feeling overwhelmed and while we may talk about movement towards a professional body that might regulate the profession, we are certainly not, I would say in a position, yet, to have CPD requirements on every staff member, so that's something we would move towards, but it might take many years to get there.

Theme 2.1.2: Experience - an overlooked element?

While a highly qualified workforce was perceived as a critical element of quality practice, some participants were concerned that experience was being overlooked. The need to recognise experience was highlighted by eight survey participants, but was not referred to within the forum or by the policymaker: 'I believe there is no recognition for years of experience. We have young graduates applying for jobs who cannot read a story at circle-time or have quality interactions with the children' (Survey).

Policymaker's perspective

Irish Government policy, and in particular the First 5 Strategy, acknowledges the critical role that practitioners play in determining quality, but focuses on qualified, rather than experienced staff: 'The individuals involved in providing learning and care are the key determinant of quality' concluding 'this means an appropriately qualified and valued workforce' (GOI, 2018, p.14). The policymaker's interview indicated the government's desire to attract and retain a graduate workforce, but did not refer to experience.

The government's intention to incentivise practitioners to engage in continual upskilling was not only articulated by the policymaker, but enshrined in the plans of First 5, which articulated the objective of creating 'a new funding model to enhance the quality of ELC' (GOI, 2018, p.115). Providing an overview, the policymaker indicated that government sought to incentivise or reward services which reached quality standards, similar to the way the higher capitation for services led by Level 7/8 graduates had contributed to raising graduate status in the workforce. Additional capitation was viewed as 'a positive incentive to take on measures and policies that the state isn't in a position to require of them'.

Theme 2.1.3: Consistency and quality training

Some participants raised concerns in relation to the quality of training available. These included calling for training to be regulated and pathways to be reviewed and standardised: 'Reviewing qualifications pathways and establishing some kind of standardised pathway for qualifications and regulating the providers of ECEC programmes at Level 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9'.

Participants equally called for consistency and well-trained tutors and lecturers, with one highlighting: 'I have been to several training events, listened to several facilitators who were appalling in their knowledge of what constitutes best practice'. There was also a call to develop an Early Years Council to regulate the quality of trainers/lecturers.

Policymaker's perspective

Ensuring initial qualifications and ongoing training in the sector are of high quality has been a focus of government policy. Strategic action 3.B. aims at improving 'access to high-quality initial training and CPD opportunities' (GOI, 2018, p.162). The strategy committed to publishing 'agreed criteria guidelines for further and higher education ELC (and school-age childcare) qualifications including access and entry requirements; knowledge and content of programmes and the incorporation of supervised professional practice'. The strategy indicated this would support 'the implementation of the Workforce Development Plan', by ensuring 'a shared agenda, common practice and understanding of quality (ensuring the practice frameworks are reflected in training), clarifying the roles and responsibilities of the training institutions' (GOI, 2018, p.162). This objective was implemented in April 2019 with the publication of the 'Professional Award Criteria and Guidelines for Initial Professional Education (Level 7 and Level 8 Degree Programmes for the Early Learning and Care (ELC) Sector in Ireland (DCYA, 2019). The policymaker further extended this policy objective by sharing that 'Education institutions have been given a couple of years to prepare for this and revise their degree programmes'. The Government, he stated, has also published an implementation plan, which will create 'a structure to assess the degrees to ensure they meet those standards and guidelines'.

Theme 2.2: Valuing the workforce and their qualifications

Strategic Action 3.C. in the First 5 Strategy focused on government's intent to 'develop mechanisms to raise the professional status of the ELC (and school-age childcare) workforce', with a view to supporting employers to offer more favourable working conditions. This was an issue raised by practitioners, who noted that retaining staff after they have achieved graduate status was viewed as challenging, not only because of poor pay and conditions, but as they believed society did not value ELC practitioners as professionals or see the benefit of higher qualifications:

> Once staff receive a Level 8, they are looking for better opportunities in Pobal or CCC's or deciding to go back to college for primary teaching. It's the lack of increments and pension I think, well that was it to me, to not see a pay rise ahead.

A conversation in the online forum showed practitioners' disillusionment with society's lack of value in their qualifications:

> *Practitioner 1*: When I was studying for my higher diploma parents and colleagues always asked what I would be qualified to do once I finished????
>
> *Practitioner 2*: I've had the same conversation! And I always respond in the same way as you. I also make a point of naming how much I value the work I do by investing in my own education.

Participants articulated frustration that a degree in ELC was not valued equally with other degrees within public perception:

> I too have a business degree with specialisation in database development (Level 7) and now BA in childcare (Level 8) and the business degree carries far more weight than the Childcare Degree.

Pay and conditions were viewed by participants as inextricably linked to how society values the practitioner and their qualifications: 'If there was better pay in the sector morale, performance, feeling valued and seen as a professional would automatically increase'.

Policymaker's perspective

The policymaker highlighted the government's objective to raise the professional status of the sector, with the recent change of name within the First 5 Strategy, proposed as the first move towards providing a clear identity for the sector:

> Early Learning and Care (ELC) was introduced to steer the public debate away from the use of childcare. Childcare is the term generally used in the media and public debate to describe the sector and we have a strong feeling that doesn't reflect the importance of ELC for children's development, the impact it has on children's outcomes or the value of the work done by practitioners. We wanted a term that would recognise those things, but would be clear and simple enough that it could be used in public debate and picked up in the media.

Participants in this research did not share the policymaker's view. In contrast, they articulated that the name change happened without consultation and devalued the sector, as the word 'education' had been removed, unlike the previous title ECEC, which they felt was more accurate.

Theme 2.3: Recruitment and retention of a graduate workforce

Recruiting and retaining highly qualified ELC practitioners was considered extremely challenging, escalated by increased expectations, low status, and poor pay and conditions. Participants repeatedly cited the lack of a professional pathway, with no recognised pay scales or salaries much beyond the minimum wage, no pensions and a general sense of not feeling valued by politicians or society. They viewed these circumstances to be stagnating, offering practitioners limited incentive to upskill, either financially or in terms of status. Participants considered graduates as particularly vulnerable to exiting the sector in search of better opportunities elsewhere.

Theme 2.3.1: Pay and conditions

An analysis of the findings of the survey and forum raised 100 direct references to pay and conditions. 15 of these focused on the need to introduce pay scales, 47 were on recruitment and retention, and 13 on the need for unionisation. The complexity of the issue of pay and conditions was captured by the policymaker and within the forum discussions. While there was a distinct consensus among participants that pay and conditions remained a significant challenge for the sector, how this issue could be resolved was much more problematic: 'We had to offer higher wages or staff went elsewhere….Even with the higher wage we are now offering keeping staff long term…is very difficult' (Forum).

The online forum generated a discussion on how to address pay and conditions through unionisation. Unions could force a Sectoral Employment Order (SEO), which could require settings to introduce a pay-scale in line with public sector workers. However, SIPTU, the main union, was struggling to gain sufficient membership to realise this objective. Participants articulated a gamut of perspectives on why they believed practitioners were reluctant to unionise. These included views that the sector was too fragmented, gendered, and lacking in self-worth.

While one participant questioned if low self-esteem was acting as a barrier to practitioners demanding better terms and conditions, others viewed the issue as a complex challenge that arose from the diversity of the sector, which included both employers and employees. For employers there was a nervousness regarding an SEO, the introduction of pay scales, and the potential impact this could have on their services' sustainability. Another participant thought

that practitioners were reluctant to unionise and push for an SEO with appropriate pay-scales out of loyalty to their employers. As settings were small, friendships and loyalties were real and personal. A selection of comments is below:

> Is self-esteem so low amongst practitioners that they feel this campaign is not worthwhile?

> If an SEO comes in and the funding model is not changed ECCE sessional services are done for.

> I think providers as employers don't think they can join and practitioners don't feel like they can join as they don't want to feel that they are against their employer.

Policymaker's perspective

Strategic goal 3.C.in the First 5 Strategy aimed to develop 'mechanisms to raise the professional status of the ELC workforce'. As a key element of this objective, it articulated the need to 'support employers to offer more favourable working conditions to attract and retain staff'. Within the initial actions, a proposal was put in place to develop a 'professional standards body to promote and regulate the ELC (and school-age childcare) profession'. It also proposed, alongside the Workforce Development Plan, to introduce 'a new funding model for the ELC', with inbuilt 'quality levers', in terms of extending higher capitation payments to incentivise employers 'to attract and retain staff, and in particular, graduates'. The actions also included undertaking 'a review of the types of favourable working conditions that could be supported so that employers can attract and retain staff', including the new funding model and looking at how 'optimal time for observations, reflection, planning, teamwork and cooperation with parents' could be explored (GOI, 2018, p.164). The policymaker articulated these views and particularly highlighted that pay and conditions and their impact on recruitment and retention of a graduate workforce was a concern for government, indicating it '…matters in terms of ensuring that we have staff with the qualifications that we are trying to encourage. We need them to be able after they have done their qualification to come and work and stay in the sector'.

Pay and conditions were viewed by the policymaker as an indicator of how society values the practitioner:

> The Minister has made very clear it is one of her main concerns. It matters in terms of the valuing the work that practitioners do. In terms of the current pay rates, they don't value the work and that's very important.

The policymaker viewed remuneration and retention in the sector as critical to children's wellbeing:

> Consistency of care is a crucial part of quality and if there is a constant turnover of staff in a setting that's going to have a very direct negative effect on the quality and experience and wellbeing of the children.

However, fundamentally, the policymaker articulated that the issue of pay and conditions was complex and somewhat out of the remit of government policy as 'the state is not the employer. So, it is a funder, but we don't pay the wages of staff and we cannot control the wages of staff directly'.

The policymaker articulated that government is:

> …doing what we can given the tools that we have…...so far there has been a very large increase of investment going into the sector. It has almost doubled in the last few years and that money is largely going to services directly to run their businesses.

'The Minister', the policymaker affirmed, 'has committed full cooperation with an SEO' and believes this could 'provide a viable way' of addressing the issue of pay and conditions. The policymaker resonated the commitment from the First 5 to develop 'a new funding level, where the state would reward services that offered higher levels or standards…All the details of that still need to be worked out, but new pay-scales would need to be developed'.

Theme 2.3.2 Stress and overwhelming expectations

Many participants expressed stress about keeping pace with the constant change and expectations arising from rapid policy development. In particular, many articulated feeling overwhelmed by the excess of paperwork required in order to remain compliant with an ever-changing policy landscape. They shared how time spent on paperwork was directly taking away from time spent with the children. Others expressed the challenges of working with the inspectorates, the lack of consultation with the sector regarding the reality of implementing various policy initiatives, and the continual perceived expectation to participate in CPD. Participants not only expressed their sense of being overwhelmed with these pressures, but they further articulated that this constant pressure was driving many away from the sector to other positions which were better paid, respected, and with less responsibility. A sense of frustration and disillusionment was echoed by many participants, 'the workforce is at

breaking point', 'Did I make a mistake spending the last three years to upskill, just so I can be stuck doing paperwork?', 'Two staff members who worked with us for over ten years have left the sector due to increased pressures'. A participant in the forum encapsulated shared view that:

> Many in the sector are overwhelmed with the plethora of policy & practice guides and the lack of related training offered as well as poor pay and conditions. I am completing a MEd in ECE and cannot at this point see myself remaining in a preschool setting.

The issue of the administrative burden that has risen as a consequence of policy did not arise in the policymaker's interview.

Theme 2.4: Funding and sustainability

Linked to this disillusionment with overwhelming expectations, participants strongly voiced their opinion that funding for the sector was inadequate, with many articulating the challenges of sustainability against this backdrop. 111 references called on the government to increase funding, to support sustainability and recruit and retain qualified staff. Reflective of the responses, participants shared the view that 'quality is linked to sustained financial investment'. In participants' perceived absence of funding, some shared:

> We are just about keeping our business afloat with revenue, corporation tax, rates of over €16,000. We cannot afford to pay what our staff deserve and it breaks your spirit and your love of the childcare sector.

> More funding is needed for ECCE settings as it is very hard to pay staff and be paid, while delivering professional education and care to children.

> The funding model needs to change to ensure businesses are viable.

Other participants, however, acknowledged that the increased level of funding provided by government had been critical to their educational development, viability, and had made preschool accessible to all children. Aligned to the policymaker's perspective that higher capitation incentivised higher qualifications, one survey participants indicated, 'the introduction of the higher capitation for Level 7/higher has inspired me to continue my study and achieve a Level 8'.

Another survey participant attributed increased funding to supporting the success of her business: 'Since the introduction of the ECCE scheme, business has grown and developed'. Another participant noted that 'the introduction of the second free year…..offers families childcare, where in other circumstances they might not be able to afford it'.

Policymaker's perspective

The policymaker agreed that more could be done, yet equally echoed that investment had been significant, with 'the level of funding has going up and up and up'. Further plans were in place to develop a new funding mechanism linked to quality development in the First 5 Strategy.

Theme 2.5: Consultation processes – whose voice matters?

'Nobody consulted us', was strongly echoed in responses from the participants in both the survey and forum, where they expressed feeling disenfranchised from policy development:

> Our voices are rarely listened to. To be listened to, one must be included in the conversation and allowed to talk. Why is it that...practitioners...are not consulted about what we feel is best practice, and what we feel works for us in an Irish setting? (Forum).

> How are we supposed to develop our professional status in the eyes of families, when we have no input on everyday policies that affect our work with children and families (Forum)?

> Those working in childcare are not being given the chance to have their voices heard; the people making the rules have no realistic sense of what working in a childcare setting is like (Survey).

The policymaker, in contrast, believed the government had developed strong mechanisms to facilitate consultation with the sector and welcomed practitioners' voices at all levels of the decision-making process, either through surveys, forums or within the inspection process:

> Consultation with/and involvement of practitioners happens in direct and indirect ways. Indirect ways include a range of forums ……...through which representative bodies are in dialogue with the department and consulted on a regular basis, across a whole range of policy developments. An example would be the Minister's Early Years Forum, which includes a professionalisation sub-group and a wide range of stakeholder bodies representing the sector.

In terms of direct consultation, the policymaker indicated 'major new policy initiatives have involved major consultation exercises'. The policies referred to included Future Investment in

Childcare Report, 2015, First 5 Strategy, SAC regulations, with upcoming consultations on Childminding Action Plan and the Workforce Development Plan (WDP). The consultation mechanisms included 'surveys', 'seeking submissions' and 'focus groups'. The policymaker indicated that the WDP will involve 'a very extensive consultation plan', where the workforce will be consulted, but the details were not available at the time of the interview.

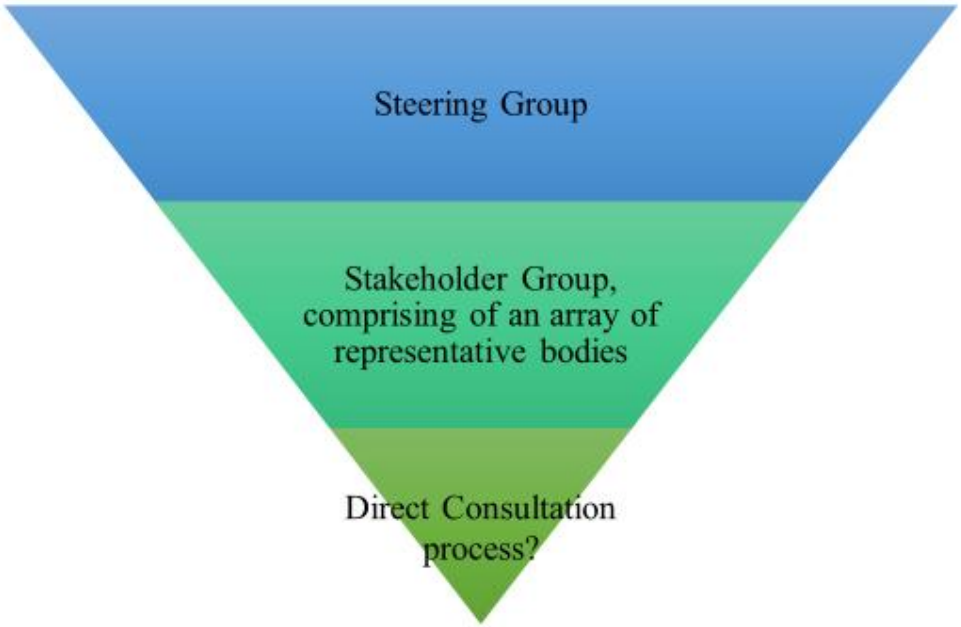


Figure 22: Proposed consultation for the WDF (DCYA, 2019e)

The importance of consultation was discussed under the theme 'respected as professionals,' but also directly relates to policy development. Further discussion on micro-consultation processes relating to regulations are discussed in the next section.

5.3.5 Theme 3: Policy development

Policy and its impact on the development of quality

Policy in general and specific policies such as AIM, the ECCE scheme, and the Aistear and Síolta frameworks, were generally viewed as contributing to quality in ELC settings. As the impact of policy on the development of quality practices was at the core of this research, it is not surprising that it was the most frequently cited element in developing quality in the ELC sector with 392 references, reflecting both positive and negative impacts of policy development. Consequently, policy development is presented as a theme in its own right.

Policy, emerging as a consequence of the Quality Agenda, evoked often dramatically contrasting perspectives from participants, with the majority welcoming policy as beneficial to raising quality standards. Some articulated mixed views and some expressed experiences that were fundamentally negative towards policy. This section presents findings on the positive and negative impacts of policies both directly and indirectly related to the Quality Agenda. It will also present policies that practitioners feel could contribute to the development of sustained quality improvement.

Quantitative data

The quantitative information presented earlier highlighted overwhelming support for the Quality Agenda, with over 70% of participants in the online survey affirming that it had been successful in raising quality in ELC settings. However, over 20% were significantly less positive, believing the QA had been detrimental to the development of quality.

Positive and negative outcomes of policy

In terms of positivity, the Quality Agenda was credited with raising awareness and enhancing knowledge relating to quality, thereby providing a standard for practitioners to work towards. One survey participant said 'the quality agenda has deeply influenced knowledge' and another 'all policies are good and help us to keep our standard. Policies also ensure we are all singing from the same hymn sheet in our service'.

Negative perspectives on contemporary policy cited personal experiences, for example the earlier one of the participant who attributed policy to the closure of their setting. Others shared struggles of keeping pace with the rapidity of change; the burden of expectations combined with inadequate funding. There were calls on the government to stop 'tinkering with the system' and allocate funding directly to practitioners, 'EYP's are feeling weighed down by policy…no other sector voluntarily engages in so much CPD linked to policies, mainly at their own expense' (Survey). 'I think as a sector we are overburdened with policy. It's time now for the government to really support EY by increasing capitation' (Survey). A further survey response articulated that 'at the moment there has been such rapid changes to policy with little consultation. This is adding to the stresses of the job, raising the cost and doing little in the way of assisting services to continue to provide quality services'.

Other respondents welcomed policy development, albeit with reservations: 'Every policy has a positive impact, especially inclusion, AIM, CPD etc... However, services can only remain compliant by spending copious hours of their own time with training, assessments, observations etc...' (Survey); 'Overall Ireland is moving forward….. However, more funding is needed….it is very hard to pay staff and be paid while delivering professional education and care to children' (Survey).

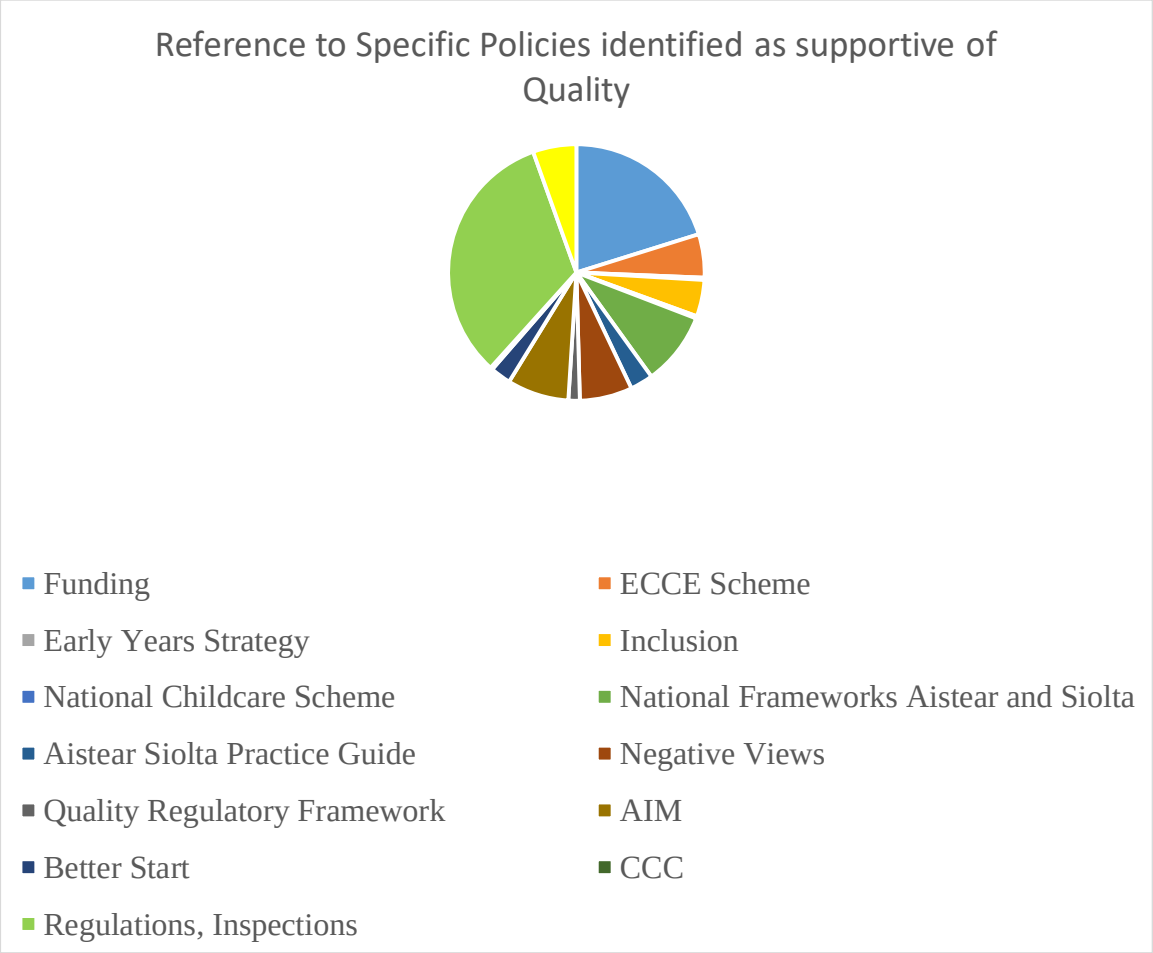


Figure 23: References to Specific policies within the qualitative data identified through NVivo

Within the qualitative data, regulation, inspection and compliance generated the most discussion, followed by the National Quality Frameworks and Better Start.

Theme 3.1: Regulation/compliance/inspectorate regime

There were 162 references to regulation, compliance and the early years inspectorates, with contrasting perspectives on how the regulatory system was contributing to the development of quality (Concept Map 7).

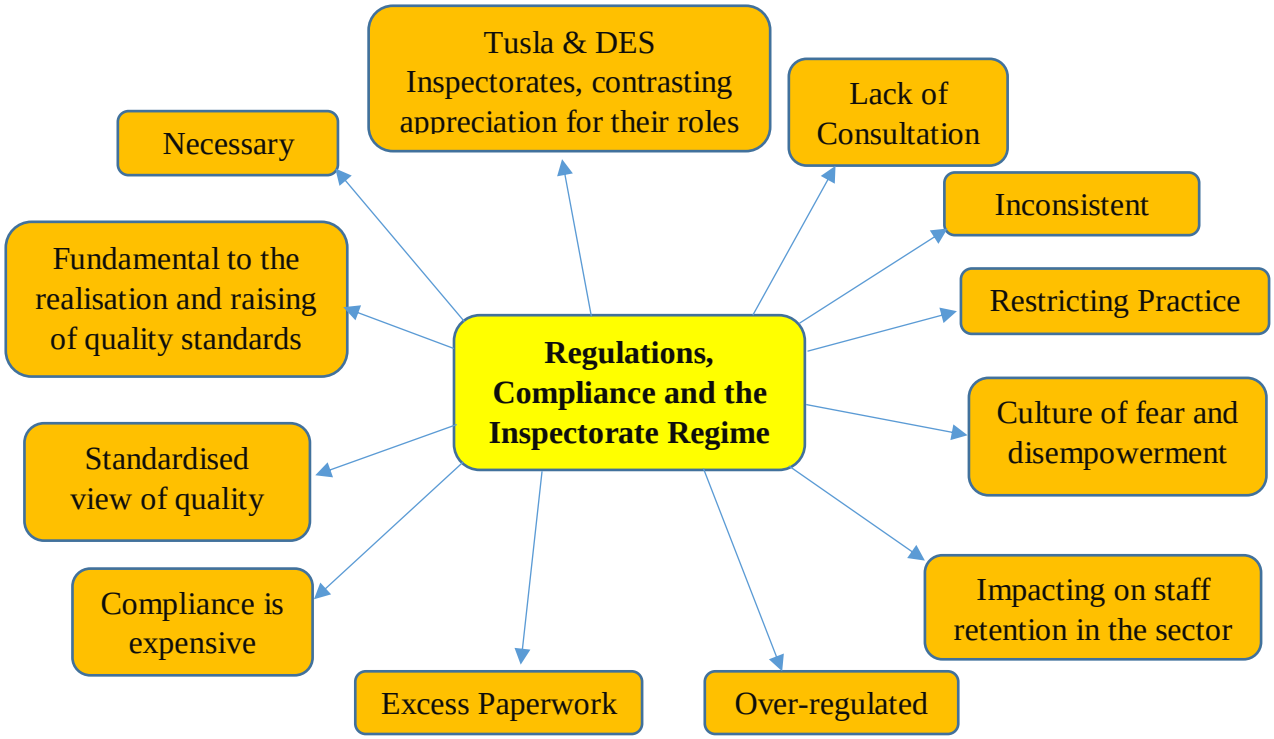


Figure 24: Concept Map 7: Theme 3.1 Contrasting perspectives on the regulatory system

Many perceived the regulatory system as fundamental to safeguarding, maintaining and raising quality standards:

> Tusla and DES inspections have definitely made services more aware of what the ideal preschool experience should be. They focus on child interactions, which is of great importance and highlights the benefits of using the Aistear Síolta Practice Guide (Survey)

Ambivalence frequently prevailed, where participants on one hand welcomed regulations as necessary, but also criticising them for their narrow vision of quality: 'Even though all the regulations and inspections are a positive, it sometimes feels as though they were created based on one standard preschool model (Forum). Extending this perception, participants forwarded this view of quality had reduced the inspection process to a tick box exercise, where 'inspections are so focused on making us fit the check box, that everything outside their check box is ignored'(standardising) (Forum). Similarly, equivocal views were expressed with the array of agencies that ELC services have to be answerable:

> While at times I believe we are becoming over-regulated i.e. Pobal, DES, Tusla, NERA etc. I think it could/should all come under one umbrella. I also believe change and advancement is good. All the recent changes have helped to keep us on our toes in terms of knowledge and child development (Survey).

Participants enunciated a sense of being overwhelmed by the increasing paperwork and costs arising from striving to be compliant:

> Unfortunately, being compliant has become the number one priority and they keep adding to the paperwork. If it's not documented it didn't happen! (Lack of trust) Between risk assessment sheets, roll call, cleaning sheets, documenting emergent interests and how I plan to enhance them, transition reports, curriculum planning, medical administration, accidents and incidents and documenting all the interesting things the children have said or done today, I don't really feel as though there is much time left for me to focus on enhancing quality, let alone spend time just enjoying playing with the children (Forum).

The paper trail and restrictions placed on practitioners by inspections was cited as restricting time spent with the children and limiting opportunities and experiences for them:

> I understand the need for policies…, but when it's overdone it is impacting the possibilities of what we can do with children…the children showed an interest in playing coffee shops, so we decided to take a visit to a local coffee shop. It took me three weeks to get the paper work in order, two trips in my own time to the coffee shop…I went from feeling wouldn't this be great, to feeling anxious about everything that could go wrong (Forum).

Another participant shared:

> I haven't had the heart to take mine out for years... In the past we used to go to the playground, the library or to our local hotel to see the vanishing art exhibitions they hosted. It was so enriching… the people we would meet as we meandered through the town. The restrictions of ratios and insurance has caused a stagnation (Forum).

Participants also expressed frustration at the costs incurred by inspectors' requests, which led to unnecessary expense and reduced, rather than extended quality development:

> Our setting was in the process of redeveloping a natural outdoor space for the children, but the project had to be put on hold for two years, following a Tusla inspection (Forum).

Compliance with Tusla changes cost €17,000 and were viewed as unnecessary by the participant.

In this conversation, another participant shared:

> This demand/regulation caused us to move our early intervention room to another part of the school, which was very expensive, as we had to install new toilets, changing spaces, shelves, wall units, partition, sleeping and rest areas. Costing us €10,000 (Forum)

Compliance with rules, although illogical in the view of the practitioner, was ultimately subjugating their own common sense and values in the face of the power of the inspectorate.

Fear and a sense of being disempowered in the face of inspections was stated to have impacted on staff retention, with practitioners feeling forced out of the sector due to the increased pressures compliance/inspectorates placed on them:

> Inspections need to be in partnership, one inspector was very rude to our staff and we found the process extremely difficult. Two staff members who worked with us over 10 years have left the sector this year due to increased pressures (Forum).

Frustrations were expressed with the inconsistency between inspectorates, inspectors and variations in how the regulations are interpreted: 'I think our inspectors do a good job of making sure we are adhering to quality, if only they would sing from the same hymn sheet everywhere they go...' (Forum)

Practitioners strongly articulated that they felt their views were listened to, but not processed or taken seriously. While they appreciated the opportunity to respond to inspection reports, they felt that it was only the actual inspection report, which is noticed by the public, not their response:

> The inspector was nice and even though she gave me the impression that she respected me as a professional, she didn't really want to hear my opinion. It was as if she was saying 'yes I hear what you say, but my idea is better'…it's great there's a section in the report in which we had the opportunity to show that we have implemented suggestions, but I wonder is it not just tokenistic. At the end of the day parents scroll down to see the overall ratings - poor, fair, good, very good or excellent. I wonder if anyone bothers or even knows to read what we thought at the end of the report. (Forum)

Tusla and DES inspections received contrasting appraisals. The DES's EYEI were generally welcomed, with the overarching view held that EYEI contributed positively to quality development. In contrast, Tusla inspections were referred to in terms of fear and frustration, with some articulating that significant improvement of Tusla was required.

Policymaker's perspective

The Quality Regulatory Framework (QRF) provided an infographic view of the central position that the Tusla inspectorate played in terms of quality development, which as Figure 25 shows, was the overarching agency overseeing quality in ELC services, ensuring appropriate learning opportunities are provided for the child and family. The diagram shows that the second inspectorate, the EYEI, was positioned more peripherally alongside Better Start, Education and Training organisations, Regulatory Support Forum and the Consultative Forum.

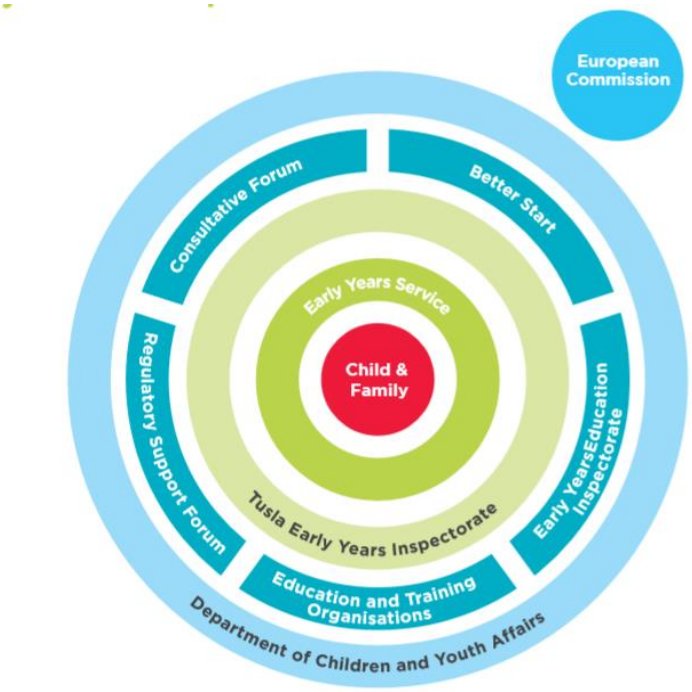


Figure 25: Overview of Tusla Early Years Inspectorate's key relationships (Tusla, 2018, p.xx).

The policymaker, in contrast to practitioners, did not view the same level of challenges with the current inspectorate arrangements. From the policymaker's perspective, a robust regulatory system was critical to quality development. Furthermore, the recent launch of the Quality Regulatory Framework (QRF) was viewed as a mechanism to bring clarity and consistency to the inspectorate process. The policymaker perceived the inspectorates as the most far-reaching quality initiative at the Government's disposal. Other quality support initiatives did not necessarily reach all settings, whereas the inspectorate regime, which does, was perceived as the most powerful lever in quality development:

> Our Quality Agenda has to include both robust regulations to ensure minimum standards are met and positive supports to help practitioners in settings improve quality… regulation is absolutely necessary to protect children's health, safety and wellbeing.

Unlike the participants in the survey and forum, the policymaker did not perceive that having two inspectorates created any challenges in terms of consistency or expectations. On the contrary, two inspectorates were seen as complementary in supporting quality standards:

> I think the two inspectorates collaborate well. I don't think the messages are inconsistent, the frameworks they are working from have slightly different purposes. Tusla framework is fundamentally about ensuring compliance with the regulations; DES framework is education-focused work. I think they complement each other; they weren't intended to be identical.

Practitioners often expressed feeling powerless in the face of inspections. When the policymaker was asked whose voice and opinion mattered in the inspectorate process, there was no ambiguity that it lay with the inspector:

> Tusla regulations are clearly requirements and have the status of the law. They do not claim to say everything about what quality is, so it is certainly not the case that quality is being reduced to a set of fixed standards. The QRF aims to provide clarity and consistency, so when Tusla go out to inspect on the regulations everyone understands what they are looking for…The voice of the practitioner is absolutely taken into account. Well, of course the inspector is the inspector, but they all involve dialogue, they all involve opportunities for feedback, for the setting to come back to the inspector on the draft report.

Theme 3.2: Leadership

The references to leadership which arose in the survey indicated a clear recognition of the critical role leadership played in the development of quality and were categorised into 6 sections (Concept Map 8).

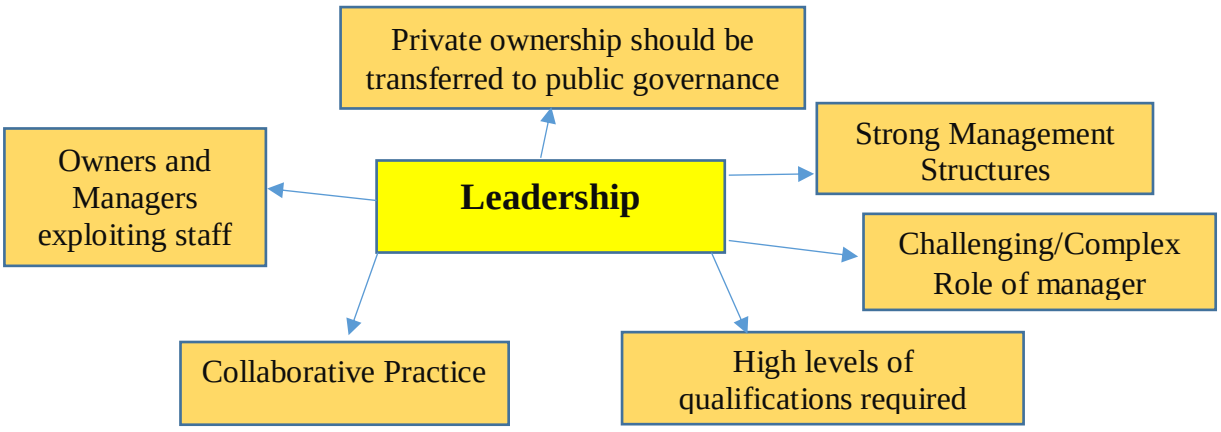


Figure 26: Concept Map 8: Theme 3.2 - Leadership

Some of the 25 references to leadership within the survey indicated that much work needs to be done to raise the standard of management nationally, such as 'inadequately trained managers/owners exploiting over qualified staff has been my experience' (Survey) and 'Most settings are businesses led by business headed shrewd entrepreneurs whose main focus is profit. All policies are required…but staff don't have proper meetings to discuss how these will affect us on a day to day basis' (Survey).

Participants also viewed the role of managers as extremely complex and difficult in the face of ever-evolving policy. However, it was perceived that without strong leadership government policy was unlikely to be realised:

> The role of a manager is incredibly difficult with so many different bodies and inspections. There are huge administrative burdens placed on services and not enough support (Survey).

> The ECCE scheme is the best policy we have, but in order for it to be truly effective we need leadership (Survey).

Private/public ownership

A small number of participants in the survey called for the ELC sector to be moved from private to public ownership. This concept arose again in the forum regarding debates arising in the media and from government that quality is being corroded by private owners focusing on the business elements of their setting. One participant highlighted this:

> The realities are that it is a business, it's a business in regard to adherence to regulation, it's a business in regards to health and safety at work, it's a business in regard to employment law, it's a business in regard to tax law. It's a business in regards to profit and loss and how that in turn allows you to reinvest in the business (be that training, new equipment, expansion, wage increases...etc). I could go on and on. We run a business full stop. Quality, dedication, passion, innovation, commitment and vocation can be seen in all good businesses by all good management and employees. Our business is early Childhood Education and Care. Our ethos is QUALITY early childhood education and care.

Counteracting the business model, another participant proposed public ownership as a solution:

> …the Big Start campaign and the call on the government to provide funding to improve work conditions etc. - the problem would be solved if the government became our direct employers which would be very positive for employees in the sector, however not for employers. If the government took over the EY sector and provided quality professions this would certainly impact quality service in a very positive way.

Policymaker's perspective on the role of leadership

The policymaker indicated that leadership was an area where 'more could be done'. The government acknowledged that quality and professionalisation across the sector varied, with management playing a key role in supporting practitioners along the 'path of professionalisation'. The policymaker identified AIM's Leadership in Inclusion Course (LiNC), as an initial policy targeted at enhancing leadership. Better Start was also identified as a lever for the promotion of leadership at ground level:

> We have identified (leadership) as a clear area where more could be done. We have started some of this certainly in AIM, the LiNC Leadership for inclusion programme…it is not fully evaluated, but the anecdotal evidence that we are seeing is that it is having a positive effect in not only upskilling the individuals who take part, but through them and the leadership roles they play they can bring wider roles in cascading effect, in training and learning throughout the settings. Better Start is also part of that leadership. We are still working out the best way but there is more we can do, it's a question we're still working out.

National Frameworks

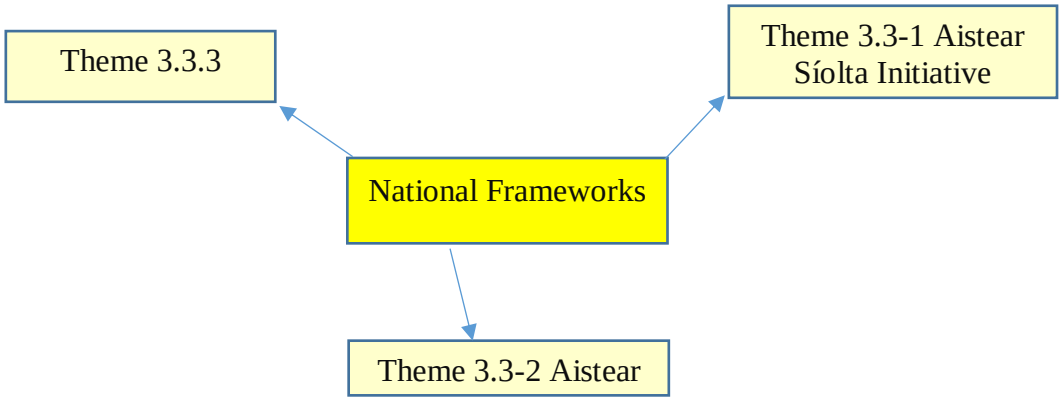


Figure 27: Theme 3.3: Concept Map 9: Theme 3.3 National Quality Frameworks (Aistear and Síolta)

There were 66 references to the Aistear and Síolta Frameworks. As mentioned within the quantitative findings, 111 out of 114 participants indicated that the Aistear/Síolta Practice Guide had contributed significantly or very significantly to quality improvement within the sector. 11 participants indicated it had no impact, while three said it had reduced quality, one

of which indicated ‘significantly reduced’. This represents overall positivity towards the national frameworks and practitioners’ belief in their ability to support quality development.

Theme 3.3.1: Aistear-Síolta initiative

As mentioned earlier, although the Aistear-Síolta initiative has been in existence since 2016, specific CPD training only commenced in 2019, which explains why there is no reference to this initiative within the survey. Aistear-Síolta training was referred to in the forum, where the participant found the practice guide and support from the Better Start Practice Guide beneficial:

> The Aistear and Síolta training, as well as the support received from Better Start mentoring programme has been hugely helpful in supporting practice. The Aistear self-evaluation tool kits are an invaluable resource for enhancing practice also (Forum).

The Aistear-Síolta Practice guide was generally viewed as a useful resource which ‘allows you to reflect and enhance your practice’; ‘it is very useful to support quality development’, and ‘a very positive step, but needs more promotion and training among practitioners’.

Others viewed Aistear and Síolta as affirming their current practice: ‘it acknowledges this for staff and parents’. The frameworks were viewed as fundamental to how settings ‘plan, assess and document learning’, resulting in both a ‘listening agenda’ and ‘emergent curriculum’, where children’s interests are informing ‘future planning and activities’.

Theme 3.3.2: Aistear

Positive views on Aistear included:

> Following Aistear in a child-led environment has had a huge positive impact on my practice, as the children get to explore what interests them and lead their own learning and development! (Survey)

> Aistear Framework has the most positive impact, ensuring a guidance for staff newly qualified to create a learning environment with plenty of opportunities (Survey).

> Aistear's themes and aims provide guidance and encourages reflective practice (Survey)

Theme 3.3.3: Síolta

Participants referred less frequently to Síolta. One articulated that engaging in Síolta was both challenging and costly:

> The Síolta guidelines are neglected by services. The focus tends to be on Aistear. The fact that the Aistear Síolta Practice Guide is online seems to be a contributing factor in the lack of engagement with Síolta. It's time consuming to navigate. Also, there is a lack of leadership within settings to engage with these documents. Engaging with the quality assurance scheme is voluntary and costly in terms of money and time.

Theme 3.4: Support systems

The national support systems were underpinned by the National Frameworks and the Early Years regulations. Participants were generally positive towards the support systems, with Better Start being frequently cited as impacting positively on the development of quality. Within the categorising of the data, the support systems refer to Better Start Quality, Better Start AIM and the County Childcare Committees (CCC's).

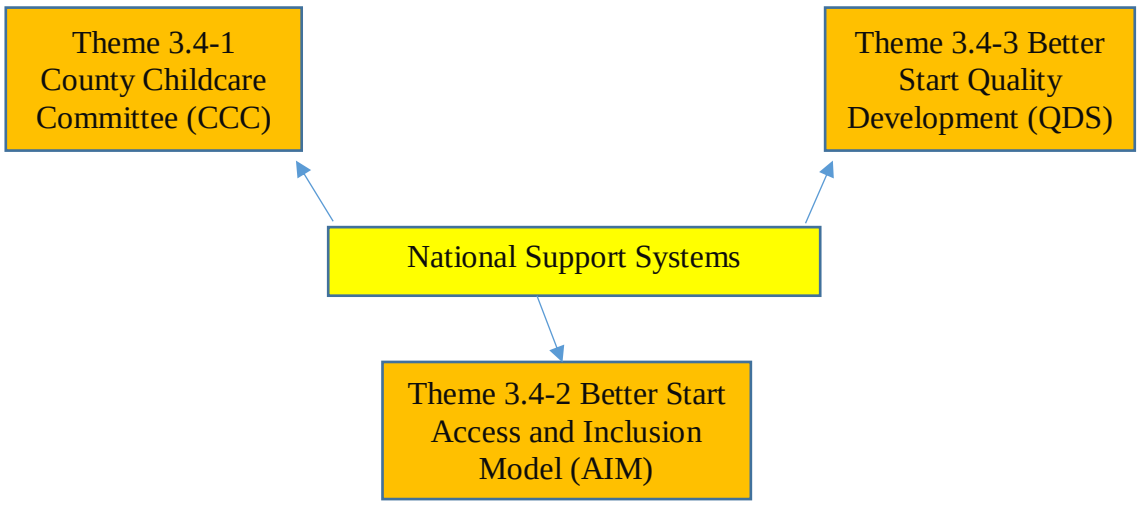


Figure 28: Concept Map 10: Theme 3.4 National Support Systems

Theme 3.4.1: County Childcare Committees

The CCCs were formed in 2001, significantly prior to the launch of the QA in 2013, unlike Better Start which was developed in two strands, Quality Development Services (QDS) in 2014 and two years later, Better Start (AIM) in 2016. As the CCCs were not a direct outcome of the QA, it was not offered as a listed policy option in the online survey. Participants in the qualitative data highlighted the critical role the CCCs played in raising quality in ELC settings. The CCCs were also recognised for their role in providing training for practitioners:

> County Childcare Committees are very important in supporting quality (Survey).

> Access to…. training for educators…. enhances quality'. Training is improving 'with various childcare committees**….** providing relevant courses (Survey).

Themes 3.4.2: Better Start - AIM and 3.4.3: Better Start - QDS

Better Start - QDS was set up in 2014 as one of the direct initiatives arising from the QA with the key objective of supporting services to raise quality standards in their settings. It was a collaborative initiative between the DCYA Early Policy Unit (EPU) of the DES hosted by Pobal to develop a mentoring service to support quality development within the context of the National Frameworks Aistear and Síolta. In 2016, Better Start - AIM was established to support the access and inclusion for children with disabilities to meaningfully participate in the ECCE scheme through a range of supports including, where necessary, capitation to employ an additional person in the room, mentoring service, and equipment. The final role that Better Start play in raising quality is through supporting 'coordination, cohesion and consistency' between state-funded quality supports working in alignment with statutory systems such as Tusla (Better Start, 2019).

Better Start QDS and AIM work directly with services. Participants sometimes specified Better Start, but did not always clarify which strand they were referring to when they used this phrase. Better Start and its meaning thus had to be interpreted by the context of the reference.

Theme 3.4.2: Better Start - AIM

Within the quantitative data, participants viewed AIM as the policy that has most benefited quality improvements in their setting. In the qualitative data, participants remained very positive, but there were reservations regarding the efficiency of AIM:

> AIM has really helped my school; it has given us endless support and help this year with my class having three children with undiagnosed needs! The AIM Coordinator with our school was always available to help with those children (Survey).

> AIM/Better Start have been invaluable in ensuring participation of all children. Better Start Staff are highly supportive and give practical advice on inclusion (Survey).

> AIM as has positively impacted on children in my care, swiftly providing funding for additional staffing (Survey).

> The introduction of AIM has helped to improve the quality for all children. As having an AIM person allows us to also spend time with the children who do not need extra attention (Survey).

Other participants expressed frustrations with the limited contact they received from the AIM specialist and how sometimes recommendations were of a generic nature, rather than specific to the realities of the setting. Other criticisms included calls for further training and that 15 hours were not sufficient for children who remained in the setting after the ECCE provision ended. There was also a suggestion that AIM specialists could play a greater role with parents.

AIM - a positive development, but…

> It is a very good support for the children, but there is very little follow up due to the numbers of children looking for assessments (Forum).

> One of our recommendations was to let the children out first thing ….to run, to release their energy, but we are in a church car park…I really feel their recommendations need to be specific to the early years setting (Forum).

> I think AIM is a great addition. For a child to be allocated a Level 7 without a diagnosis is fantastic. It opens up lines of communication between parents and practitioners, where before it may have been difficult to approach issues around the child's development. However, sometimes extra staff in the room does not solve the issues. Training and supports are still needed. Full time services struggle outside of ECCE hours, as AIM is only for 15 hours max and no supports are available for early morning or evenings when the child attends (Forum).

> I see AIM as positive and beneficial; however, we are finding there are long waiting periods for the representative to come to meet/observe the child (Forum)

Theme 3.4.3 Better Start – QDS

While Better Start QDS was launched in 2014, their work is not as widely disseminated as Better Start AIM. This is because QDS's work tends to be with larger services, whereas AIM is linked to the child and therefore the AIM EYS visits more services. This was reflected within the quantitative data, where the largest number of participants indicating 'no opinion' in relation to Better Start QDS out of all policies. 73 participants indicated that Better Start QDS had improved quality; 18 indicated no opinion; a further 18 indicated QDS had no impact on quality, and 4 stated it had reduced quality. As mentioned earlier, many participants, when asked which policy had impacted most positively on practice, indicated Better Start, but whether the participants' meant AIM, QDS or both was not clear. Below are two of the comments that clearly indicated positive views on how QDS has contributed to the development of quality in their services. There were no negative comments in relation to QDS.

> The mentor provided by Better Start made a significant difference in how we approach our planning, implementing and evaluation of practice (Survey).

> I have had mentoring from Better Start. The mentor arrived periodically to discuss/give advice on observations/use of resources/learner records/emergent curriculum/Aistear evaluation tools. I found the visits very helpful. We are shortly going to commence visits from a Speech Therapist every two weeks to assist us with a child who is on the autism spectrum - such hands-on training/guidance is invaluable in my opinion (Forum).

Theme 3.5: Accessibility and Affordability

As mentioned earlier, at the launch of the First 5 Strategy, Minister Zappone announced the formation of an Expert group to develop a new funding model for ELC, based on the ongoing and internationally recognised principles of affordability, accessibility and quality development. In her speech announcing the working group, she indicated that while investment in the sector had grown by 117%, the government was committed to increasing funding 'towards average OECD levels of investment'. The dominance of these discourses was enshrined in terms of education generally in September 2000 by the United Nations, through the Millennium Development Goals, which committed to achieving universal primary education for all (UN, 2000). Building on this, the Sustainable Development Goals not only set the objective of ensuring that all children have 'free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education', but Goal 4.2 set the objective that by 2030, all children

would have ‘access to quality early childhood development and care’ and education (UN, 2015). Education for All (2015), in joint collaboration by the World Bank and UNESCO, had the objective that all children would have access to education by 2015 (UNESCO, 2015a; World Bank, 2014).

The most significant policy in terms of providing universal access to preschool education was introduced in the 2009 emergency budget, following the financial crisis which hit the country in 2008. This scheme began in advance of the QA, but was a fundamental lever facilitating the government to attach contractual quality commitments including the implementation of the national frameworks and minimum qualification levels. Many of the initiatives developed during the QA focused specifically on the ECCE scheme, with eligibility for the scheme extended as part of QA. The National Childcare Scheme (NCS) was launched in November 2019 with its core objective being to make childcare more affordable for parents.

Theme 3.5.1: ECCE scheme

Participants’ responses to the ECCE scheme were ambivalent. Some viewed the scheme as the most fundamental policy in the development of quality, whereas for others it had been detrimental to quality development, as funding was viewed to be inadequate: ‘The ECCE scheme is the best policy we have, but in order for it to be truly effective we need leadership, training and proper remuneration for our time and efforts’ (Survey); ‘The funding from the ECCE scheme was so poor that it didn't cover the cost of delivering any sort of a quality service’ (Survey). Other participants indicated that the scheme had been central to the sustainability of their service: ‘The funding aspect kept my doors from closing’ (Survey). In contrast, a participant referred to earlier in this project, directly attributed the ECCE scheme for the closure of her service.

Other benefits arising from the ECCE scheme from the practitioners’ perspectives included providing access and affordability for parents that otherwise would not have been in a position to utilise preschool:

> The ECCE scheme has brought a lot of new families to my service, ones which may not have come otherwise. This brings new energy and dynamics to my practice which I welcome (Survey).
>
> Free Preschool Programme, it significantly improved the lives and development of young children, those most at risk of poor outcomes (Survey).

It was also viewed as the incentive, which encouraged practitioners to upskill in a sector that was previously stagnant in terms or raising qualifications:

> The scheme has encouraged staff to take part in training, which they wouldn't have done otherwise. Either through lack of confidence, or complacency, many of our staff were reluctant to train initially, however they have definitely benefitted from it (Survey).

The final criticism of the ECCE scheme lay in the fact that this is where all the focus in terms of quality was aimed, leaving the quality of time outside of these three hours disregarded: 'Well, the only thing that seems to matter at this point is the 3-hour ECCE session' (Forum).

5.4 Conclusions

The findings presented in this chapter highlight that participants of this research fundamentally welcomed the Government's Quality Agenda and perceive that the policy initiatives that have emerged as part of this agenda have been significant in raising quality within ELC settings. The most welcome policy initiatives included AIM, CPD, and the higher capitation for employing graduates as room leaders in ECCE rooms. While the education-focused inspections were generally welcomed, Tusla inspections received mixed reactions, with participants viewing them as necessary but restrictive, reducing practitioners' capacity to draw on their own experience, values, and unique context, which would enable them, develop quality meaningful to their individual settings. The national frameworks, Aistear and Síolta, and the support systems of Better Start and the CCC's were all viewed as positive contributions to quality development. The key barrier identified in terms of quality development lay with participants' articulated belief that they were not respected as professionals, reflected through a lack of consultation and limited funding, which result in poor pay and conditions and limit practitioners' incentive to pursue graduate status or remain in the sector. Participants in the survey and forum and the policymaker viewed qualifications, CPD and leadership as critical areas of focus for quality development. In contrast to the participants in the online research, the policymaker articulated that funding for the sector was significant, consultation was progressive, and the inspectorates played a crucial and mutually complementary role in ensuring quality within ELC settings. Both the policymaker and online participants concurred that the issues of pay, conditions, recruitment and retention were problematic, but the government believed the sector, as the direct employer, should resolve these issues. A Sectoral Employment Order was proposed in the survey, forum and by the policymaker as a possible solution. The policymaker also indicated that the recently announced development of a new funding mechanism may also resolve this critical issue. The next chapter will discuss the implications of these findings.

Chapter 6 - Analysis and Discussion

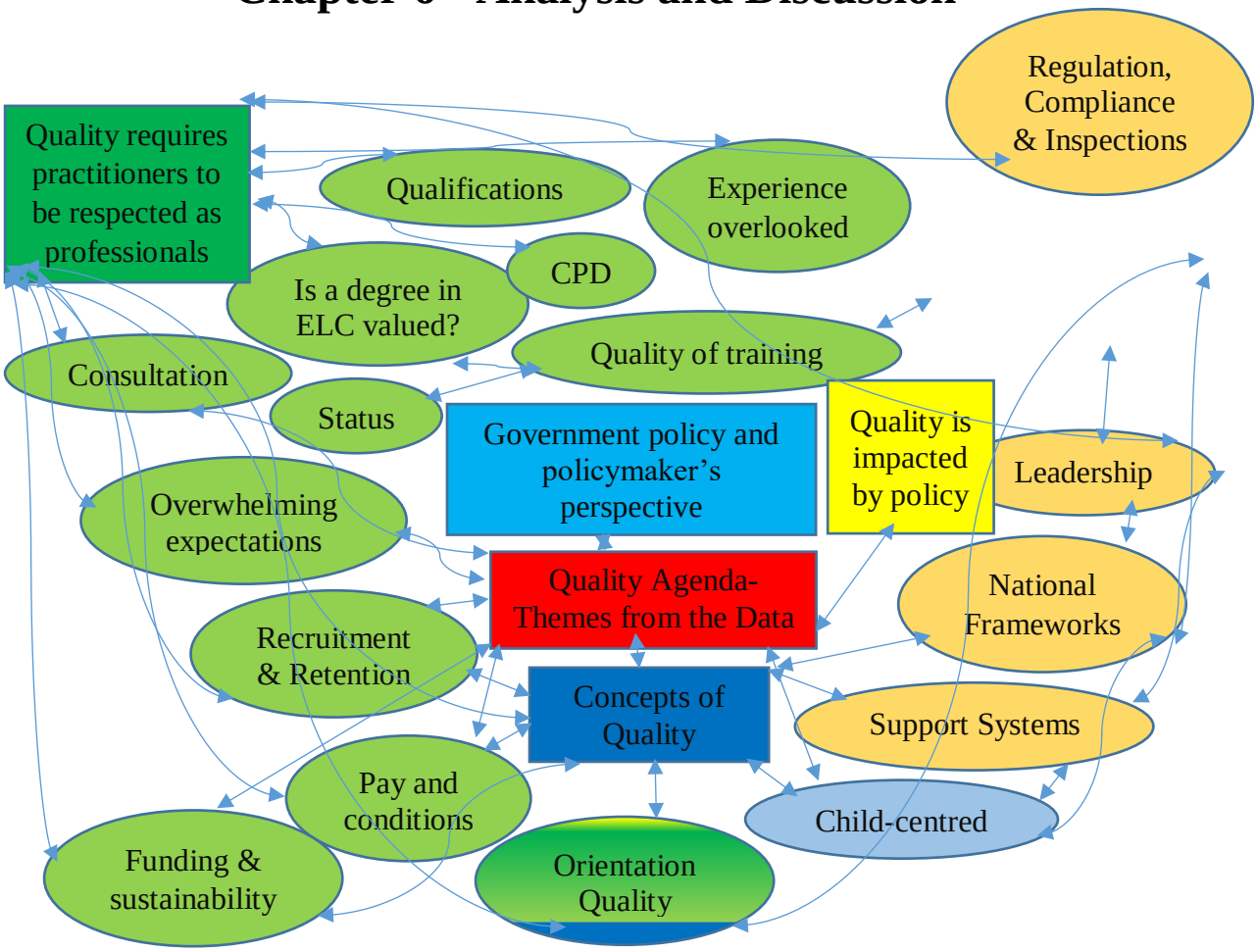


Figure 29: Analysis & Discussion. Question Focus – How policy has been impacting quality from a practitioner's perspective since the announcement of the Quality Agenda in 2013.

6.1 A complex space - layers of complexity.

Complexity theory, as Levy (2000) suggests, is useful for the study of dynamic, highly complex and unpredictable systems, while supporting the organisation of this complexity into ordered and meaningful information. ELC in Ireland, as Walsh (2016a) proposes, presents an increasingly complex policy landscape under the influence of a dynamic interplay between national and international government departments, agencies, and NGOs. Irish ELC policy has developed rapidly and has transformed the early years landscape in the last 20 years, with particular acceleration since the announcement of the Quality Agenda (QA) in 2013 (Urban et al., 2017). How practitioners respond to rapid policy development varies considerably, as Ball (2003, p.215) argues, some view it as 'an opportunity to make a success of themselves, for others it portends inner conflicts, inauthenticity and resistance'. This was strongly reflected in the findings of this research, where practitioners for the most part welcomed the

QA. Yet, many participants demonstrated inner conflict and tensions, as while they welcomed policy, they had reservations about the unintended consequences of policy, which they believed impacted negatively on quality development in practice. Others articulated that in their experience, policy reform in ELC was the antithesis to quality development. Moreover, it had been directly detrimental to their capacity to provide the quality they desired and had forced closures of ELC settings.

In times of 'intense policy attention', Cumming et al. (2015b, p.80) argue that it is important to open 'conceptualisations of early childhood practice' exploring how complexity supports understanding and opens possibilities. The objective of this research was primarily to capture how successful policy emerging from the QA has been in raising quality standards, primarily from the practitioners' perspectives. However, it also contextually explores this in terms of the Irish government's intentions behind policy and awareness of the impact of rapid policy development on practitioners' capacity to progress quality in their settings. Within the complex systems of Irish ELC policy development, which is shaped under the influence of supranational powers and national agents, it is not surprising that the findings of this research are complex and multi-layered. The practitioners' and policymaker's perspectives show some commonalities, but also with significant diversity of opinion. Thematic analysis, combined with concept maps and NVivo, was used to bring meaning to the complex array of findings presented above in Figure 29. The aspiration is that the findings will be useful in terms of reflecting on contemporary policy and in considering the direction of future ELC policy in Ireland.

6.2 Theme 1 – Concepts of quality

The concept of travelling discourses in relation to quality development in ECE has been repeatedly traced by academics, noting the influence of international organisations such as the OECD on national policy (Otterstad & Braathe, 2016; Calder, 2015; Ball, 2003). As Ball (2003) notes, globalisation is having an epidemic effect on educational reform within ECEC and the accompanying discourses. However, it is important to understand how travelling policy discourses impact in particular ways in individual countries or regions. In Ireland and internationally, affordability and accessibility, together with quality, have become the keystones dominating ELC, as reflected in the Education for All (2015) and the First Five Strategy in Ireland (2018) (GOI, 2018c; UN, 2015). In terms of practitioners' visions of quality, participants responded in personal ways about how policy had impacted on their practice, with their discussions being dominated by the role of the practitioner, which many

felt was displaced and undervalued partly as a consequence of policy reform. The concepts of affordability and access were generally viewed positively, but the point was not missed that affordability was at the expense of the practitioner. As one participant highlighted, affordability for parents was desired, but equally, appropriate remuneration for qualified adults was fundamental to quality: 'Realistic affordable childcare for parents, realistic employee supports, right wages and properly educated staff infrastructure'. This reflects the research of Cumming et al. (2015b, p.82) in the Australian ECE context, where 'complexity at work in educators' practice', positions ELC practitioners negotiating 'discourses and subjectivities informing their practice' influenced by policy and the sector in general.

6.2.1 Child-centred practice

Child-centred practice and related terms were highlighted by practitioners 141 times as concepts viewed as central to quality development. Discourses of child-centred practice infiltrate the policy text of Ireland's national frameworks and other internationally respected pedagogical approaches, such as the Reggio approach from Italy, and Te Whariki in New Zealand (Campbell-Barr, 2019). Therefore, it was not surprising to locate this concept within the lexicon of the participants in this research. There were 21 direct references to child-centred practice, which included 'following the child's lead', using an 'emergent curriculum' and developing a 'listening culture'. Participants also highlighted the importance of orientation quality, where they stated adults needed to have the right attitude, be 'interested in what they do', 'loving what you do', and value the child as a 'mighty learner'. Campbell-Barr (2019) argues that child-centred practice is not a simple construct, but that adults' interpretations and cultural influences impact its meaning. Similarly, Chung and Walsh (2000) note that over time, the concept of child-centred practice has evolved and within contemporary discourses, the real complexity of how children learn and develop have been concealed. This complexity and discomfort with the concept were apparent in participants' responses: 'Child led through Aistear, but I feel children haven't got enough structure'. Further unease was captured in the requests to have 'More guidance with delivery of a child-led' curriculum and 'more focus on how we as the first line people can be supported'. This traditional discourse of developing a 'curriculum in harmony with the child's real interests, needs, and learning patterns' (Kliebard, 1995, p.24) was well endorsed in the participants' visions of quality practice, aligned with the other contemporary policy directives, such as partnership with parents, outdoor play, inclusive practices, documenting the curriculum, and using Aistear and Síolta. However, as Kliebard (1995) and Cumming et al. (2015b) argue,

child-centred discourse can result in de-centring the early childhood educator. This sense of feeling decentred was repeatedly articulated by participants, particularly in the face of inspections. However, the findings argue that, while respecting that child-centred practice is a critical element of quality development, it must not be at the expense of recognising the expertise of the practitioner and the critical role they play in quality development and implementing child-centred practice.

6.3 Theme 2 – Respected as professionals – an overlooked element of quality?

Despite international and national recognition of the importance of the ELC sector in terms of children's future and the economy, the practitioner, in Ireland and internationally, is generally 'undervalued and under resourced' (Moloney et al. 2019, p.1). The profession is fundamentally struggling to be recognised and valued. This reality was not lost on the participants of this research, who clearly articulated a view that they felt undervalued, under-resourced, and controlled by government agencies, particularly the ELC inspectorates. This sense of being undervalued was further intensified by participants' view that while they recognised that qualifications and CPD were fundamental to quality development, these seemed to have limited impact in raising the profile of practitioners in terms of government policy and societal opinion. The literature review that formed the foundation of this research argues, however, that orientation quality, which takes into account the attitudes, values and experiences of practitioners, needs to be addressed and not overlooked within the policies of quality reform (Anders, 2015). As Moss (2012) argues, the value we place on our ELC practitioners is fundamental to how we value the children in their care.

6.3.1 Qualifications

International research has consistently proposed a link between qualifications and quality development in ELC settings (Campbell-Barr, 2019; Sylva et al., 2004). Participants in this research, as in earlier research by Duignan and Walsh (2004), overwhelmingly stated the view that high levels of qualifications were inextricably linked to providing quality practice. In total, there were 239 references linking quality to higher levels of qualifications, with most calling on the sector to be graduate led. Despite this overwhelming support for a graduate-led workforce, Ireland remains significantly behind its OECD neighbours in this regard. In Ireland, the minimum regulatory qualification for working in the ELC sector is QQI Level 5, which is the equivalent of a certificate. While the most frequently held qualification is QQI Level 6, with 41.8% of practitioners holding this qualification and 25% holding a Level 7 or

higher, it still falls considerably short amongst OECD nations. In 75% of OECD countries, the minimum level of qualification is a bachelor's degree (OECD, 2019; Pobal, 2019).

The concept of valuing higher levels of qualifications as noted above, was not a stand-alone issue for participants. On the contrary, participants strongly linked qualifications to a wide range of issues that participants believed were barriers to the development of a graduate workforce. These replicated the same issues highlighted in the literature review, which included pay and conditions, recruitment and retention, funding for the sector, inadequate consultation, and increasing stress with the expectations placed on the sector (ECI, 2019d; Moloney, 2015b). Participants in this research also articulated a sense of not being valued or having their degree valued and also expressed their frustration with the lack of consistency and quality they experienced from training providers, which they believed impacted on the status and quality of the degree.

Similar to this final finding, Campbell-Barr's (2019) research in Hungary noted that a dearth of focus was placed on the content and delivery of initial ELC training. Equally an analysis of training in Ireland, by Urban et al. (2017), reported significant discrepancies existed in the array of degree courses available nationally in terms of length and content. Some participants in this research were concerned about the quality of training, calling for consistency of training and for this sector to be regulated, with one participant proposing adopting Moloney and Mc Kenna's (2017) proposal to develop an Early Years Council. One participant shared her negative experiences of training, 'I have been to several training events/workshops and listened to several facilitators who were appalling in their knowledge of what constitutes best practice', while another participant also called for 'consistency within training courses from level 5 to 8', arguing 'the content and quality of each is variable in terms of content and length'. Further calls were made to regulate the training colleges. The policymaker responded by highlighting the steps taken by government with the recent publication of the Professional Award Criteria and Guidelines for Initial Professional Education (Level 7 and Level 8) Degree Programmes for the Early Learning and Care (ELC) Sector in Ireland (DES, 2019). As the Policymaker indicated these guidelines 'set out clear requirements in terms of credits that are required for a degree, in terms of practice placements and other aspects of the standards we look for in a degree'. While this move may go some way towards responding to practitioners' calls for consistency of content, it is less likely to significantly impact on the delivery of training, as no clear remit has been established in relation to the qualifications of the trainers. The guide states that trainers should be one level above students, be research

active, and take lead roles in supervising students. However, how realistic this is remains questionable, as few academics, particularly on part-time and blended programmes, have permanent contracts, frequently relying on other employment for self-sustainment. Unless the issue of precarious part-time and fixed term contracts at third level can be addressed, questions over the quality of staffing at third level institutions remain unresolved (Clarke et al., 2018; Cush, 2016).

6.3.2 Continuous Professional Development (CPD)

Aligned with European and national policy papers, CPD was viewed by practitioners as a fundamental element of professionalisation and quality development (DES, 2019; EC, 2013). As outlined in the Professional Award Criteria and Guidelines, achieving a degree is not considered to 'represent the end of the learning processes or indeed complete professional formation', instead, it was viewed as a foundation that 'will be built on by both formal and informal learning throughout the early childhood educator's career' (DES, 2019:11). The policymaker concurred, stating, 'If we're talking about what good quality practice looks like, taking part in an ongoing basis in CPD opportunities is part of that', sharing that CPD was identified by Government as a policy priority. CPD opportunities were also welcomed and valued by practitioners: 'CPD is very important for quality', 'the more knowledge and experience a practitioner has will have a direct influence on quality in an ELC setting'. However, in contrast to policy documents and the views of the policymaker, practitioners also articulated a sense of being overwhelmed by the relentless expectations to engage in CPD:

> I also agree CPD is a very important aspect for underpinning quality within the setting. However, does this ongoing CPD training outside working hours have an impact on the practitioner's quality of life? Which in turn could have effect on level of quality provided within the setting?

Aligned to this perspective, many practitioners shared their experiences of attending training after long days in settings, often at their own expense, consequently experiencing a deterioration in their own quality of life. While the policymaker announced government's intention to extend current CPD opportunities, including Hanen, Lámh, Aistear, and Play, they also stated that the intention was not to leave practitioners overwhelmed, but rather supported to undertake CPD. Consequently, the policymaker shared that, the government is exploring the range of delivery options and piloting paid CPD for practitioners. While CPD is

currently not a requirement, the policymaker indicated that it could be in the future; meanwhile, the Government is also looking at ways to incentivise attendance within the proposed new funding model. As the government reviews the future direction for CPD, it could be worth bearing in mind the point made by Scales et al. (2011, p.1) 'that teachers are best placed to make decisions regarding their own continuing professional development'. Teachers, they argue, know their own local context, the needs of their children, and the gaps in their own knowledge. Professionalism or professional development, they argue, cannot be a top-down imposed concept; instead, a sense of professionalism must come from the teachers themselves. This in turn motivates practitioners to pursue their own relevant professional development. Scales et al.'s (2011) research further argued for a move away from a didactic approach to CPD, which focuses on providing information and knowledge. They contend that this is limited in its impact, as knowledge evolves so rapidly and instead CPD should be viewed as a collaborative process where teachers become researchers, reflective practitioners, and work collaboratively to develop their own practice. Jensen and Iannone (2018, p.23) in a study across 10 European countries, found that 'innovation in CPD' was viewed internationally as a way of raising quality in ELC settings. Innovation in CPD moves away from a focus on knowledge and skills to developing 'processes such as critical thinking, reflectivity and co-creation within and across ECEC systems'. This approach to CPD, they argue, presents benefits at both macro and micro level, because it supports the ongoing professionalisation of practitioners, contextualises their CPD to their unique context, and contributes to research and development at both national and international levels. Viewing CPD and professionalism as two sides of one coin, both mutually compatible and complementary, would thus be worth considering in terms of reflection on the future delivery of CPD in the ELC sector.

6.3.3 Recruitment and retention of a graduate workforce

The rapid policy development that has characterised the Quality Agenda has generated 'higher professional expectations for staff' (DES, 2019, p.33). To meet these expectations, the Irish government has articulated a clear policy objective to develop a graduate-led workforce. While policy documents consistently acknowledge the critical role the adult plays in raising quality within the sector, the findings from this research indicate that participants generally perceive there is no concomitant emphasis on respecting and valuing the practitioner. Recruiting, retaining and supporting the development of a graduate-led workforce was considered by participants to be challenged by insufficient funding of the

sector, which in turn has given rise to poor pay and conditions, which is both reflective of and contributes to a societal lack of value in their role. This was further exacerbated by proliferating stress levels arising from ever-increasing expectations on practitioners:

> The well-being provisions for ourselves and our work force is at breaking point. This is due to out of hours work from observations, writing up learning stories, updating policies, training such as FAR, manual handling, Síolta, Healthy Ireland, etc., with not enough funding to support the reality of the non-contact hours we provide. The sector is demanding quality and professionalisation, which we respond to, however, sadly, we are not seen or paid as professionals.

The Irish Government, in setting out the criteria for Level 7 and Level 8 awards in the ELC sector, acknowledged the increasingly complex role practitioners undertake, navigating an exponentially 'more complex policy and practice landscape' (DES, 2019, p.1). Yet despite increasing qualifications and expectations, aligned to international trends, working in early childhood remains a low-paid sector with limited career progression (Urban et al., 2017). In 2012, the OECD noted that against a backdrop of policy expectations to expand the sector and raise qualifications, considerable challenges existed in terms of recruiting and retaining a high-quality workforce:

> Chronic shortages of ECEC staff are observed ...the main reasons for the shortages are often cited as: low wages, low social status, heavy workload and lack of career progression paths... (p.190)

Six years later, the participants in this research equally concurred there was little incentive to remain working in the ELC sector for the above reasons. Participants forwarded that those who upskilled generally were exiting the sector in search of better opportunities elsewhere:

> Once staff receive Level 8, they are looking for better opportunities in Pobal or CCC or deciding to go back to college for primary teaching, it is the lack of increments and pension, I think. Well that's what it was for me, to not see a pay rise ahead as I was at top of pay scale.

Others thought that staff were exiting the sector due to the unprecedented demands, together with low morale, arising in part because of the regulatory system. Staff were being lost to supermarkets such as Aldi, where they would have increased pay with lower levels of responsibility and expectations.

> In the 7 years I have worked in my setting we have lost nearly 10 staff members who were dedicated, qualified hard-working individuals who loved the children, to jobs at Maxol and Aldi all because it was just too much, working from 8-6 every day and then still having to do paperwork or training on weekends and evenings. We are at a point now where it is really hard to find staff and we end up

> employing the first one through the door or trying to convince the work placement student that this is a great opportunity.

A lack of consultation with practitioners, combined with being overwhelmed by rapid policy development, limited training, and poor pay and conditions, left practitioners who sought to raise their qualifications feeling deflated, unable to see a future working directly with children:

> Consultation rates on policy development are low. Many in the sector are overwhelmed with the plethora of policy and practice guides and the lack of related training offered as well as poor pay and conditions. I am completing an MEd in ECE and cannot, at this point, see myself remaining in a preschool setting.

Pobal's (2018) Early Years Sector Profile confirmed an almost 25% rate of staff turnover. The literature, internationally, is consistent in terms of the detrimental impact of high turnover rates on children's wellbeing (Grant et al. 2019; Casey et al., 2016). Internationally, high levels of turnover are associated with the issues raised by participants in this survey, which include low pay, low status, high expectations, and increased stress arising from the role. Casey et al. (2016) note that particularly among higher qualified staff, low wages was the primary reason for leaving the sector, although workers also left because of burnout due to emotional exhaustion, high stress levels, and a lack of promotion opportunities.

The policymaker equally shared concern for high turnover levels and low wages, indicating the government was concerned about wages and highlighted the Minister's articulated support for a Sectoral Employment Order (SEO), which could bring in pay scales for the sector, adding that if required, the Government would reconsider current funding levels. The new funding model announced in the First Five, the policymaker indicated, could act as a mechanism to provide a financial incentive/reward for services with higher-qualified staff. Minister Zappone, in her Budget 2020 press statement, announced the creation of a fund to support the introduction of a SEO, a tangible move towards improving pay and conditions (DCYA, 2019c). However, the Government's line, as outlined in the policymaker's interview, remains that 'the real challenge is that the state is not the employer. It is a funder, but we don't pay the wages of staff and we cannot control the wages of staff directly'.

While this is a point, funding levels have a direct impact on the wages that can be provided by employers. Not all funding directly transfers to a wage, but the Level 7 capitation in AIM

provides €13 per hour to employ an additional staff member, which equates at most to about an €11 per hour wage. Some employers indicated that the funding only facilitated them to pay their staff a low wage, although their preference would be to pay more. This aligned with the argument forwarded in the literature review by Moloney and Pettersen (2017, p.6), that the Irish government, and indeed governments internationally through their funding mechanisms, were holding the key to the 'financial viability of services'. Moloney, cited in Morton (2019) warns that the childcare sector in Ireland is facing a severe crisis, since according to a recent SIPTU survey, 90% ELC practitioners are considering leaving the sector mainly due to poor pay and conditions. The question remains, will government action be too little too late? The inaugural meeting of the Expert Working Group to establish the new funding model took place on 29th October 2019 (DCYA, 2019b). While the group has made a commitment to consultation with the sector, the question arises; are those working in the sector or running a service not experts? Why there is no direct representative of the childcare sector part of this expert working group? As a forum participant argued, 'to be included you need to be part of the conversation', therefore childcare providers and practitioners should be included in this group.

Low status

> 'I work so hard to learn at school what is best for the children and then come to work to make low wages', she lamented. 'Why don't you change your major and get a real job?' her husband replied (Hale-Jinks & Knopf, 2006, p.234).

This sense that society did not view ELC as a real career option requiring qualifications emerged from the experiences shared by participants, where during their degree studies, they found parents asking them 'what will you do when you're finished?' or where '[p]arents and colleagues always asked what I would be qualified to do, once I had finished'. Parents, and many working in the sector, did not view a degree as necessary for working in ELC; rather a means to exit the sector. The policymaker, however, indicated that the government does value a qualified workforce and intends to continue to support practitioners to increase their qualifications. The findings from this research suggest that this aspiration may remain challenging unless action is taken to improve working conditions, not just through remuneration, but through valuing and respecting the practitioner.

Lack of consultation

Aligned to a sense of not being valued, practitioners in this research expressed that they did

not feel their voice mattered or that consultation was meaningful. In contrast, the policymaker believed that consultation with the sector was extensive and significant in the development of ELC policy. Practitioners' sense of feeling under-represented at policy development stage, however, arises frequently in online forums, through unions, and analysis of consultation processes (Duignan and Walsh, 2004a; Tusla, 2018c: Oireachtas, 2017; ECI, 2018a: ACP, 2020), suggesting this is an area where improvements are needed. As O'Donoghue-Hynes (2012, p.10) note, ELC providers and practitioners are difficult to 'recruit or involve' at policy level and while this might be a reality, it results in those 'most familiar with the requirements of the childcare sector', being absent from policy development processes (ibid, p.10). Jones (2019) notes in the English context that while consultations are widely used, the practical application is problematic, leaving the exercise of consultation a meaningless PR spin. This can equally apply to consultation processes in the Irish sector. An analysis of consultation processes in the literature review and previously by Blackburne (2017c) highlighted that the voice of the practitioner/provider remains largely estranged from meaningful policy development dialogue. The recently established Funding Model Expert Working Group, although it has articulated a firm commitment to consultation with the sector, actually has no direct representative for the childcare sector among its members. This research further proposes some solutions that could be considered by government for future consultation with the sector. Firstly, widely publicise consultation opportunities, as many participants were unaware of the consultation processes that had taken place. Secondly, consider methods that can capture qualitative and meaningful information. This research suggests online forums as a suitable approach as they can be widely accessed by practitioners regardless of geographical location, and qualitative surveys. The responses to this research suggest that sharing surveys by email through CCCs receives a strong response rate. Equally, Pobal's PIP Portal has yielded significant responses to its annual sectoral survey. Annual workshops for practitioners were promoted in the forum as a means of consultation, while others suggested unionisation as a means of being heard. The key message, however, is that government needs to move away from a top-down approach to quality development to a more collaborative approach, which seeks ways to meaningfully consult and collaborate with the sector in advance of policy development and in pursuit of quality.

6.4 Theme 3 – Policy and its impact on quality development

6.4.1 Regulations/compliance and the inspectorate process

> The essential characteristics of professionalism are autonomy, specialist knowledge and responsibility. These are the very characteristics, which professionals, not just in education, feel, have been increasingly eroded by excessive control from the centre and managerialism (Scales et al., 2011, p.1).

ELC settings in Ireland and internationally are increasingly scrutinised by multiple government agencies, all seeking compliance with various criteria in pursuit of quality. The OECD, in *Starting Strong III- A Quality Toolbox*, forwarded policy levers to raise quality standards. This view contends that quality development is dependent on a strongly regulated ELC system. This was further emphasised in *Starting Strong IV. Monitoring Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care*, which disseminated the concept of monitoring across OECD nations (Moloney & Peterson, 2019). Monitoring quality was established as a policy objective within the Quality Agenda (DES, 2018a; DCYA, 2013a) and remains a consistent Government commitment through the development of a robust regulatory regime. This has produced an increased focus on externally monitored governance with regulatory expectations for ELC settings to comply and develop structures for internal monitoring reflective of a corporate business model (DES, 2018a; GOI, 2016). In Ireland, the ELC sector is required to respond to various compliance bodies, including two inspectorates, funders, employment and health and safety regulators. The focus on compliance has emerged as a dominant concern for both providers and regulatory bodies, in that a plethora of courses are available focusing on compliance. Furthermore, the CCC's have published a full guide entitled 'Compliance and Beyond'. In this research, the participants' response in relation to compliance focused generally on the two inspectorate teams: Tusla, which holds responsibility for the implementation of regulations, and the Education-focused inspections, which were developed by the DES to not only monitor the development of quality, but to 'contribute to capacity building in the delivery of high-quality early education provision and practice' (DES, 2018a, p.9).

Regulations and the inspectorate – a complex relationship

Participants in this research shared mixed views on how successful the inspectorates were in raising quality standards. In contrast, the policymaker articulated that while the system could be further improved, both inspectorates were necessary and working well. While many participants welcomed regulations and inspections as a necessary part of quality

development, they equally articulated frustration with the inspectorate process. In their experience, the focus on compliance has led to increased paperwork, frequent inconsistencies between inspectors and inspectorates, and ultimately a sense of being under scrutiny in a context where the practitioner exerted limited power. This complexity of response to the inspectorate frequently arose in the findings, where practitioners had contradictory responses to the inspection process:

> Even though all the regulations and inspections are a positive addition to the sector, it sometimes feels as though they were created based on one standard preschool model and inspections are so focused on making us fit the check box that everything outside their check box is ignored.

Practitioners shared their experiences of finding the inspection process nerve wracking, where they felt both tested and powerless:

> Being inspected can be nerve wracking and I sometimes struggle to defend my point when I'm put on the spot. Afterwards there was sense of did she say things to see how I would respond?

This view also emerged from Moloney's (2016b, p.91) research where participants felt the inspectorate are 'always trying to catch us out'.

Burden of compliance

Compliance was articulated as a burden that increased their workload, but presented limited impact in raising quality standards:

> Unfortunately, being compliant has become the number one priority and they keep adding to the paperwork, if it is not documented, it did not happen. Between risk assessment sheets, roll call, cleaning sheets, documenting emergent interests and how I plan to enhance them, transition reports, curriculum planning, medication administrated, accidents and incidents and documenting all the interesting things the children have said or done today, I don't really feel as though there is much time left for me to focus on enhancing quality, let alone spend time just enjoying playing with the children.

These findings replicated views expressed in research by Moloney (2016b) in relation to the Tusla inspectorate and in a DES review of the Education Focused inspections, (DES, 2018a). As the DES (2018a, p.23) review states, participants in their research also expressed stress at the increasing expectations arising from compliance:

> Between TUSLA, EYEI and Pobal, the documentation and paperwork and worry and hassle is huge…...We need a break here. The workforce is not happy right now and we are all joining unions. We are all at breaking point and we feel we are not allowed to do our jobs correctly without the thought of an inspection

> looming. And all three are looking for different things which is most confusing….

Moloney (2016b, p.90) argues that managers within the ELC sector operate within a 'culture of fear resulting from regulatory enforcement'. This view was also articulated in this research, where a participant shared her sense of being overwhelmed with the increased expectations, heavy workload, unpaid time spent with parents, training and paperwork:

> We are expected to do all this for pittance. To fear the arrival of TUSLA on our doorsteps, fearing they will come on a bad day and pick up on everything we do wrong, rather than everything we do so well. The sector is a disgrace.

Participants also highlighted inconsistency amongst the inspectorates, which also emerged in the DES (2018a) review and Moloney's (2016b) research:

> I have experienced a lack of consistency between different individuals within the same inspectorate. What one inspector argues is breaking regulations, another ignores.

Another practitioner was concerned the regulations limited the autonomy of the practitioner, and wondered if the inspectors also lacked autonomy:

> I do have to wonder how pressured are they as inspectors to stick to the script so to speak. It would be interesting to know if they too find in some cases that the regulations don't allow for them to incorporate common sense.

Different inspectorates, different visions

Participants articulated fluctuating views towards the dual inspectorate:

> Tusla and DES inspections have definitely made services more aware of what the ideal preschool experience should be, it focuses on adult-child interactions also which is of great importance and highlights the benefits of using the Aistear-Síolta practice guide.

Moloney (2018d, p.6) forwarded that practitioners are 'under inordinate pressure' to 'please two masters'. This was reflected in the participants' engagement in training to comply with the inspectorates. Similarly, Moloney's (2016b) research presented a culture of compliance, where practitioners worked towards meeting minimum requirements rather than extending quality practices.

Aligned to the findings of the DES (2018a) and Moloney (2016a), participants in these findings were generally positive towards the EYEI. The partnership approach to inspections was welcomed, as was the affirming of good practice, 'the EYEI have allowed the work we

do to be recognised'. In contrast, another participant (who didn't specify the inspectorate), indicated that the lack of a partnership approach was leading practitioners to leave the sector, disillusioned by perceived unreasonable expectations.

The EYEI was viewed by some participants as successful in raising capacity in the sector. '[T]he education focused inspections - led me to focus more on child centred emergent curriculum as well as improving planning and documenting'.

Limitations of a regulatory system to raise quality

In Ireland, there are various compliance bodies to which the ELC sector has to respond. These include Tusla, the regulatory inspectorate; the DES Inspectorate - process/education focused quality; Pobal - funding compliance; NERA - employees' rights, health and safety, fire compliance etc. Consequently, the ELC practitioner in Ireland has many masters. The omnipresent power of the inspectorate and their impact on practitioners and their practice presented diversely and frequently within this research data, replicating the findings of Kilderry (2015, p.633) in the Australian context. She noted 'that early childhood teachers have different ways of responding to the expectations' of regulations and the inspectorate, which included 'performative accountability: anxiety, confidence, and disregard'. Although disregard was not a feature in this research, resistance and anxiety were evident, with participants indicating the sector was at breaking point. In the wider context, this breaking point was amplified by the 30,000 strong street protest on 5th February 2020, to highlight the imbalance between government expectations, remuneration and consultation with the sector.

The ubiquity of regulation, standardisation and accountability in education has become a global feature of how governments internationally are addressing the issue of quality in early childhood and the wider education system (Sahlberg, 2014). This Global Education Reform Movement, which promotes this approach to raising quality within the education sector, is criticized for replicating the governance of corporate organisations. Furthermore, several authors have argued that the GERM plays to the interests of the business community while alienating teachers' personal professionalism and disempowering them through its disciplinary procedures, presenting effectively a narrow vision of what education can and should be (Kilderry, 2015; Ball, 2003; Novinger and O'Brien, 2003). In effect, this approach to raising standards offers a simplistic, calculated vision of quality reform through clearly defined standards and discounts the complexities and contextual dynamics interplaying

within the fabrics of early childhood settings. There simply is not or cannot be a one size fits all approach. Practitioners in this research related their frustrations with the standardised vision the inspectorate placed on their practice. The burden of proof for these practitioners lies heavily upon them, leading to copious amounts of paperwork and where what they viewed as common sense was disregarded in favour of pre-set, pre-determined, inspector-interpreted regulations. This was articulated as reductive in terms of quality development, where paperwork came before children, school outings were contracting due to excessive focus on risk assessments and insurance, and where implementing quality as perceived by the inspectorate was viewed as costly, inconsistent and not commensurate with funding. The impact of inspections added to practitioners' stress, negatively affected their wellbeing and was attributed to many exiting the sector. This was exemplified in the case of the owner provider, who articulated that the increased pressure, combined with a lack of adequate funding, directly led to her closing her doors, as she argued 'you cannot pay peanuts and expect a platinum service'. This juxtaposition of governments expecting high standards at reduced costs has been replicated globally and by practitioners in this research, where funding within the sector was consistently highlighted as inadequate in providing 'any sort of quality'. Novinger and O'Brien (2003) argue this approach to quality reform has and is being driven by a corporate management model that focuses on a top-down approach to quality development, which they argue is suffocating democratic practice and limiting teachers' autonomous decision making processes. This leads ultimately to the question posed by Moss (2015) 'are there alternatives?', These alternatives have been proposed by Sahlberg (2011) in the 'Finnish Way' and Moss (2015), who argues there is hope in the emergence of approaches such as Reggio Emilia.

Scales et al. (2011, p.1) argue that 'teachers need to be trusted and treated as professionals' and through working in partnership inspectorates and practitioners could develop and enhance professional practice. A collaborative approach that respects and promotes ELC practitioners developing their own quality practices may be more effective than mere focus on compliance. Sims (2017 p.7) argues that practitioners have to 'advocate for …a world where democracy flourishes'. Elements of democratic practice and raising quality in this manner are emerging through the principles of Better Start and the DES inspections. These both build from a strengths-based partnership approach, which was welcomed by participants in this research. Without developing a more democratic approach to quality reform, the resistance that is growing in the sector,

marked by the 30,000 strong protest march in February 2020, will continue to grow, where limited funding and continuously increasing expectations are leaving many practitioners feeling undervalued, under-resourced and at breaking point.

6.4.2 Leadership

Leadership is increasingly viewed as instrumental in the development of quality practices in the early years (Slot, 2018; Bush, 2012). It has moved from an area of policy neglect to one of intense interest. Leadership has not been overlooked by the Irish government, as reflected in the interview with the policymaker, who highlighted it as a policy priority an 'area where there is more could be done'. In Irish policy, a trajectory towards a corporate managerial style of leadership has emerged, as noted in the literature review. This raises many complex debates in favour of this approach and in rejection. Participants in this research highlighted the criticality of strong leadership in quality development. Similarly, Slot's (2018) international research argues that effective leadership is critical to quality development, in particular when it is established on the principles of supporting belonging and teamwork amongst staff. This research also called for a collaborative approach to leadership. Penn (2019, p.2), in her research in the English context, warned that in the structures of management, those 'with a lowly position within that organisation' are compelled to conform rather than transform. This sense of powerlessness was also highlighted by some participants, who expressed the view that many managers/owners were exploiting staff, focusing on increasing their profits at the expense of a sustainable income for staff. Aligned to this, a small number of participants called for ELC provision to be removed from capitalist private ownership to a more social model, where settings are placed under public governance. Urban's (2018) blog, referring to the Irish context, proposes that ELC is a public concern and urges that a real commitment to quality development requires the de-privatisation of the sector. He argues that a sector developed on a business/corporate model 'cannot in the long term, deliver the common good'. Instead '[q]uality…tend to be low, access and outcomes unequal, costs high, working conditions for staff unsustainable, governance and regulation overly onerous'. Journalists suggested that de-privatisation of ELC was a consideration in government formation discussions between FG and FF amid the Coronavirus pandemic in April 2020 (Kelly, 2020; O'Connell, 2020). The published proposal, however, only reflected the objectives already outlined in the First 5 to 'reform', 'modernise', improve accessibility, reduce costs', and provide 'workers with a sustainable career pathway' (FF and FG, 2020, p.10). Some smaller parties who potentially held the balance of power indicated only de-

privatisation of the sector would be acceptable (Clarke, 2020). Aligned to this view, Kilderry (2006) warns against a market-based model of childcare, where business interests will consistently outpace the interest of children and families. If we continue to model our policy objectives on a corporate model of leadership, as outlined through the 2016 regulations, this leads to a system that is more difficult to navigate for a small ELC provider with a few staff operating on a part-time basis, as opposed to a large corporation which operates and legitimises its operation through a corporate managerial model. Two contrasting arguments arose in the forum; one stating that childcare is a business and that providers should not need to apologise for making a profit, nor should it be assumed that this compromises quality, while the other believed that rights for workers and the development of quality can only arise through public ownership. The debates about whether ELC should be in private or public ownership, and whether making a profit in ELC is a legitimate practice, need to be open for further exploration and consideration of the long-term consequences in terms of developing a future for young children. Penn (2018) warned of the growing corporatisation of the ELC market, noting in particular a significant increase of interest from corporate companies reflected in the rise of childcare chains. This growing interest in the childcare market, she indicates, emerged at a KMPG (2018) conference, where childcare was identified as a vibrant and dynamic market for investment. This is further reiterated in Reportlinkers' reports on both global and national markets, which shed light on the billion-dollar childcare industry (Reportlinkers, 2019). Within their global reports, Ireland, among other nations, was identified as a market opportunity. This corporatisation of childcare, Penn (2018) warns, brings inequity, as only affluent areas are attractive. The mere size of these organisations, she argues, will inevitably compromise continuity and consistency, where the care of young children is seen as a commodity that can be bought and sold. As we move to a corporate form of leadership, it is worth thinking about who will benefit and thrive within this atmosphere and what are, perhaps, the unintended implications?

6.4.3 National frameworks

On a positive note, the national frameworks were viewed within this research and in the literature as positively contributing to the development of quality. Similarly, the support systems, Better Start and the CCCs, were unanimously welcomed. The sense of working in partnership was viewed by practitioners as both supportive and affirming. Perhaps when we consider leadership, the future of quality development is through collaboration and partnership, rather than a top-down approach.

6.5 Conclusions

Despite quality and policy development in ELC being complex, dynamic, evolving, subjective, and multi-perspectival, key reflections have emerged from the findings in this chapter. Respecting and valuing the knowledge, understanding and contributions that ELC practitioners can make to future policy development is critical to policy success. Meaningful consultation with the sector is required so that policy is supportive of quality development at the nexus of implementation and that unintended consequences of policy that potentially could compromise quality development can be identified. The evidence from this study and related literature indicates that quality development can best emerge from a collaborative, partnership approach that values the practitioner as a co-professional, supported by wider government agencies, including inspectorates, mentoring, and the CCCs. A further focus needs to be placed on orientation quality, which acknowledges that practitioners' attitudes, values and wellbeing impact directly on the experiences children receive in ELC settings. Investment in the sector is needed to facilitate appropriate remuneration to attract, retain and value highly qualified ELC graduates. Graduates can then be supported to draw on their knowledge, experience and autonomy to develop quality practices that are contextualised and meaningful at a local level, providing the opportunity to develop quality within their settings from a ground up, rather than a standardised top-down perspective. Leadership within the sector is a critical issue for further reflection, with the research suggesting that leadership also needs to be collaborative, focusing on team building, where all practitioners are valued and supported to contribute to quality within the organisation.

Chapter 7 - Conclusions – Negotiating Complexity

Quality development in the ELC sector is complex, multifaceted, and has far-reaching consequences for government, society, providers, practitioners, and children. Supranational organisations such as the European Union, the OECD and the World Bank in the global south have relentlessly advocated for ELC quality reform in nation states. Similarly, national governments, NGOs, and industry have promoted the rapid expansion of the sector and more recently placed emphasis on quality reform. The foci of policy development have been diverse, with responsibility dispersed across government departments and agencies. The influence of globalisation on ELC policy development in Ireland is undeniable (Walsh, 2016b). In this context where multiple policy actors, compete for influence, Roberts-Holmes (2019) argues commercial interests tend to be very powerful. Stephenson (2013, p.817) further notes that this multi-level governance (MLG) sways towards oversimplified concepts of what are 'issues of complexity and institutional complexity' arising from 'pluralistic and highly dispersed policy-making activity, where multiple actors participate at various political levels'. This thesis, aligned to previous research, argues in contradistinction that quality development is complex and contestable where reform requires collaborative processes, with the voices of ELC practitioners who hold responsibility for implementing policy being included (Arndt et al., 2018; Urban et al., 2017: Tobin, 2005). Discourses shaping quality reform need to be deconstructed to consider their implications and what the consequences might be for children. The findings argue that policymakers need to embrace complexity through critical reflection with stakeholders, namely practitioners and providers, to foresee the intended, unintended, and possible consequences of policy. To pursue this requires courage, trust, and an open commitment to listening to all stakeholders, thereby facilitating meaningful reflection on the long-term implications of policy. This research respects that these processes are multifaceted due to the diversity of stakeholders, who often have diametrically opposing visions regarding the purpose and function of ELC (Mahony & Hayes, 2006). However, as Havel (2015) proposes, truth can only be untangled when there is a certain willingness to disturb others and the system.

7.1 Complex times - future visions for quality reform in turbulent times

Using an iterative approach, this research listened primarily to practitioners, as they reflected on how policy relating to quality reform was impacting on their practice with children.

Participants' perceptions and experiences as explored in the survey and the forum informed the policymaker's interview, which facilitated an opportunity to explore the intentions behind contemporary policymaking, focusing on quality reform. This interview provided an insight into where the government in Ireland at that moment in time was projecting future policy intentions, as set out in the First Five Strategy, and facilitated reflection on what this might mean for the ELC sector, quality development, and how it is perceived.

The Irish government's vision for policy development in the ELC was outlined in the First Five: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028. As a seminal document for future ELC quality reform, with clear implications for this research and the foundations for the policymakers' responses to the findings from the survey and forum, this document has supported the concluding reflections on this research. The intentions of this conclusion are to consider critically the overarching implications of this research in the context of current and projected ELC policy. The trajectory of ELC quality reform has been sculpted within the context of international influence, namely the OECD, UN, and EU. The three well-articulated lynchpins driving the development of ELC globally and nationally in Ireland have been accessibility, affordability, and quality. Further formational discourses already in action and clearly stated within the First Five as the drivers behind the enunciated reform of the ELC sector are: 'Strong Public Investment', 'robust regulation', 'inspection regimes', and a 'defined professional workforce' (GOI, 2018c, p.174), all of which are strongly connected and have implications for the findings of this research. Quality reform in the ELC sector in Ireland has been framed within this economic paradigm initially delineated as returns on investment, now simply as investment. As Gibson et al. (2015, p.323) observed in the Australian context, which is equally true for Ireland, 'the early childhood professional is also now being drawn into the broader economics of (Australian) society, produced as an investment broker, and charged with watching over the 'investment'. This results in ELC policies and practices forming part of the economic landscape with 'its affordances, which act to both enable and constrain the work of early childhood professionals' (p.323).

Recalling Pierson's (2000) theory on path dependence, which argues that policy tends be linear and focused on economic returns, with junctures and events occasionally occurring that alter the projected policy trajectory, it would be negligent to disregard the political change and resistance occurring in Ireland as this thesis moves towards conclusion. The ELC sector in Ireland historically has been fragmented, weak, and primarily passive against the tide of

relentless policy change. However, on 5 February 2020, 30,000 early years practitioners, mobilised by Together for Early Years (a conglomeration of unions and ELC organisations) took to the street to protest against pay, conditions, funding and the lack of consultation with the sector. Together with the Irish electorate's dramatic swing towards the liberal left, reflected in the same sex marriage and abortion referendums and the 2020 General Election, this mobilisation suggests that ordinary citizens are no longer willing to accept policy impositions, but seek and are willing to exert their voices for change. Also unprecedented was the Irish caretaker government's response to protect the ELC sector in the midst of the Covid19 pandemic. The government's swift response in taking public responsibility for the sustainability and salaries of the ELC sector not only highlighted how important childcare is to the government for society and the economy, but also in effect moved funding and control of the sector from the private domain into the public. Media reports on the government formation talks further suggested that the electoral parties were considering creating a pubic childcare system. While nothing concrete emerged from those talks, it does suggest that perhaps future Irish governments could consider a move away from the Global Education Reform Movement, which has to date provided a privileged position to private enterprise, and instead consider an alternative system which views the childcare sector as a public, not private responsibility. The newly formed government continues to support the ELC sector's sustainability through specific funding provisions for the ELC sector. However, the status quo of a largely privately operated sector remains, with the continued, if not accelerated hallmarks of crisis, with recruitment and retention of staff remaining challenging and further stress placed on the sector through the additional responsibilities of opening safely in the midst of a global pandemic (ECI, 2020). The government's ambition to create a new funding model has not abated with the formation of the new (albeit very similar to the old) government. Their commitment to consult with the sector in its formation remains at the forefront with submissions and online consultation taking place in autumn 2020. The dynamics created by an uncertain future and how this will impact on current ELC policy intentions and trajectories and whether the 10-year pathway outlined in the First Five Strategy for reforming the ELC sector will be pruned or amended by changes in government, activism from the sector itself, or other junctures we cannot yet foresee. This does, however, add to complexity, which is the foundational argument and theoretical framework driving this research. Only time will tell how these changes, will unfold. How effective will the announced consultation processes be in listening to the views of ELC practitioners? How will the ongoing impact of the Covid19 crisis impact on sustainability and the government's

ability to continue to support the sector and respond to the demands for increased funding? Covid19 is not just a global pandemic, but has spiralled national and international governments into a period of unprecedented uncertainty with ever evolving responses and projected future pathways. In effect, the future is uncertain. The relationship between the government and the ELC sector remains tense (ECI, 2020) with the dysfunctionality of this relationship apparent at times in this research, both in the protest march in February and frequently on ELC sector websites. Discord is further reflected in the growing recruitment, retention and sustainability crisis (ECI, 2020). This fragility within the sector was 'exposed and was acknowledged by government through the series of bespoke measures' in response to Covid19. In response, ECI (2020, p.15) argue that this 'focus on supporting and investing' in the ELC sector must continue, and could pave the way for improved relationships between the sector and the government.

7.1.1 Complexity in ELC policy development

ELC policy has been and is interpreted in numerous ways by different stakeholders, from practitioners who work daily, implementing and sometimes resisting policy, to policymakers who are at the kernel of policy development, as well as academics and researchers who critique its implications. This is further problematised by the concept borrowed from Kristeva (1991) that subjects do not have fixed identities but instead are constantly in process. In the same way policymakers' and practitioners' perspectives and experiences evolve in response to media illuminated events, policy development, social media discourses and mobilised resistance, as reflected in the recent ELC sector protest. These complexities are presented as problematic in this research, as the context has evolved and changed throughout the research process and will continue to evolve in ways that are not predictable due to the complex nature of ELC policy development. The 'political stakes' as Murphy and Skillen (2013, p.84) suggest, are high, but the stakes for children are higher. Embracing this complexity is critical if concepts of quality practice and provision are to be realised in ways that are meaningful for practitioners and children. In particular including and valuing the voices of all stakeholders is critical, particularly those working directly with children in policy development.

7.2 Contribution to knowledge and limitations

This research presents a new perspective on how policy related to the ELC Quality Agenda announced in 2013 continues to impact on practice, primarily from practitioners' and providers' perspectives, and further enriched by the opportunity afforded by the DCYA to

garner a policymaker's views on the issues raised and to explore the intentions behind current and future quality reform policies.

Throughout this research, the visual representations provided by concept mapping have supported my understanding of the complex policy networks involved in the formation of ELC policy and the complex findings that have emerged from this research. They remain useful at this point to consider and reflect on the contribution this research makes on various levels to understanding the impact of quality reform from varying perspectives and which methodologies and methods could be useful in supporting future research in this area. Irish ELC policy has its foundations in global discourse and global policymaking arenas. Therefore, these findings also have implications for governments internationally to consider the impacts of global educational, particularly ELC quality reform (Concept Map 11). Discussion of all elements follows hereafter.

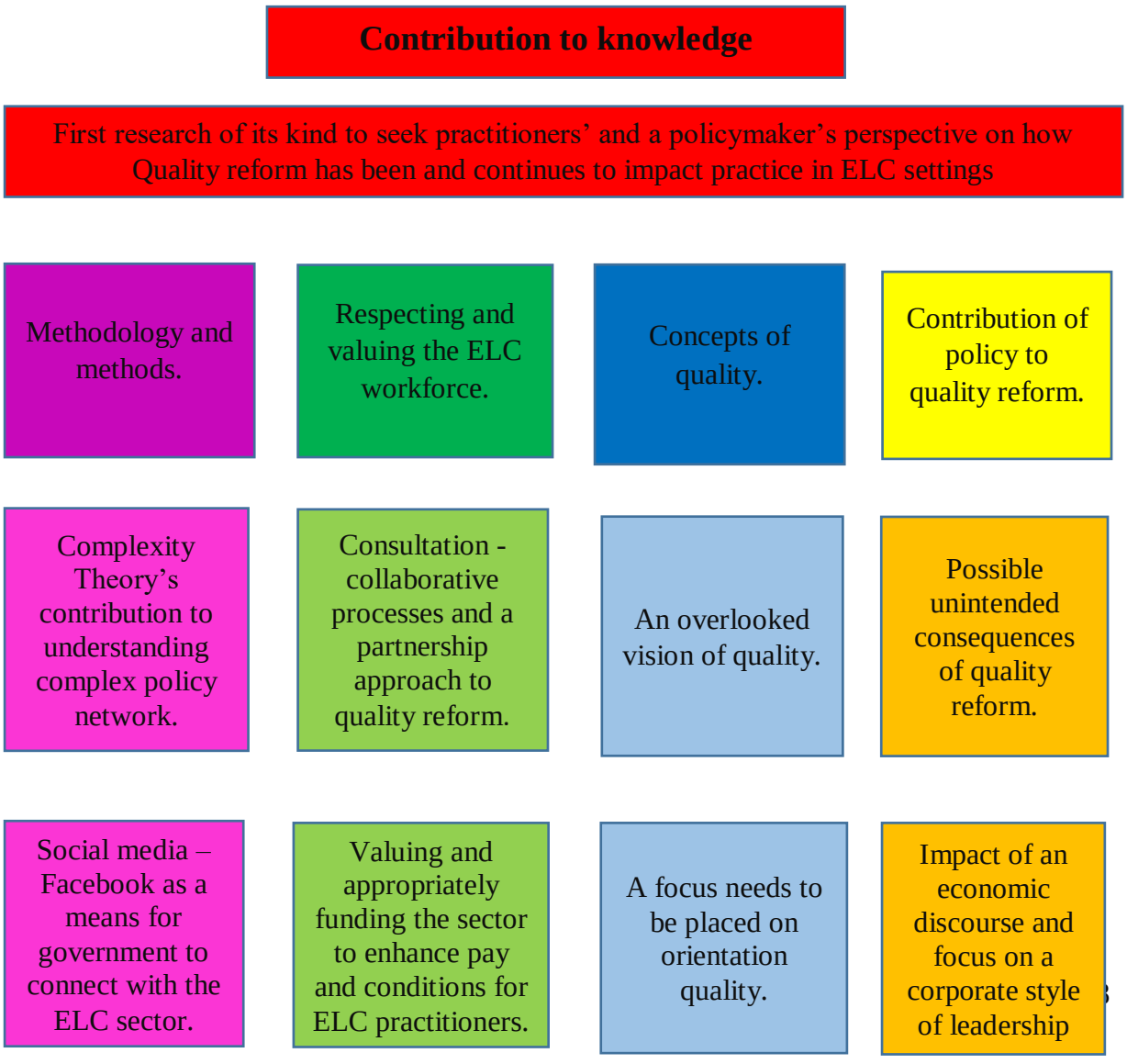


Figure 30: Concept Map 11: Contribution to knowledge

7.2.1 Limitations of this study

This research was undertaken between 2016 and 2019, which has been a period of relentless policy development. Significant developments have taken place in the sector since the survey was completed and activity on the online forum ceased, therefore the impact of more recent developments has not been sufficiently explored. Since the RTE documentary 'Behind Closed Doors' aired, a number of significant events have taken place. ELC services had to re-register; the National Childcare Scheme and its administration began; insurance costs spiralled; the 30,000 strong street protest by ELC workforce against underfunding and lack of consultation took place, and the 2020 General Election witnessed a dramatic swing towards the political left. The spread of Covid-19 increased government intervention, closing all settings, ceasing funding schemes and in replacement agreeing to fund staff wages in return for services agreeing to maintain free of charge children's places. Furthermore, FF and FG publish a joint proposal for government formation, which proposes continuation of the policy trajectory outlined in the First 5, however notably dropped in the newly acquired Early Learning and Care title intended to raise the status of the sector and did not include ELC as part of the continuum of education (FF and FG, 2020). These events have all had a significant impact on the sector, yet this research as it was in its closing stages was not positioned to capture how practitioners perceive these might impact on quality within the sector. Moreover, this research represents the views of those that responded to the survey and participated in the online forum, but does not necessarily represent the views of all those working in the ELC sector.

7.2.2 Social media as a means for government to embrace complexity and connect with the ELC workforce

Complexity theory within this research has acted as an effective framework to explore Ireland's complex policy landscape, where multiple perspectives exist in both the

development and resistance to its reform. As Mason (2008, p.4) argues, complexity theory facilitates a move towards 'connectionist, holistic, non-linear' approach to policy development, rather than an 'input– output', 'black-box', causal modelling' approach. In contrast to standardising ELC quality, CT visualises that policy needs to be emergent, transformational, dynamic, and responsive. Complexity theory embraces listening, considering multiple perspectives, and thereby resists global discourses that tend to systematise quality and practice. Yet this does not mean that practice looks merely inwards; on the contrary, it looks outwards for inspiration and then reflects on how this can be meaningful for local practice.

Including the voices of ELC providers and practitioners is complex, as they cannot be viewed as a homogenous group. The sector is delineated by diversity in terms of qualifications, experiences, pedagogical approaches, and positions, thereby comprising varying responses to policy and its impact on practice. Equally, finding suitable methods to bring practitioners from the periphery of policy development to its centre is troublesome (O'Donoghue-Hynes, 2012). However, as Amartya Sen (2011, p.3) argues, an understanding and vision for the future comes from embracing the 'wealth of social differences' and the 'rich diverse' and 'distinct ways' practitioners develop quality. The political disenfranchisement of ELC practitioners and losing their valuable knowledge can be avoided by incorporating complexity, developing a culture of listening, and inviting practitioners into the policy debate. Consequently, this research not only listened to practitioners' perspectives, but explored methods that could include practitioners' voices more effectively in policy development, thereby presenting an alternative policy process whereby those with experience at the nucleus of practice can contribute to policy development. With the ubiquitous use of social media in the lives of ordinary citizens, particularly focusing on Facebook in this thesis, it appears that using social media to connect more closely with citizens is worth exploring. As O'Connell, J. (2020) observed in an analysis of the 2020 General Election in Ireland, online culture has and is reshaping the political landscape, which requires further government attention. People share ideas, communicate thoughts and interact with each other through social media, thereby facilitating connections that otherwise might not exist. My research was undertaken with limited resources, connections, time and money. It nonetheless reached a broad spectrum of practitioners and providers across the country, with 114 responses to the online survey and 17 participants joining the forum, where practitioners articulated their opinions and experiences competently. The validity and relatability of the responses was

reaffirmed through sectoral Facebook pages and in the national protest, where similar issues were highlighted such as pay, working conditions, and a lack of consultation.

7.2.3 Rights and responsibilities of the ELC workforce: implications of quality reform - is a compromise required?

Biesta (2015) proposes that within complex systems, tensions and conflicts arise relating to quality reform, questioning whose interests are central. In Ireland, ELC quality reform has resulted in relentless policy development, with increased responsibilities placed on ELC practitioners. However, through social media, increased unionisation, and the street protest, they are articulating that their needs are not being heard. Fragmentation within ELC in Ireland, demarcated primarily by private enterprise, has created a sector that has been politically weak and subject to the unintended negative impacts of quality reform. As the Irish government tightens control of the sector through an array of compliance structures and contractual agreements, practitioners in this research highlighted how limiting their professional qualifications and knowledge are against the power of government agencies, particularly inspectorates who wield control in relation to how quality should and can be practiced in settings. Arndt et al. (2018) call for a counter-narrative against what they term the 'global uniformity machine' where global, supranational agents such as the OECD, World Bank, and international corporations are shaping national policy through discourses of quality which focus on standardisation, monitoring and regulation, and are criteria driven, with competitive cross-national comparisons. This is particularly relevant in the context of the First Five Strategy, which forwards a positivist view that quality can be defined and regulated. This research argues for further consideration of this positivist view, as the counterargument forwarded by Moss (2017) amongst others, argues that this version of quality can suffocate the knowledge and experiences of practitioners and their local understandings. Albrichter et al. (2011) cited in Arndt et al. (2018), claimed from their research that perhaps teachers should be trusted and therefore less inspected. The policymaker rejected this concept, based on the argument that the sector is not ready for a scaling back of accountability structures. Two RTE broadcasts, 'Breach of Trust' and 'Behind Closed Doors' and findings from this research support the view that regulations are necessary and contribute significantly to quality development. However, as Murphy and Skillen (2013, p. 85) noted earlier, accountability processes act as 'a double-edged sword', which 'on the one hand are necessary', but on the other can have unintended negative consequences for practice. Accountability in itself is a complex construct.

Ireland, as noted earlier, is historically receptive to global influence, albeit originally as a means to assert our independence as a Free State and republic. This responsiveness to European and global policy is evidenced in the Action Plans for Education 2016-2019 and in the First Five Strategy, where international benchmarks of monitoring, evaluation, funding for legal and quality frameworks, and replication of international policy development were stated as the policy drivers. Monitoring, regulations and accountability raise complex dichotomies, where juxtapositions and paradoxes abound. A core objective of the First Five Strategy is to develop 'a graduate-led workforce, in line with a recommendation in the EU Quality Framework' (GOI, 2018c, p.111) and to date, year on year, practitioners' qualifications and number of graduates have risen. In tandem, regulations have increased, with the sector now responding to a myriad of compliance bodies, including two inspectorates Tusla, the Regulatory Inspectorate, and the DES Education Focused Inspections (EYEI) all with different policy objectives. Within the same inspectorate alone, participants in this research articulated that different inspectors were imposing competing and evolving demands, based on individual interpretations and values. This culture of compliance limits and restricts practitioners' autonomy, focusing on compliance rather than innovation and creativity. This raises the question as to why are we training practitioners to become critical, reflective and transformative and then restricting their professional autonomy by imposing stringent, externally-imposed requirements on their practice? Within the online survey and forum many participants held undergraduate and Masters degrees, yet they articulated that in the face of an inspection, their views, experiences and values were discounted. This finding was previously raised by Moloney (2016b), who also reported a culture of fear and compliance when the inspector calls. This research also indicated how the burden of proof enforced by the inspectorate regime was leading to copious amounts of paperwork, leaving practitioners with considerably less time to enjoy quality experiences with children. As one practitioner stated, 'if it is not written down, it didn't happen'. In this context, participants articulated that quality experiences for children were affected, such as abandoned outings, as the paperwork and risk assessments were overwhelming. This research indicates that state-imposed accountability structures, which have responsibilised practitioners on multiple levels to fulfil policy expectations, require further exploration. Perhaps a level of compromise is required, in which cognisant of the growing professionalism within the sector, inspections would be collaborative rather than authoritative. This collaborative approach has already been initiated by the Education-Focused Inspections.

The Education-Focused Inspections (EYEI) have adopted a strengths-based approach. While they grade quality and make recommendations for improvements; their reports acknowledge the strengths of the setting. This approach was welcomed by participants in this research and may present a model for future inspections/compliance visits, where practitioners are viewed as professionals and quality development is viewed as a collaborative practice. As Scales et al. (2011, p.1) argue, 'teachers have a right to be professionals, but they also have a responsibility to be professionals'. The potential of the strengths-based approach was also articulated through practitioners' positivity towards the collaborative and partnership approach provided by Better Start QDS, AIM, and the CCCs, which were all welcome initiatives in Ireland.

This collaborative approach was further reiterated at the World Economic Forum (WEF) (2018) in Davos, where speakers warned of the need to depart from standardised approaches and instead embrace soft and reflective skills, which synthesise meaning from information and ideas. Two years later, the 2020 forum warned of the risks of 'stagnation' and global unrest. The speakers called for collective and urgent action to respond to an 'unsettled global landscape'. While WEF (2020) mainly focused on climate change, some key messages were relevant to this research; in particular, the need for technological responsiveness and economic incentives as drivers for change and the need to explore not ignore global unrest. These changing global foci raise the question of whether a new vision of quality is required.

7.2.4 Concepts of quality – a new vision required?

Within the context of responding to the unrest arising in the ELC sector, this research argues there is a need to re-examine how we evaluate quality. Participants expressed they felt overburdened, undervalued, and under-resourced, in a sector where their qualifications did not raise their status. These perspectives are further endorsed by the recruitment, retention and sustainability crisis facing many providers. Participants in this research reiterated the importance of placing children at the centre of their practice, but ultimately believed that quality reform was restricting their ability to do this. Congruent with Moss (2012), this research argues that a vision of a strong, competent child needs to be supported by a vision of strong, competent adults, which leads to a need for other ways of evaluating quality within the sector. Similarly Sims et al. (2017) question why we are teaching practitioners to think critically when we view critical thinking in adulthood as a problem, not a resource.

7.2.5 The need to focus on orientation quality

This research has identified that the predominant focus on process and structural elements of quality fundamentally results in overlooking the critical and overarching role orientation plays in quality development. Day and Gu (2010, p.xiii) argue that '[p]ersonal, emotional, organisational and intellectual ideas' of teachers/practitioners matter. Katz (1993, p.8) contends that 'we cannot have really good environments for children, unless they are good for the adults who work in them', a recommendation that remains unfulfilled to date. Orientation quality highlights the critical role that teachers' attitudes, beliefs and dispositions play in quality development (Wall et al., 2015; Anders, 2015). Quality is subjective and based on values. Beliefs held by practitioners will inescapably impact on how quality is perceived and implemented within the cultural constructions of ELC settings (Cottle & Alexander, 2012). Orientation quality may be overlooked, but is essential, particularly to process quality (Bautista et al., 2016). In this study, the attitudes, values, and beliefs of practitioners dominated participants' view that their dispositions were fundamental to quality development. Participants highlighted that quality was continually eroded by what they perceived as the lack of value placed on them by government and society. Practitioners' values are inextricably linked to the overall success of all elements of quality development, as highlighted by practitioners in this research, who continuously referred to the 'quality of staff, their interactions and their job satisfaction'. The findings and literature concur with the recent ELC protest in that this must be addressed in terms of tangible rewards such as remuneration, as well as intangible ones which include governments working in collaboration, consultation and respecting practitioners as professionals (French, 2018; ACP, 2020a).

7.2.6 Qualifications and CPD

Both practitioners and the policymaker concurred with the growing body of literature and international and national policy that higher qualifications and ongoing CPD are critical in quality development. In congruence with the view that orientation quality is important, the OECD (2006) acknowledged that the dispositions of those working with children matter. Moreover, they also argue that education and training contribute towards developing positive attitudes in practitioners. However, as previously mentioned, developing and retaining a graduate workforce is being compromised by poor pay, conditions, and a lack of value for practitioners and their qualifications. Participants valued higher qualifications in recognition of the complexity and multiple demands placed on practitioners. Equally, they valued access

to ongoing CPD, albeit with caution, as many expressed burnout from the constant expectation to upskill combined with the monetary and time costs. Cognisant of these difficulties, the policymaker indicated that government hoped to ease these burdens through measures such as the recently piloted paid-for CPD and through exploring various means in which CPD could be delivered face-to-face, blended, and online. The policymaker indicated that CPD was a critical element of the reform agenda and while not currently mandatory, could be a future expectation; meanwhile the new funding model may incentivise participation in CPD. The literature suggests that CPD should be developed in consultation with practitioners so it is reflective of their needs and requirements, with the focus on quality rather than quantity of opportunities. Collaborative reflection amongst ELC practitioners as a means of engaging in CPD may also be a meaningful way to raise quality (Moss, 2018; Lazzari et al., 2013). Professional Criteria and Guidelines for (Level 7 and Level 8) degree programmes for the Early Learning and Care (ELC) Sector in Ireland (DES, 2019) were published towards the close of this research and may address concerns raised by participants regarding the quality of training.

7.2.7 Quality reform – future plans and possible implications

The First Five Strategy and the policymaker's interview outline the governments' intention to incentivise quality reform through a new funding model, 'whereby settings are funded to meet certain quality indicators' (GOI, 2018c, p.175). One objective behind this funding model is to support 'employers to offer favourable working conditions', but how this will happen is less clear (GOI, 2018c, p.174). Concerns regarding pay, conditions, and sustainability dominated this research, where participants articulated that they were not respected as professionals, reflected in the lack of funding, funding mechanisms, and consultation with the sector. The policymaker identified the issue of pay as complex because the government is not the employer. However, as the primary funder, responsibility remains with government to actively respond to the increased unrest this lack of pay and funding is causing in the sector. While mindful of the significant increases in investment and plans for a new funding model, this research argues that the future Irish government needs to consider the contradiction raised by professionalisation, with high expectations and qualifications, against poor pay and conditions, which has led directly to a recruitment, retention and sustainability crisis. Consistent with the work of Moloney and Pope (2013), the most highly

qualified practitioners in this research indicated that they were unlikely to remain in the sector and instead seek better opportunities elsewhere. While participants in this research welcomed government initiatives to address affordability, particularly through the ECCE scheme, this has led to precarious working conditions, as funding is only for 38 weeks. Consequently, part-time seasonal contracts, with practitioners claiming unemployment for the summer months, is common and not a characteristic associated with a profession. Participants indicated that the mismatch between funding and increased expectations were undermining the wellbeing of the sector. The policymaker was correct in recognising this as a complex challenge.

Investment in the sector has increased significantly, with the RTE programme 'Behind Closed Doors' highlighting that the featured childcare chain had made significant profits as a consequence of this funding. Reflective of Penn's (2019) warning of the domination of chains in the childcare sector, Reportlinkers' Global Market Reports identified childcare in Ireland as a lucrative global investment opportunity (Reportlinkers, 2019). Within this development, Penn (2018) cautions that the growth and power of some childcare chains will result in a priority of profits above quality and practitioners' wellbeing and lead to inequality of access for children. This undercurrent of dissent briefly arose in this research, where a practitioner expressed experiences of exploitation by owners. Direct payments by government to services, with no accountability structures in place, does not ensure that increased funding to the sector will result in improved pay and conditions for the workers. Urban (2018) argues that quality is always under threat in private for-profit organisations and called for consideration of public ownership, a point also made by a research participant. While some services may benefit from funding, smaller services are struggling to meet spiralling costs, exacerbated by increased insurance costs and the registration of services (Loughlin, 2019).

Unions and research participants advocated the introduction of pay scales through a Sectoral Employment Order (SEO) as a potential solution. This could have significant implications for the sustainability of services, unless government funding increases accordingly. The outgoing Minister Zappone had repeatedly articulated a commitment to support an SEO, should it be requested through unionised channels. These promises evidently sit uneasily within the sector, which experienced little improvement in their terms and conditions during her tenure, as witnessed in the February protest march. Yet unions have been struggling to attract sufficient membership to demand an SEO. Participants in this research explained that this arises from providers' fears for sustainability with an SEO and union involvement, combined

with the close relationships between providers and employees, where issues of loyalty, friendship and trust acted as barriers to unionisation.

The First Five Strategy aims to 'radically reform' the ELC funding model, which the policymaker indicated would financially incentivise services to meet specific quality criteria. This strategy will lead to a two-tiered funding model. Questions thus arise; who will benefit from this model, who will lose out, and what are the implications for quality reform when the criteria of quality and professionalism are more clearly defined? One possible criterion forwarded in the First Five included 'minimum service operating hours' (GOI, 2018c, p.175). This could have significant implications for the future of smaller sessional services, which are currently the most common form of childcare offered, representing 88% of the sector (Pobal, 2019). Ultimately, this may lead to further closures of smaller settings, a concern and reality for some participants in this research. The government formation discussions towards the close of this research speculated upon the possibility of a public childcare system. While this new system has not been realised, the Irish government's unprecedented move to bear the responsibility for the wages of practitioners and sustainability of the sector during the Covid19 pandemic does indicate, as mentioned earlier, a tangible shift towards viewing the ELC sector as a public, not private responsibility. This was further reiterated by Minister Roderic O'Gorman's comments that the state, rather than parents, are responsible for any increase in practitioners' salaries (Brennan, 2020). Does this mark a move away from the rhetoric that salaries are the responsibility of the private sector, not the government?

Ireland is at a critical intersection and moment of change, where policy directives are frequently contradictory, such as valuing the work of the ELC practitioner but not the practitioner; driving for professionalism and higher qualifications, yet reducing autonomy, proposing new funding models, then whisperings of the possibility of public childcare. All-encompassing collaborative discussions are required to consider the implications of any future policy action.

7.2.8 Leadership - an area for further development

The policymaker, aligned with the international focus, highlighted leadership as a critical area for future policy reform, noting initiatives already under way, including the Leadership for Inclusion Course (LiNC) and the work of Better Start. The 2016 regulations require services to have 'clear management structures' with 'lines of authority and accountability' in place

and to ensure employees are 'supervised' (GOI, 2016, pp.12-13). Area 4 of the Education Focused Inspections concentrates on Leadership, as does Goal D, Building Block 1 in the First Five Strategy. While some research indicates this corporate style of leadership is effective in raising quality in a cascading manner (Kaz & Wilcox, 2017), other research suggests it could be debilitating where 'a 'from above' approach, imposes control, rather than empowering creativity' (Dyer, 2018, p.348). This raises the question of whether a corporate style of leadership is more suited to the larger childcare chains, rather than the small sessional services, which may only have one owner. How we focus on leadership in future policy reform and how this transfers to practice, and the possible implications, need further consideration.

The Quality Agenda – Are there alternatives?

The Irish ELC sector – and its relationship with the Irish government – remains tense, with most historic issues remaining unresolved despite continual increased investment by the Irish government. The sector remains dispirited in the face of an ongoing recruitment and retention crisis, increased responsibilities, the burden of accountability, a sense of not being listened to and effectively a childcare system that remains expensive for parents. While overall, participants have positively affirmed that the Quality Agenda has been successful in raising standards, it would be remiss to forget or overlook the participants who highlighted the negative impact that policy was having on their practice. The ELC owner/provider articulated that services had suffered greatly, were overburdened with paperwork and rendered unsustainable due to inadequate funding and the stress of overwhelming expectations, ultimately leading to the closure of her setting. Equally, other comments indicated a sense of being over-regulated, stressed by chronic staff shortages and overwhelming expectations, against a backdrop of low status and limited consultation. The question arises; is there a better way?

Irish policy constantly looks outwards for international inspiration and evidence-based policy making infiltrates Irish policy discourse, but perhaps it is time to look inward? Although Sahlberg (2014, p.173) argues that 'it is easier to follow the paths that others have travelled than to be in the lead', perhaps it is time to take the lead and respond innovatively to the Irish ELC crisis. In this regard, Ireland could take inspiration from Finland where, as Sahlberg (2014) announced, educational excellence has happened in many respects due to a rejection of the Global Education

Reform Movement (GERM). Fielding and Moss (2011, p.ii) have also argued for the need to push back against an education system dominated by 'markets and competition, instrumentality and standardisation, managerialism and technical practice' and develop a ground level-up force to develop quality through democratic practice. Reggio Emilia is often hailed as a model of good practice, where teachers are respected for their professionalism and provided with the time to reflect and develop their practice based on their unique contexts. Equally, Finland provides the basis for much inspiration, where teaching is valued as a highly esteemed career path, teacher training degree programmes are developed to ensure graduates have developed the critical skills required for developing quality within their settings, and in practice teachers are trusted and therefore enjoy autonomy and flexibility to develop their teaching curriculums to meet the specific needs of their children and environmental context (Sahlberg, 2011; Happo et al., 2013).

As the ELC sector becomes more qualified with more graduates entering the sector, we now need to retain them, not just through improved pay and conditions, although these are important factors, but through allowing them to utilise their qualifications and to reflect and develop their practice in collaboration with children and families. Sahlberg (2014) advocates relaxing accountability structures to allow practitioners to focus on supporting children's learning, rather than concerning themselves with how to be compliant. This argument was reflected in this thesis by the participants of this research, who highlighted quality time and opportunities for children were constantly eroded by the pressures of paperwork and the burden of proof. In dedicating their book to Alex Bloom and Loris Malaguzzi, Fielding and Moss (2011, p.ii) emphasise their critical message of understanding 'why democracy matters' and how we need to consider what we need to do 'to live together more joyfully and more justly'.

Is the time right for a more democratic approach, where the voices of ELC teachers are embraced and invited to contribute to a future ELC sector which values that true quality is developed democratically through collaboration between key stakeholders at ground level, rather than imposed from above? The current consultation processes with the sector initiated by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) formerly known as the DCYA, which is underway, indicates that the Irish government does value the voices of practitioners. These processes, together with taking responsibility for protecting the sector in the face of Covid19, view ELC as a public rather than private

responsibility, indicating that the seeds of possibility are there for Ireland perhaps to become a leader and innovator in realising quality in the ELC sector. In order to become a leader, Ireland should take an inclusive approach that reflects local voices, contexts and cultures, rather than following a global reform movement without questioning the possible unintended consequences. This would help to ensure that quality becomes an orientation rather than a destination.

7.3 Final thoughts

While the majority of participants in this research were positive about the development of quality within the ELC sector, it would be remiss not to consider and listen to those voices who expressed dismay with the negative impact policy development was having on them. If we truly want to develop a professional sector, we need to listen and take their concerns seriously, like the provider who shared how policy had forced her to close her doors. Through social media and their recent protest, members of the ELC sector are indicating that graduates and experienced practitioners are leaving the sector and many smaller services are closing down. One key message that this research wishes to highlight is that not only do the intended consequences of policy need to be considered in their development, but also the unintended consequences. Actively including ELC practitioners' voices should support reflection on unintended consequences. If these services close down, who or what will replace them to provide access and quality for parents and children who require ELC, and what will the implications of such consequences be for quality development?

The Quality Agenda is welcomed, but as Rogers (2014) proposes, quality is not a destination it is a journey. This journey needs to be collaborative, where all on board, not just the driver, decide where we need to move to, why, and how. Policy development in Ireland remains a work in progress, ever evolving, changing, and responding to political/societal events and discourse. Meaningful consultation and collaboration with ELC practitioners, which recognises practitioners and providers as professionals and co-constructors in the development of quality, is critical for future policy development in the ELC sector. In order to realise this, technological responsiveness through social media needs consideration as a possible means to collaborate and connect with the complexity and diversity of the ELC sector. As future government proposals suggest, 'We are at an unprecedented moment in the history of our State' (FF & FG, 2020, p.1). Our response, therefore, must be collective and inclusive.

Postscript

What a difference a year makes? A final reflection on political developments that occurred during 2020 after data collection and analysis. What implications does 2020 and the global pandemic have for the future trajectory of ELC in Ireland?

On the 5th February 2020, three days before an Irish General Election, the tensions between the ELC sector and the Irish government reached a dramatic juncture when 30,000 early years practitioners and providers, mobilised by Together for Early Years (a conglomeration of unions and ELC organisations, which included the Early Years Alliance, an umbrella group of the union SIPTU, the Association of Childhood Professionals, the Federation of Early Childhood Providers, the National Childhood Network and Seas Suas), took to the streets to protest against pay, conditions, funding and the lack of consultation with the sector.

Three days later, the Irish General Election marked a historic move away from traditionally conservative and right wing voting in Ireland, dominated by the Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil parties, in favour of left wing parties and in particular Sinn Féin. The voting in many respects marked a protest vote against the current government and traditional parties, with many unknown Sinn Féin candidates topping the poles in many electorates (Coburn, 2020). While Sinn Féin claimed victory and Fine Gael accepted defeat, no government was actually formed. When the Coronavirus pandemic reached Ireland, many, including those who had voted against Fine Gael, came to admire Leo Varadkar's caretaker leadership, which showed decisiveness and dramatic responsiveness (Landen, 2020). The caretaker government's response was far-reaching and dramatic, with the effective closure of the country in a bid to save lives and assist the healthcare systems. While the impetus created by the February protest was somewhat muted by the arrival of the pandemic, the government's commitment to supporting the childcare sector throughout the crisis was unparalleled in any other area requiring government assistance. While the government did a U-turn on their agreement to retain all funding models during the closure period, in an unprecedented move through the creation of the Temporary Wage Subsidy Childcare Scheme (TWSCS) they took responsibility for paying the salaries of childcare practitioners during the pandemic and paid a subsistence to services in return for a promise from services to suspend charges to parents (DCYA, 2020b). This political move to support the sector during the closure period demonstrated the government's commitment to ensuring childcare provision would survive and be ready to reopen when required, In addition, this strategy unambiguously recognised

ELC as a public necessity rather than private responsibility. This commitment to the sector's sustainability was further extended with the July stimulus plan, which promised continued funding for the sector until December 2020 to facilitate ELC settings to remain sustainable and retain staff despite operating at the reduced capacity placed upon them by many parents continuing to work from home (DCYA, 2020a).

Early Childhood Ireland (ECI) (2020, p.4) viewed the government's Covid19 emergency plan as a possible template for a 'new Social Contract' to respond to the demands being placed on government by the sector, as was articulated in the February 2020 protest. The global pandemic, the ECI (2020, p.4) argued, demonstrated the criticality of 'having a robust and efficient childcare system for the functioning of the rest of society and the economy'. This response marked a positive commitment to the sector with the jointly articulated objective of respecting the importance of ELC for children's development and 'supporting the economy to return to normal' (DCYA, 2020b). However, what remains absent from these objectives is a commitment to the ELC practitioner and provider. Consequently, the tension between the government and the sector did not dissipate despite this commitment.

The chasm between the government and the sector was specifically illuminated by the failure of the government to convince ELC providers to sign up for their plan to provide childcare to frontline workers and their families, with only six providers nationwide signing up to provide outreach childcare in frontline workers' homes. A number of issues, including insurance and a lack of consultation with the sector, were attributed as causes for this fiasco (ECI, 2020).

A new government was formed during the pandemic and it was leaked to the press that government formation discussions were focusing on the creation of a publicly funded childcare system, rather than the currently private-dominated sector. However, the new government, comprising of a coalition between the traditional parties of Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Green Party, presented little change from the current commitments to childcare as set out in the First 5 Strategy, with the discourse of affordability, accessibility and quality remaining steadfast. Within the programme for government was a commitment to form a new agency, Childcare Ireland with the remit to expand high quality childcare in public and private settings (O'Gorman, 2020). A department with a possibly wider remit of Children, Disability, Equality and Integration and Youth, replaced the Department of Children and Youth Affairs. The impact of this change remains to be seen.

On the 27th June 2020, the Minister for the new department, Roderic O'Gorman, initiated a review of the childcare operating model to 'support the delivery of accessible, affordable and high quality early learning and care and school age childcare services' as was promised in the First 5 Strategy. This work was to complement what had already been initiated by the expert working group. The government at this juncture established an interdepartmental working group (IDG) to examine funding schemes and to 'recommend improvements based on principles of best practice', with the aspiration of developing a new model which would be more efficient and effective and include a significant consultation process of 'all relevant stakeholders'. Those involved in the working group, comprised of government funded childcare organisations. Submissions were invited from the public; a survey of all households with children under 15 would commence, and a 'series of thematic online consultation events with providers, practitioners, parents and other key stakeholders' were undertaken in October 2020 (DCYA, 2020b; 2020c). At the close of the year, practitioners, providers and stakeholders were invited to an information webinar: 'The future of the workforce and the future of funding within the early learning and care and school-age childcare sector: key consultation findings, next steps', further reiterating a commitment that consultation with the sector was tangible and not merely tokenism (DCEDIY, 2020).

The government's commitment to the sector during the pandemic was critical; however, the issues and tensions between the government and the sector remained, with recruitment, retention and unrest continuing as critical features. The Federation of Private Providers, a member of the Together for Early Years movement, is moving above unionisation towards joining Irish Business and Employers Confederation (IBEC) who attribute themselves to being the largest lobbying group for the business sector (IBEC, 2020; FEDS, 2020), but to date this does not seem to have been replicated within the other organisations connected with the 2020 protest. While united on the 5th February, Together for Early Years fundamentally remains a conglomeration of different group with some common ground, but also with fundamental differences reflective of the diversity in the sector. Research by ECI (2020) reflects a deeply dissatisfied sector, frustrated by funding mechanisms, stressed by recruitment that had been further expounded by the ongoing threat of staff becoming ill and no emergency staff to replace them, and by the additional responsibilities placed on the sector to reopen safely in the midst of a pandemic. However in a final twist, as this research is submitted for publication, The DCEDIY (2020a) announced on the 10th December 2020, the establishment of a process to discuss how to address the issue of pay and conditions through

partnership with SIPTU and CSI/IBEC, and to consider how a Joint Labour Committee might support this process.

Policy continues to evolve unpredictably and at speed within the ELC sector in Ireland. As governments, including Ireland's, respond to the unprecedented Covid19 pandemic, a commitment to sustaining an ELC sector appears consistent, but how policy and the sector will evolve remains uncertain. This illustrates the shifting policyscape at global and local levels, illuminating the inadequacy of conceptualising quality as a destination. Instead, this thesis aspires to consider quality as a collaborative and inclusive orientation.

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Appendix 1 – Ethical approval

Downloaded: 24/03/2020
Approved: 26/01/2018

Criona Blackburne
Registration number: 150137067
School of Education
Programme: EdD in Early Chidlhood Education

Dear Criona

PROJECT TITLE: From Policy to Practice, have early childhood policies aimed at enhancing quality in the early years sector enhanced experiences for young children? The Practitioners perspective.
APPLICATION: Reference Number 016678

On behalf of the University ethics reviewers who reviewed your project, I am pleased to inform you that on 26/01/2018 the above-named project was **approved** on ethics grounds, on the basis that you will adhere to the following documentation that you submitted for ethics review:

- University research ethics application form 016678 (form submission date: 15/01/2018); (expected project end date: 30/06/2019).
- Participant information sheet 1037435 version 3 (15/01/2018).
- Participant consent form 1037439 version 2 (08/01/2018).
- Participant consent form 1037438 version 1 (20/11/2017).
- Participant consent form 1037437 version 1 (20/11/2017).
- Participant consent form 1037436 version 1 (20/11/2017).

If during the course of the project you need to deviate significantly from the above-approved documentation please inform me since written approval will be required.

Your responsibilities in delivering this research project are set out at the end of this letter.

Yours sincerely

David Hyatt
Ethics Administrator
School of Education

Please note the following responsibilities of the researcher in delivering the research project:

- The project must abide by the University's Research Ethics Policy: https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/rs/ethicsandintegrity/ethicspolicy/approval-procedure
- The project must abide by the University's Good Research & Innovation Practices Policy: https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/polopoly_fs/1.671066!/file/GRIPPolicy.pdf
- The researcher must inform their supervisor (in the case of a student) or Ethics Administrator (in the case of a member of staff) of any significant changes to the project or the approved documentation.
- The researcher must comply with the requirements of the law and relevant guidelines relating to security and confidentiality of personal data.
- The researcher is responsible for effectively managing the data collected both during and after the end of the project in line with best practice, and any relevant legislative, regulatory or contractual requirements.

Appendix 2 - Participant Information Sheet - Online survey and forum.

Participant Information Sheet

Criona Blackburne

Research Title: How effective has the government's quality agenda been on improving practice in early years settings from the practitioners' perspective? This research will focus on the early childhood policies which have emerged as part of the government's quality agenda with a view to assessing their impact at ground level in improving experiences for young children in these settings.

Invitation to participate: You are invited to take part in a research project which will focus on the impact of recent Irish early childhood education and care policies which have emerged, as a consequence of the Irish government's articulated commitment to enhancing quality in the early years sector. This research aims to capture the impact of these policies on early childhood practice at ground level within your setting from your perspective as an early years' practitioner. Whether or not you take part is your choice, if you choose not to participate, you do not have to give a reason and no judgement will be made. If you decide that you do want to take part now, but change your mind later, you can leave the research process at any time.

Before deciding, you need to understand why this research is being undertaken and what it would involve for you. Please take the time to read the following information carefully. Ask questions if anything you read is not clear or if you would like more information. Please take the time to decide whether or not to participate and feel free to discuss your decision with friends or family.

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to sign a consent form. You will be provided with a copy of the consent form and information sheet for your records. However, in relation to the online survey or the online forum groups, participation will be taken as consent.

Possible Risks or benefits of participation: As participation is voluntary and the identity of participants will be protected at all times, the researcher perceives no risks. Participation

should be of benefit to the participants as it will provide a forum to discuss the impact of contemporary early childhood policies on their daily practice. The researcher aspires that this research could inform future policy development and implementation.

Participants Rights: Participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate and if you do decide to do so, you are free to withdraw at any time without any consequence whatsoever. When the research data has been gathered, the researcher will share this information with you and you will again be provided with the right to clarify the information provided or to withdraw any information at that point

Confidentiality: All information you provide will be used only for the purpose of this research and your confidentiality will be respected at all times, unless upholding this confidentiality results in the researcher contravening legal or regulatory requirements. In particular, the researcher still has obligations under the Children First Act (2015) to ensure that all children's wellbeing and protection is not deemed to be at risk.

All information will be stored safely in keeping with the Data Protection Act (2017). The computer being used to gather and save the information has been encrypted. Your identity will not be revealed as anonymity will be protected throughout the process.

Survey Monkey will be used as the method of distributing an online survey. This medium was chosen as it provides protection for data. The information gathered through Survey Monkey is password protected, therefore I am the only person with access to the data gathered. Once the research is completed, Survey Monkey locks the account from anybody logging in and the data is then destroyed.

The survey will contain a range of questions both closed and open to seek practitioner's views on how recent policy is impacting on their daily practice. Within the online survey on Survey Monkey there will be an invitation to participants to put forward their name, in order to engage in a more in-depth secret online focus group discussion, where further conversations can emerge to debate the impact that early childhood policy is having on daily practice and interactions together with the care of young children.

A secret Facebook group provides the maximum online privacy, as it is invitation-only, not searchable on Facebook and only members can see posts. Therefore, only people invited into the group by myself as the administrator will be allowed to join and only those within the group will be able to see the data generated within this forum. The 'secret' group setting does

not allow non-members access to the group or to see, distribute or share the content with their own personal network. The only way information can be shared is through members copying content and pasting it to their personal walls. This does place an onus on participants to be respectful of the confidentiality of their co-participants. A condition of involvement will require participants to agree to respect the confidentiality and privacy of the other participants and any breach in confidentiality such as copying and pasting onto a personal forum will result in removal from the group. All participants will be informed that the ultimate protection of their privacy is dependent on all members honouring one another's right to privacy, in the same way as it would be if the participants were engaged in a face-to-face focus research group.

Once the data has been gathered and the research process is completed, I will delete the group. This is done by removing the members first and once all the members are removed, the group can be deleted. This is permanent and the group or the data cannot be retrieved again (Facebook, Help Centre, 2017).

There are a few limitations to privacy on Facebook pages of which participants will be fully informed in writing in the participant sheet, before they agree to take part. As there is only one administrator, it is highly unlikely that the page could be hacked into. However, due to the constantly evolving skills of hackers, this cannot be guaranteed. No matter what type of group you choose and what settings you take advantage of, there is a limit on how private Facebook groups can actually be. If users report content inside the group as violating Facebook's Community Standards, it can be taken down. Users can even be temporarily banned from the platform for such violations (Gebhart, 2017).

By using both an online survey and an invitation to join a secret closed group, all the issues relating to informed consent that would be upheld within traditional research methods can be equally respected within this online forum, including informed consent, the right not to participate or to later withdraw, confidentiality and identity protection. The information from the surveys can be submitted anonymously, unless the participants choose to forward their contact details, so that they can be invited to join the secret Facebook group, to create an online forum, so that the impact of policy on practice can be explored at a deeper level. The information from the online forum will be in a secret group, so therefore only the group members will have access to it or know who is a member of the group.

In the onsite visit, a video recording or photographs may be taken, but only with the additional consent of the service provider. Interviews may be recorded with the consent of the participant or alternatively the researcher will take notes. The content of the interview will be shared with the participant to ensure accuracy and clarity of meaning. All recorded information will be saved to an SD card which will be stored in the locked filing cabinet outlined above. Only information pertaining to this research project will be saved on this SD card.

All signed consent forms, original audio, visual recordings and data collected in written format will be retained in the filing cabinet, to which only the researcher has access until after my doctorate has been conferred. The data will then be destroyed or deleted as appropriate. Under the Freedom of Information Act (2017), you are entitled to access the information that you have provided at any time. You also can withdraw the information provided at any point within the agreement of this research, until the research process is completed and documented. All information gathered from the participants will be used only for the purpose of this research. The identity of the participants within the write up of the research will be anonymized. The researcher intends to publish in part or full the findings from this research. The University of Sheffield also publish theses within the University libraries.

Information on the Researcher: My name is Criona Blackburne, my background is in education, firstly as a secondary school teacher, then as an owner/manager of an early years setting and subsequently as a tutor and lecturer in early childhood education. Most recently, I have also undertaken the role of early years specialist on the AIM team, to support services to include children with additional needs, to enable them access and meaningfully participate in their ECCE year, as set up under the Access and Inclusion Model, established as an outcome of the AIM Policy launched in 2016. I have a Masters in Early Childhood Education from the University of Sheffield and I am currently undertaking this doctorate also with the University of Sheffield.

Background and Purpose of the Research: Education, and in particular early childhood education, is consistently highlighted and recognised as the most critical element in achieving a progressive society (Blackburne, 2016b; Lutz, 2016). In terms of early childhood education, the focus internationally and in Ireland is on developing structures to ensure quality early childhood care and education (OECD, 2017; DCYA, 2015; United Nations, 2015; European Commission, 2017). In Ireland, the focus on enhancing quality accelerated with momentum

from 2013 onwards, where a wide range of initiatives have been introduced, aiming to improving quality within early childhood settings.

Many of these initiatives were underpinned by legislation with the enactment on the 15th December 2013 of the Child and Family Act. This Act allowed for the establishment of TUSLA, the Child and Family Agency, which was established on 1st January 2014, as a legal entity, responsible for child and family services, including the regulation of the early years education sector. The Act also established the concept of services registering, rather than simply notifying TUSLA of their existence, and enabled the revision of regulations, improving standards and increasing the power of inspection processes (Government of Ireland, 2014). On Wednesday 5th March 2014, Minister Fitzgerald declared in the Dail Debates, that the government was in 'the midst of an ambitious reform agenda' and that the aspiration of this reform was to 'fundamentally change how services are delivered'. This reform directly impacted and continues to impact on ECEC practitioner's practice and it is this change which leads to the key impetus for this research, which seeks to examine how effective this reform has been in meeting the objective of enhancing quality from the early years practitioners' perspective. It is hoped that the findings can illuminate the reality of implementing early childhood policy into practice. The research will investigate what policies or aspects of policies have been helpful in improving practice and also highlight policies that may be less effective or create barriers against improving quality practices. It is ultimately aspired that the findings of this research could inform future policy development, in order to bridge the gap between policy design and policy implementation.

Ethical Approval: Ethical approval has been sought and received from the Ethics Review Committee within the University of Sheffield.

Further information: Should you require further information, you may contact me by e-mail which is crionablackburne@hotmail.com or by telephone (086) 3498581. You may also contact my supervisor Professor Elizabeth Wood at e.a.wood@sheffield.ac.uk.

Appendix 3 - Participant Information Sheet: Semi-structured interview with a policymaker.

Participant Information Sheet

Criona Blackburne

Research Title: How effective has the government's quality agenda been on improving practice in early years settings from the practitioners' perspective? This research will focus on the early childhood policies which have emerged as part of the government's quality agenda, to assess their impact at ground level in improving experiences for young children in these settings.

Invitation to participate: You are invited to take part in a research project focusing on how recent Irish early childhood education and care policies emerging as part of the Irish government's commitment to enhancing quality in early years settings is impacting on daily practice in early years settings from an early years practitioners perspective. As a policy maker, it is the view of the researcher that your opinion in terms of the aspirations behind the development of recent early childhood policy, will enrich this project, both in terms of bringing balance to the research and also to help identify the link between policy as it is intended and policy as it transfers to practice. Whether you take part or not is your choice, if you choose not to participate, you do not have to give a reason and no judgement will be made against you. If you decide that you do want to take part now, but change your mind later, you can leave the research at any time.

Before deciding, you need to understand why this research is being undertaken and what it would involve for you. Please take time to read the following information carefully. Ask questions if anything you read is not clear, or if you would like more information. Please take time to decide whether or not to participate and feel free to discuss your decision with colleagues, friends or family.

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to sign a consent sheet. You will be provided with a copy of the consent form and information sheet for your own records.

Possible risks or benefits of participation: As participation is voluntary and the identity of participants will be protected at all times, the researcher perceives no undue risks. As policy aspirations have been focused on improving quality, it is the view of the researcher that including the voice from a policy development perspective will provide an additional dimension and present balance to the overall analysis of the barriers that can arise which prevent policy aspirations from transferring into practice at implementation stage, from the practitioners' perspective. There is the potential that some of the views and opinions expressed by practitioners may be critical of aspects of recent policy development. However these opinions do need to be listened to and together with the positive feedback a clear picture can emerge which will highlight the policies and aspects of policies that are having a significant positive impact on practice and those that may be less successful or even act as a barrier to enhancing practice. The findings from this research have the potential to provide clear and balanced information that can assist in bridging the gap that can exist between policy aspirations and transferring those aspirations into practice. The researcher aspires that this research could inform future policy development and support policy aspirations being realized at implementation stage.

Participants Rights: Participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate and if you do decide to participate you are free to withdraw at any time without any consequence whatsoever. When the research data has been gathered, the researcher will share this information with you and you will again be provided with the right to clarify the information provided or to withdraw any information at that point.

Confidentiality: All information you provide will be used only for the purpose of this research and your confidentiality will be respected at all times, unless upholding this confidentiality results in the researcher contravening legal or regulatory requirements.
All information will be stored safely in keeping with the General Data Protection Regulations (2018). The computer being used to gather and save the information has been encrypted. Your identity will not be revealed as anonymity will be respected throughout the process. Interviews will be recorded with the consent of the participant or alternatively the researcher will take notes. The content of the interview will be shared with the participant to ensure accuracy and clarity of meaning. All recorded information will be stored in writing or on an

SD card, which will be stored in a locked filing cabinet, which is stored in a concealed area of my home. Only information pertaining to this research project and received from you will be stored on this SD card. There will be no marks on this SD card to identify the participant.

All signed consent forms, original audio recordings and data collected in written format will be retained in the locked filing cabinet, which only the researcher has access to, until after my doctorate has been conferred. The data will then be destroyed or deleted as appropriate. Under the Freedom of Information Act (2014) you are entitled to access the information you have provided at any time. You also can withdraw the information provided at any point within the agreement of this research, until the research is completed and submitted. The researcher intends to publish in part or full, the findings from this research. The University of Sheffield also publish and retain doctoral theses within the University libraries.

Information on the Researcher: My name is Criona Blackburne, my background is in education, firstly as a secondary school teacher, then as an owner/manager of an early years setting and then as a tutor and lecturer in early childhood education. Most recently, I have also undertaken the role of Early Years Specialist on the AIM team, which supports services to include children with additional needs so they can access and meaningfully participate in their ECCE year, as set up under the Access and Inclusion Model, established as an outcome of the AIM Policy launched in 2016. I have a Masters in Early Childhood Education from the University of Sheffield and I am currently undertaking this doctorate also with the University of Sheffield.

Background and Purpose of the Research: Education, and in particular early childhood education, is consistently singled out as the most critical element in achieving a progressive society (Blackburne, 2016b; Lutz, 2016). In terms of early childhood education, the focus internationally and in Ireland is on developing structures to ensure quality early childhood care and education (OECD, 2017; DCYA, 2015; United Nations, 2015; European Commission, 2017). In Ireland the focus on enhancing quality accelerated with momentum from 2013 onwards, where there have been a wide range of initiatives introduced with a view to improving quality within early childhood settings.

Many of these initiatives were underpinned by legislation with the enactment on the 15th December 2013 of the Child and Family Act. This Act allowed for the establishment of

TUSLA, the Child and Family Agency, which was established on the 1st January 2014, as a legal entity, responsible for child and family services, including the regulation of the early years sector. The Act also established the concept of services registering, rather than simply notifying TUSLA of their existence, and enabled the revision of regulations, raising standards and increasing the power of inspection processes (Government of Ireland, 2014). On Wednesday 5th March 2014, Minister Fitzgerald declared in the Dail Debates that the government was in 'the midst of an ambitious reform agenda' and that the aspiration of this reform was to 'fundamentally change how services are delivered'. This reform directly impacted and continues to impact on ECEC practitioner's practice and it is this change which leads to the key impetus for this research, which seeks to examine how effective this reform has been in meeting the objective of enhancing quality from the early years practitioners' perspective. It is hoped that the findings can illuminate the reality of implementing early childhood policy into practice. The research will investigate what policies or aspects of policies have been helpful in improving practice and highlight policies that may be less effective or create barriers against improving quality practices. It is ultimately aspired that the findings of this research could inform future policy development, in order to bridge the gap between policy design and policy implementation.

Ethical Approval: Ethical approval has been sought and received from the Ethics review committee at the University of Sheffield.

Further information: Should you require further information you may contact me by e-mail at crionablackburne@hotmail.com or by telephone (086) 3498581. You may also contact my supervisor Professor Elizabeth Wood at e.a.wood@sheffield.ac.uk.

Appendix 4 – Consent form – policymaker interview

Consent Form to participate in an interview

Research Title: How effective has the government's quality agenda been on improving practice in early years settings from the practitioners' perspective? This research will focus on the early childhood policies, which have emerged as part of the government's quality agenda and assess their impact at ground level in improving experiences for young children in these settings.

Thank you for reading the participant information sheet for this research. The focus of this interview is to seek your perspective on the aspirations behind recent early years policy development, focusing on enhancing quality in the early years sector. If you are happy to participate, then please complete and sign the form below. Please initial the boxes below to confirm you agree with each statement:

Please Initial box:

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason and without there being any negative consequences. In addition, should I not wish to answer any particular question or questions, I am free to decline. ☐

I understand that my responses will be kept strictly confidential. I understand that my name will not be linked with the research materials, and will not be identified or identifiable in the report or reports that result from the research. ☐

I agree for the information that I communicate in this interview can be used to provide data for this research project. I understand that the information that I provide will be used only for data collection and analysis. I agree that extracts from this interview, from which I would not be personally identified, may be used in the research thesis and may also be used in conference presentations, report or journal article developed as a result of the research. I also understand that, the University of Sheffield, who have provided ethical permission to the researcher to undertake this project may publish the research. I understand that no other use will be made of the information from the interview without my written permission, and that no one beyond the researcher will be allowed access to the original recording. I agree to have this interview recorded. ☐

I agree that my anonymised data will be kept for future research purposes such as publications related to this study after the completion of the study. ☐

I agree to take part in this interview. ☐

_____	_____	_____
Name of participant	Date	Signature
_____	_____	_____
Principal Investigator	Date	Signature

Appendix 5 – Consent form – online forum

Consent Form to participate in a closed online forum on Facebook

Title: How effective has the government's quality agenda been on improving practice in early years settings from the practitioners' perspective? This research will focus on the early childhood policies that have emerged as part of the government's quality agenda to assess their impact at ground level in improving experiences for young children in these settings.

Thank you for reading the information sheet about the interview sub-study. If you are happy to participate then please complete and sign the form below. Please initial the boxes below to confirm that you agree with each statement:

	Please Initial box:
I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet dated 15/11/2017 and have had the opportunity to ask questions.	☐
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason and without there being any negative consequences. In addition, should I not wish to answer any particular question or questions, I am free to decline.	☐
I understand that my responses will be kept strictly confidential. I understand that my name will not be linked with the research materials, and will not be identified or identifiable in the report or reports that result from the research.	☐
I agree for the information that I communicate on this online forum can be used to provide data for this research project. I understand that the dialogue made within this forum will be used only for data collection and analysis and that extracts from the forum, from which I would not be personally identified, may be used in any the research thesis, which is the key impetus of this research, but may also be used in conference presentations, report or journal article developed as a result of the research. I also understand that the research may be published by the University of Sheffield, who has provided ethical permission to the researcher to undertake this project. I understand that no other use will be made of the information in the online forum without my written permission, and that no one outside the research team will be allowed access to the original recording.	☐
I agree that my anonymised data will be kept for future research purposes such as publications related to this study after the completion of the study.	☐
I would be interested in participating in further research, where I would facilitate on onsite visit of my early years' service to the researcher so that an observation and interview can take place to share the impact of recent policy developments on the quality of experiences that we provide for young children. I understand that an expression of interest at this point, is not an agreement to take part and that I might not be selected or that I can withdraw my interest at any point, with no repercussions.	☐
I agree to take part in this interview.	☐

_____	_____	_____
Name of participant	Date	Signature
_____	_____	_____
Principal Investigator	Date	Signature

Appendix 6 - Questions in the online survey

Survey

How has Early Childhood Policy impacted on practice in early years settings?

Profile

Q. 1 How long have you worked in early childhood care and education?

- Less than one year
- One to five years
- Five to ten years
- Ten to fifteen years

Q. 2 What is the highest level of qualification you have achieved in early childhood education and care?

- No formal qualifications
- FETAC Level 5
- FETAC Level 6
- HETAC Level 7
- HETAC Level 8
- HETAC Level 9
- HETAC Level 10

Q. 3 What is your current role?

- Owner
- Owner/Manager
- Manager
- Room leader
- Room Assistant

Q. 4 What is the chosen pedagogical approach in your room?

- Montessori
- High Scope
- Reggio Emilia
- Play-based
- Other

Q. 5 In 2013, Minister Fitzgerald launched the Quality agenda, which introduced a range of measures to improve quality in the early years sector. Some key policies that have emerged as a consequence of the policy agenda are listed below. Please click the policies with which you are familiar.

	Very familiar	Familiar	No opinion	Not familiar	Very unfamiliar

Publishing of preschool inspection reports					
Registration of early years services.					
Introduction of the Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016					
Establishment of Better Start Quality Development Service					
Commencement of the Education focused Inspections.					
Launch of the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM)					
Introduction of Minimum qualifications.					
Changes in the recruitment policy for TUSLA early years inspectors					
Childcare Capital funding programmes					
Provision of increased capitation rates and non-contact time.					
Increased capitation incentives for having a Level 7 or higher qualification in Early Childhood Education and Care					
Extension of the ECCE scheme to allow children commence their free preschool from 2 years and 8 months					
Passing the Children First Act (2015) and updating Children First Guidelines and policies/procedures under this Act.					
Other, please specify					

Q. 6 In your view, has the overall impact of this Quality Agenda improved the quality of practice and provision of early childhood services in Ireland?

	Strongly Agree	Agree	No opinion	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Significantly improved quality in your ECE setting/room					
Has improved quality in some areas, but reduced quality in other areas.					
Has created barriers to the development of quality and only minimally improved practice.					
Recent policy has had no impact on practice.					

Q. 7 Following on from your familiarity with the key policies which have emerged from the policy agenda, please indicate how significant or insignificant you believe them to be in enhancing quality in your early years setting.

Please rank them from very significant to insignificant in terms of enhancing quality in your early years setting.

	Significantly enhanced Quality	Enhanced Quality	No impact on improving Quality	Reduced Quality	Significantly reduced Quality
Publishing of preschool inspection reports					
Registration of early years services.					
Introduction of the Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016					
Establishment of Better Start Quality Development Service					
Commencement of the Education focused Inspections.					
Launch of the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM)					

Introduction of Minimum qualifications.					
Changes in the recruitment policy for TUSLA early years inspectors					
Childcare Capital funding programmes					
Provision of increased capitation rates and non-contact time.					
Increased capitation incentives for having a Level 7 or higher qualification in Early Childhood Education and Care					
Extension of the ECCE scheme to allow children commence their free preschool from 2 years and 8 months					
Passing the Children First Act (2015) and updating Children First Guidelines and policies/procedures under this act.					
Other, please specify					

Q. 8 In your opinion, what are the key ideas which are supporting the development of quality in the early years sector?

	Very significantly enhanced Quality	Significantly enhanced Quality	No impact	Reduced Quality	Significantly reduced Quality
• Planning, assessing and documenting					
Continuous professional development					
Partnership with parents					

Collaborative practice with outside agencies					
Aistear Síolta Practice Guide					
Inclusion					
Child led, child centred approach					
Degree led sector					
Network meetings					

Q. 9 What factors do you think are fundamental to enhancing quality in early years settings?

Q. 10 In your view, which ECE policies have had the most positive impact on your practice and why? Please explain

Q. 11 Do you have any suggestions for policy that you feel could significantly improve quality in the early years sector?

Q. 12 If you would like to add any further responses you think are relevant to the overall question on how policy is impacting on practice, please use the space below to comment.

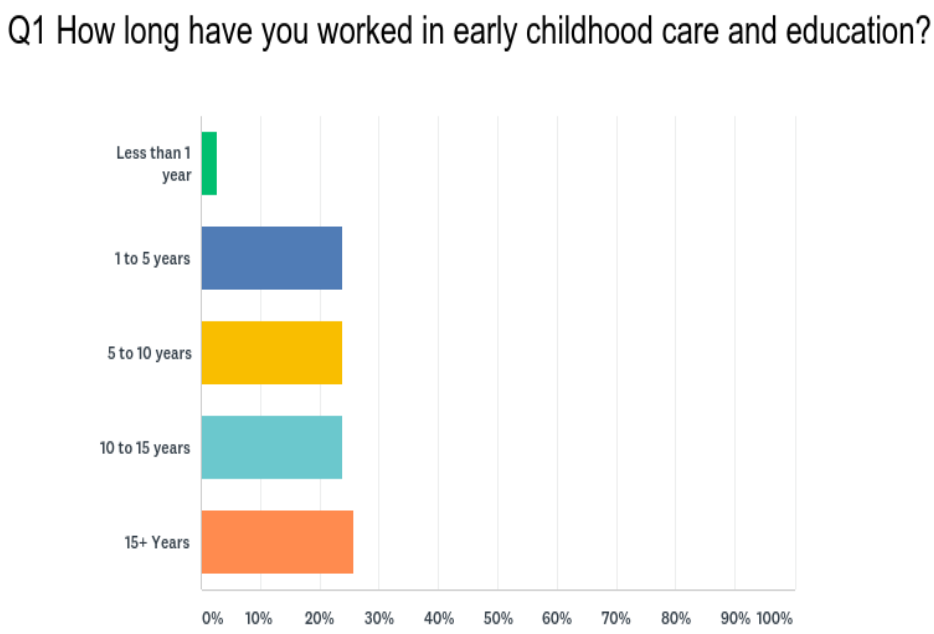
Q.13. The next part of this research process is to create a closed Facebook Forum to allow participants engage in deeper discussions in relation to the impact of recent and emerging policies on quality practices in early years settings. If you would be interested in engaging in this part of the research, please tick yes and include your contact details in the comment box.

Q. 14 Thank you for participating in this survey. For those of you who are willing to engage in a closed Facebook Forum, participants will be selected on a random basis if the number of volunteers exceed a realistic total. Conditions of agreeing to join the group will apply based on ethical considerations.

Appendix 7 – Graphs and content of graphs created to present quantitative findings

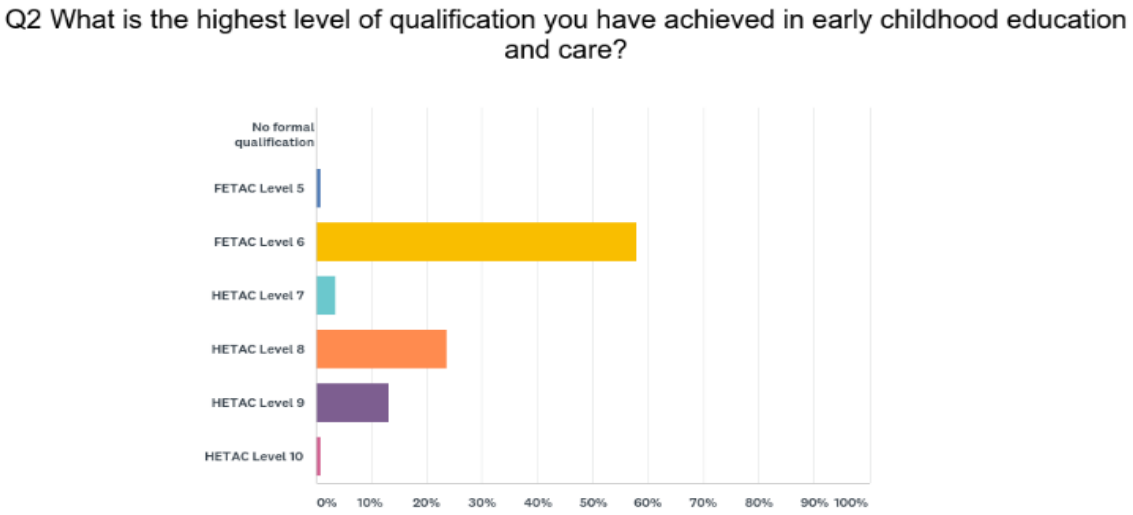
Q1. Length of Service

Graphs of the findings below.



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Less than 1 year	2.65%	3
1 to 5 years	23.89%	27
5 to 10 years	23.89%	27
10 to 15 years	23.89%	27
15+ Years	25.66%	29
TOTAL		113

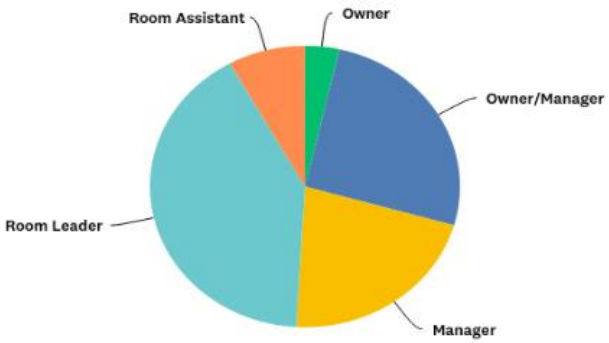
Q.2 Qualifications of participants



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
No formal qualification	0.00%	0
FETAC Level 5	0.88%	1
FETAC Level 6	57.89%	66
HETAC Level 7	3.51%	4
HETAC Level 8	23.68%	27
HETAC Level 9	13.16%	15
HETAC Level 10	0.88%	1
TOTAL		114

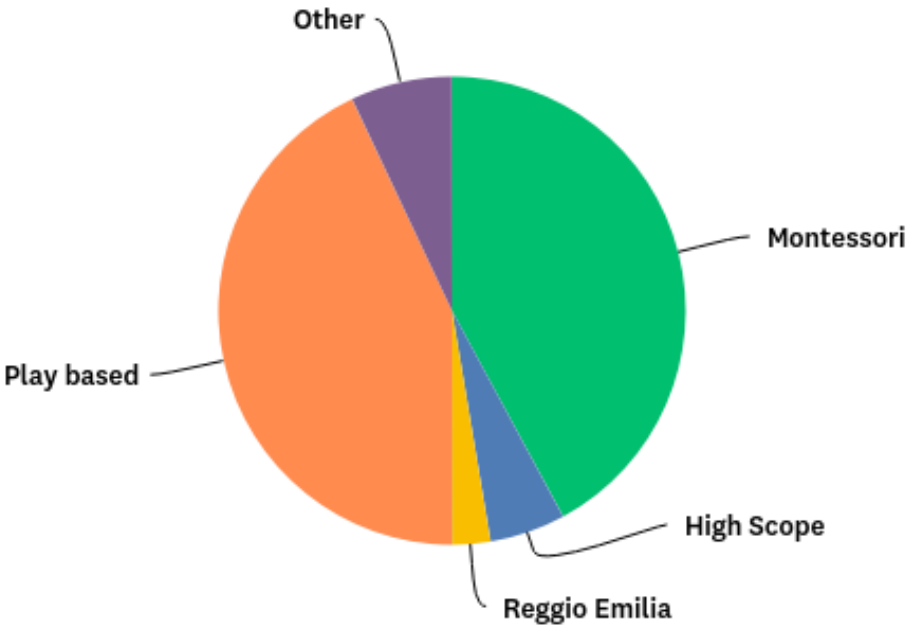
Q. 3. Occupations within the sector

Q3 What is your current role in early childhood practice?



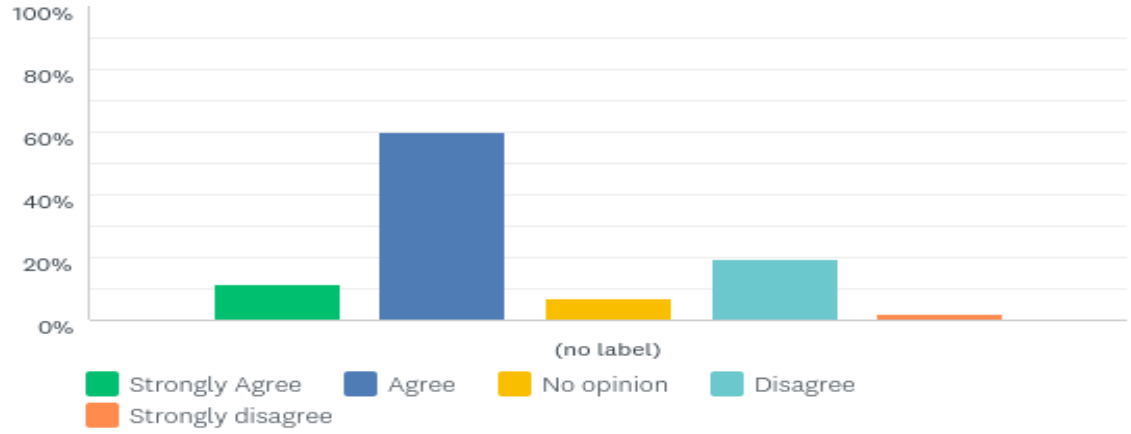
ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Owner	3.57%	4
Owner/Manager	25.89%	29
Manager	21.43%	24
Room Leader	41.07%	46
Room Assistant	8.04%	9
TOTAL		112

Q.5 Pedagogical Approaches



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Montessori	42.11%	48
High Scope	5.26%	6
Reggio Emilia	2.63%	3
Steiner	0.00%	0
Play based	42.98%	49
Other	7.02%	8
TOTAL		114

Q. 6. How successful has the Quality Agenda been in raising quality standards?

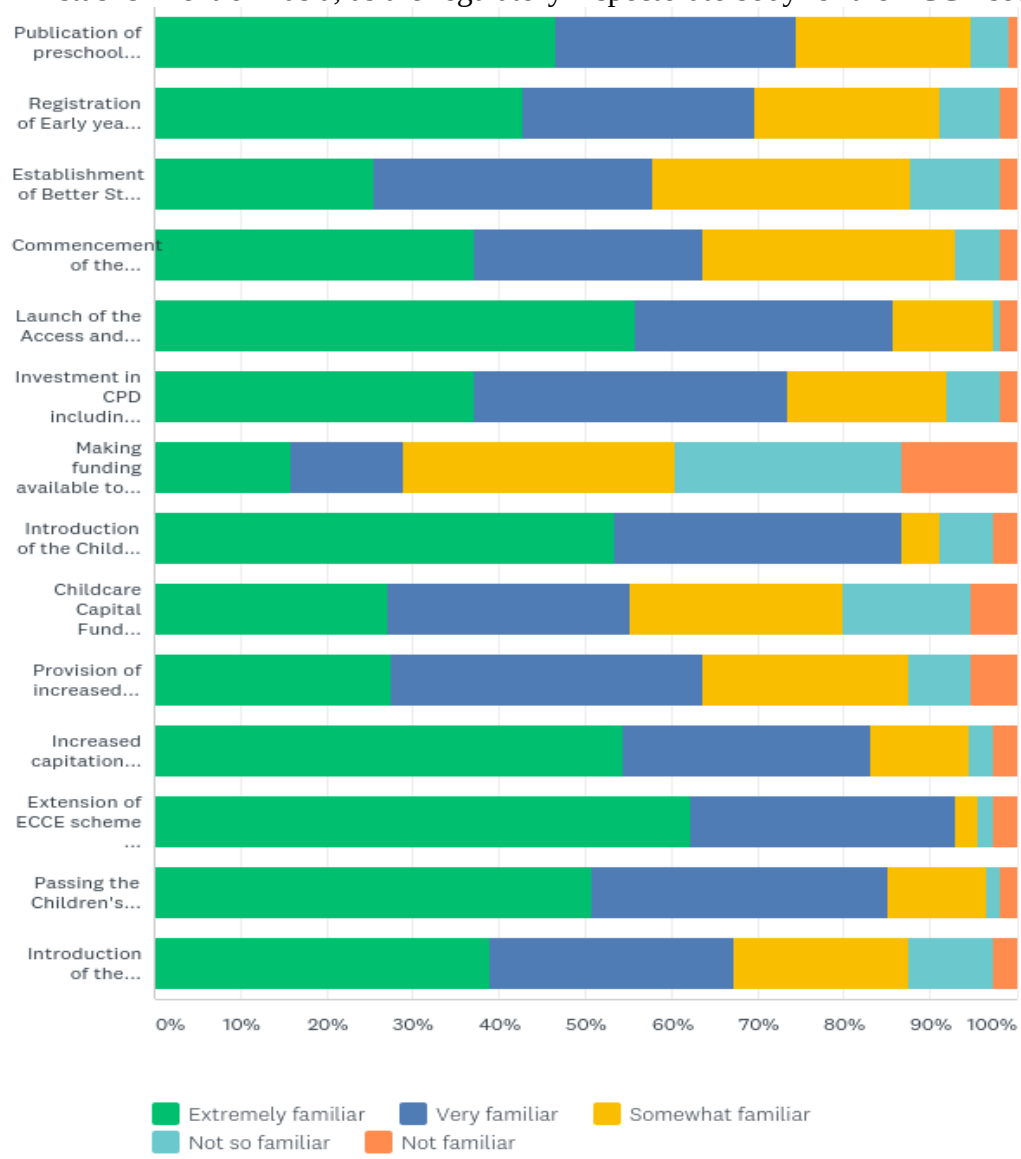


	STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	NO OPINION	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE	TOTAL	WEIGHTED AVERAGE
(no label)	11.61% 13	59.82% 67	7.14% 8	19.64% 22	1.79% 2	112	2.40

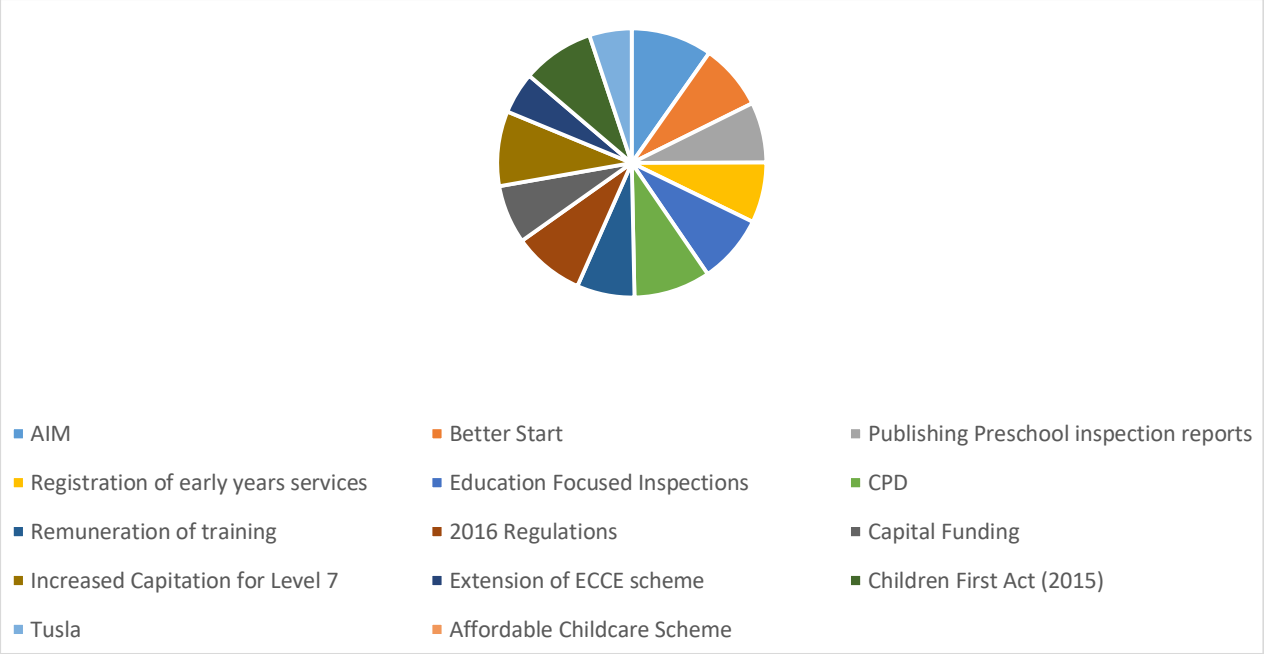
Q.7 Awareness and familiarity with specific policies, see below

- Publishing of inspection reports
- Registration of early years services
- Establishment of Better Start Quality Development Services
- Commencement of the Education Focused inspections
- Launch of Access and Inclusion Model (AIM)
- Investment in CPD including LiNC, Equality and Diversity training, Hanen, Lámh, Child protection etc.
- Allocation of funding to provide remuneration for staff attendance at training
- Introduction of the Childcare Act 1991 (Early Years Services Regulations) 2016
- Childcare capital funding programme
- Provision of increased capitation rates and non-contact time

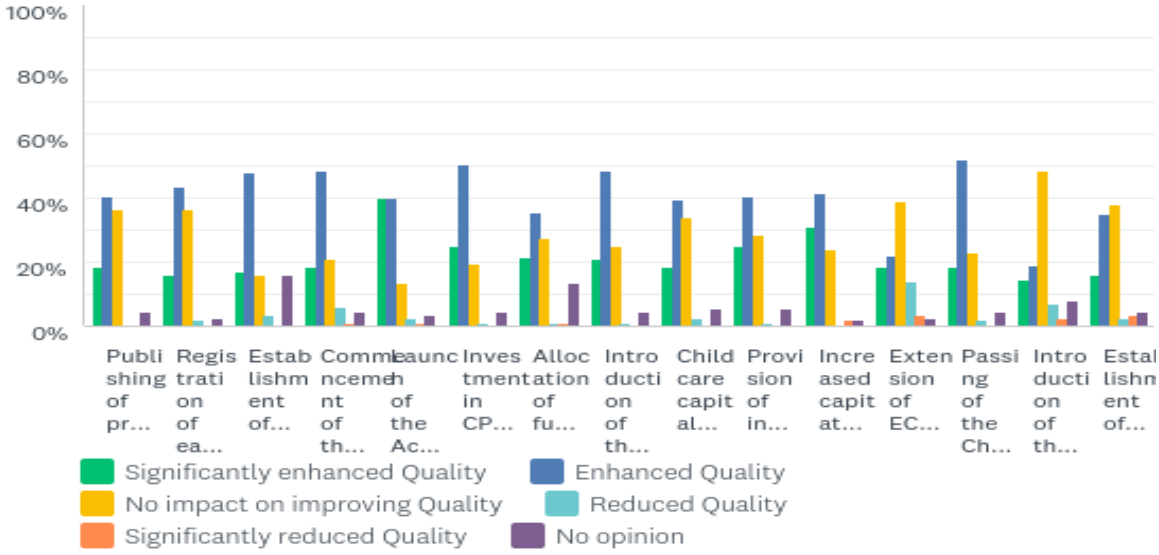
- Increased capitation incentives for employing a room leader with a Level 7 or higher qualification in an ECCE room
- Extension of ECCE scheme to allow children to commence their free preschool years at 2 years and 8 months until they start primary school
- Passing of the Children First Act (2015) and updating Children First guidelines
- Introduction of the Affordable Childcare Scheme
- Establishment of Tusla, as the regulatory inspectorate body for the ECCE sector.



Q.8 Policies considered significant in raising quality standards.



Policies considered most significant and those considered insignificant in supporting the development of quality

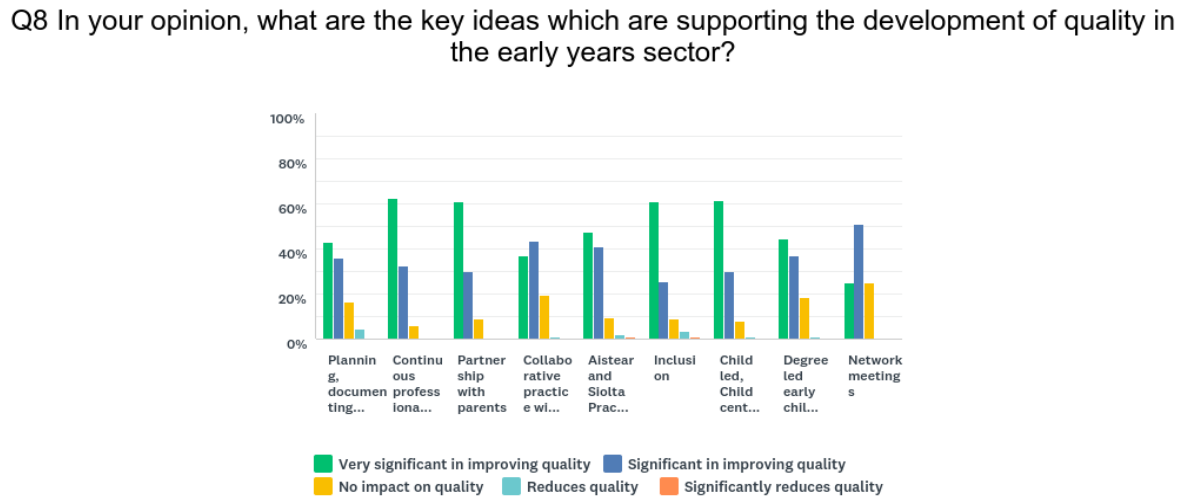


Policies in order as presented on the graph

- Publishing of inspection reports
- Registration of early years services
- Establishment of Better Start Quality Development Services
- Commencement of the Education Focused inspections
- Launch of Access and Inclusion Model (AIM)
- Investment in CPD including LiNC, Equality and Diversity training, Hanen, Lámh, Child protection etc.
- Allocation of funding to provide remuneration for staff attendance at training
- Introduction of the Childcare Act 1991 (Early Years Services Regulations) 2016
- Childcare capital funding programme
- Provision of increased capitation rates and non-contact time

- Increased capitation incentives for employing a room leader with a Level 7 or higher qualification in an ECCE room
- Extension of ECCE scheme to allow children to commence their free preschool years at 2 years and 8 months until they start primary school
- Passing of the Children First Act (2015) and updating Children First guidelines
- Introduction of the Affordable Childcare Scheme
- Establishment of Tusla, as the regulatory inspectorate body for the ECCE sector.

Q. 8. Key concepts supporting the development of quality in ELC.



Concepts in order as presented on the graph.

- Planning, documenting and assessing learning.
- Continuous professional development (CPD).
- Partnership with parents.
- Collaborative practice with other agencies.
- Aistear and Síolta Practice Guide.
- Inclusion.
- Child-led, child-centred practice.
- Degree led early childhood sector.
- Network meetings.

Appendix 8 – Questions in the online forum

Opening Statement 18th November 2018 –

Hi all, thank you so much for agreeing to participate in this forum. I have set it up as a secret Facebook group as this provides maximum privacy and confidentiality. All of us within the group also have responsibility to respect each other's rights to confidentiality, so that this becomes a safe space to express views and opinions in relation to policy developments in the ECE sector. All the details in relation to the ethical considerations are in the participant information letter that I sent with the consent forms, which were attached to my email previously forwarded to you. However, if you have any questions, please don't hesitate to contact me. I do intend on using your arguments/points in my research and while I will quote you directly at times, will not identify you in any way. As mentioned, I have been promised the opportunity to interview a policymaker with direct responsibility for the development of ECE policy, so again I would like to bring to that interview the key issues concerning practitioners, but again no participant will be identified. Forty people indicated an interest in participating in this forum. While I do not expect all of these will join the forum, I am anticipating that we should have a few more participants. Thank you all once again, and I look forward to hearing your views over the coming weeks.

Statement 2. 20th November 2018 - We're coming to the end of International Children's day, and this together with the publishing of the Early Years Strategy yesterday, the announcement by Minister Zappone of a new Workforce Development Plan and the launch of the first ever research centre specifically for early education, will shine the spotlight clearly on the Early Years Sector. Please share your reflections and views on the above.

Statement 3. 20th November 2018 - A participant made a point regarding her view on regulations and inspections. This also emerged in the survey, what are your views and experiences on how regulations and inspections support the development of quality in your settings?

Statement 4. 21st November 2018 - It has been evident from the survey, that early childhood professionals have a voice and a deep reflective insight into the reality of how policy transfers into practice in their settings. Do you think the inclusion of early years practitioners onto the inspection teams will make a significant difference to the quality of inspections?

Statement 5. 22nd November 2018 - Just following up on the debate yesterday regarding the early years' inspectorate. The consensus appeared to be that the inspector should have a background in ECE and practical experience working on the ground. Do you think this would resolve issues around regulations and inspections or is it more complex than this?

Statement 6. 22nd November 2018 – Are pay scales as unions suggest the solution to the problem of low wages and retention of staff in the sector?

Statement 7. 25th November 2018 - The Quality Regulatory Framework was launched on the 5th September this year. Do you think this framework will contribute to significantly enhancing quality in the ECE sector and perhaps bring more consistency to inspections? What are your views?

Statement 8. 27th November 2018 - Focusing again on inspections and voice. Do you feel the current inspectorate regime is fair and transparent? Do you feel that your voice is included and valued within this context? Do they have a positive impact on developing quality within your setting?

Statement 9. 30th November 2018 - Yesterday, Pobal published their annual Early Years Sector Report 2017-2018. According to the report, staff turnover in the sector is 24.7%, with 36% of these going to other early years services and 43% leaving the sector completely. What do you think are the main factors contributing to this high turnover and what impact does this have on the development of quality in the sector?

Statement 10. 12th December 2018 - Have you had any experience of working with AIM and what are your views on the AIM programme? I would love to hear from as many of you as possible as all voices and opinions matter.

Statement 11. 16th January 2019 - What policies have you found most useful and most practical in supporting you in your role as an early years' professional? I know some of you have moved on to new career paths, but you can do this reflectively about your past position.

Statement 12. 21st January 2019 – A PowerPoint from a recent research project undertaken in Ireland on burnout in the sector was shared with participants and their views on the PowerPoint were requested.

Statement 13. 27th January 2019 - Continual Professional Development (CPD) has become a distinctive feature of the quality agenda. How effective do you feel this policy is in terms of enhancing quality in the sector generally?

Statement 14. 2nd February 2019 - Following on from our discussion on CPD, have many of you engaged in the LiNC training. If so, how did you rate it and did you feel it supported you in developing an inclusive practice in your setting?

Statement 15. 9th February 2019 - As we noted previously, CPD has become a significant element in the governments drive to enhance quality, what training have you been involved in and what are your views on that training?

Statement 16, 24th February 2019 - Have you been engaged in Lámh, Hanen, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion training or Aistear and Síolta training, if so, how have you rated it and has it been helpful in terms of supporting your practice?

Statement 17, 25th February 2019 - What are your views are in relation to the name change for the sector within the First 5? What's in a name? Does it matter?

Statement 18, 26th February 2019 - Not being paid for training and having to undertake it in your own time has arisen as an issue that participants in this research feel impacts negatively in terms of undertaking CPD. Do you feel the capitation for undertaking either Lámh or Hanen training makes attending these more attractive? Do you think the government could do anything else to support staff in undertaking CPD?

Statement 19, 2nd March 2019 - Hi All, I have completed the initial coding from the online survey. There were 114 responses to the online survey and the information and content was rich, varied and very interesting.

It clearly demonstrated that early years' practitioners have strong views on what constitutes quality.

While there was a myriad of views and opinions relating to policies that enhanced quality and those that restricted the development of quality, some key themes consistently emerged.

I have attached a map of the initial overarching codes, each one represented multiple sub-codes. For the next few posts, I plan on using these overarching codes as the focus of discussion to gain some more in-depth views and visions from you. I then hope to have a number of clear points to use for the focus of the interview with the policy maker.

Statement 20. 3rd March 2019 - In the online survey, some participants forwarded the view that the ECE sector should not be in private ownership but should be provided and governed directly by the government in the same way as the rest of the education system is. It was suggested that primary schools would be the ideal context and that all early years practitioners should hold a minimum Level 8 qualification. What are your views on this?

Statement 21. 7th March 2019 - A strong view was forwarded in the survey that the professionalisation of the sector is an important element of quality, but what does professionalisation mean? What does this look like in practice in early years settings? How can professionalisation of the sector be achieved?

Statement 22. 8th March 2019 In terms of professionalisation, a view forwarded in the survey was that inspections should be a supportive partnership. There were also calls for staff autonomy, where people working in services could exert their professional judgement in terms of their practice and risk taking? How does this fit in with your views on professionalisation?

Statement 23. 15th March 2019 - Frustration was expressed with the growing levels of paperwork. Time taken up creating policies and maintaining documentation to ensure compliance with the various bodies that inspect services, participants argue, is taking away from time which should be spent with children. Is this something that any of you also experienced? How do you feel documentation completion is impacting on the professionalisation and quality in early years settings?

Statement 24. 1st April 2019 - Is the value, or lack of value in which our early years workers are seen, impacting on their capacity and capability to deliver on quality?

Statement 25. 15th April 2019 - Consistently practitioners expressed their frustration at the constant expectation to respond to a myriad of policy initiatives that impact their daily practice, ultimately feeling their voice was not heard or they were not consulted in terms of policy development. A key element of this research was to find a means to allow the practitioners voices be heard at the policy table. What do you think would be the most effective way to enable practitioners' voices influence future policy development?

Statement 26. 16th April 2019 - Have you any views on the Government's Early Years Forums, which they currently use to consult with the sector? The government holds Early

Years forums three times annually since 2016 to consult with the sector. Practitioners and providers are represented here by different organisations that act on their behalf, is this sufficient? Here is the link to the meeting and the minutes. https://www.dcya.gov.ie/viewdoc.asp?DocID=5250&ad=1 What do you think?

Appendix 9 - Interview questions (policymaker)

Q. 1 What are your views on how the current policy developments in ELC sector are impacting on the Early Years practitioners' capacity to develop quality experiences for young children?

Q. 2 What if any difficulties/challenges do you consider may hinder practitioners' ability to improve quality standards in ELC settings?

Q. 3. The survey and forum indicated CPD is generally viewed by practitioners as fundamental to improving quality standards. However, some practitioners reflected feeling overwhelmed by the constant expectation to upskill. In what ways does CPD help increase quality in the ELC sector? How and what forms of training could be delivered in a manner that leaves practitioners feeling supported, rather than overwhelmed?

Q. 4. As part of the Quality Agenda, there has been more focus on having tighter regulations with more robust inspections. Therefore, the Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016 were published and more recently, you published the Quality Regulatory Framework. What are the benefits of having defined standards of quality? Do you think any challenges may arise for practitioners from these standards?

Q. 5. There are now two inspection teams, the education focused inspections and Tusla. What are your views on the new inspectorate arrangements and its ability to support improving quality standards? Do you perceive any challenges? How could these be addressed?

Q. 6. Pay and conditions emerged as a recurring theme, which practitioners believed is impeding the development of quality practice. In what ways do you think pay and conditions are impacting on achieving quality practice? Are there any plans to address the pay and conditions issues?

Q. 7. In the announcement of the First 5 Strategy, the Minister outlined her intention to implement a new system for funding the sector. How do you think the gold standard is going to increase quality across the sector? What impact, if any, could arise from having a two-tiered funding system?

Q.8. Many practitioners in the online survey and forum expressed that they felt their views were not sought prior to the introduction of new policies. Has your department any plans to ensure the voices of early years practitioners can be brought to the policy table in order to inform future policy developments?

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