



**University of
Sheffield**

**Practitioners' perspectives of quality interaction within a Maltese Early
Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) setting:
A constructivist grounded theory approach**

Georgina Anne Fardoe

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Abstract

It is widely accepted that *high*-quality Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) remains the cornerstone for adaptive child development, learning and minimising the early skills gap for vulnerable children (European Union, 2019; OECD, 2020a; Osgood, 2009; Shonkoff, 2014). Over the past two decades, the Republic of Malta has witnessed a surge in non-formal childcare settings, driven by the Free Childcare Scheme (FCS) and financial incentives that have enabled parents to return to the labour market (Borg, 2015; MEDE, 2013; Sollars, 2018). This economic shift has raised questions about how ECEC process quality is conceptualised and observed in Malta. The notion of quality ECEC remains nuanced by dominant views influenced by supranational organisations and may be misunderstood by individual practitioners (Campbell-Barr & Leeson, 2016).

This study explores two main research questions: What are practitioners' perspectives of quality interactions, and how do they enact quality interactions with young children in a Maltese ECEC setting? Using an interpretivist approach and Charmaz's (2014) Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) methodology, a series of pre-recorded Practitioner-Child Interactions were analysed through six practitioners' individual Video-Stimulated Discussion (VSD) semi-structured interviews.

Practitioners' responses led to co-constructing four empirical categories (practitioners' repertoire, beliefs, cognitive episodes, identity and setting context) and one theoretical category (practitioners' emotionality), conceptualising their perspectives of quality. This study offers an original contribution to understanding quality interaction practitioners' perspectives in a small nation-state. The study limitation considers that participants had no prior experience with professional reflective practice such as VSD, which may have affected their confidence and openness to self-criticism (Consuegra et al., 2016), thereby influencing their responses.

Keywords: Malta, early childhood education and care, process quality, practitioner-child interactions, constructivist grounded theory, interpretivist, video-stimulated discussions, practitioners' repertoire, beliefs, cognitive episodes, identity, setting context, emotionality.

To
my husband, our son, family and the practitioners who work alongside young children in
Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) settings.

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Abbreviations

APA	American Psychological Association
CIS	Caregiver Interaction Scale
CGT	Constructivist Grounded Theory
CLASS	Classroom Assess Scoring System
CPD	Continuous Professional Development
DES	Directorate for Educational Services
DfE	Department for Education
DQSE	Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
EPPE	Effective Provision of Pre-School Education
EY	Early Years
EU	European Union
FCS	Free Childcare Scheme
FES	Foundation for Educational Services
GT	Grounded Theory
LOF	Learning Outcome Framework
MEDE	Ministry for Education and Employment
MFSS	Ministry for the Family and Social Solidarity
MFED	Ministry for Education
MFWS	Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society
MQF	Malta Qualifications Framework
NCF	National Curriculum Framework
NCFHE	National Commission for Further and Higher Education
NRP	National Reform Programme
NSO	National Statistics office
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PCI	Practitioner-Child Interaction
PPP	Public Private Partnership
REPEY	Researching Effective Pedagogy in Early Years
SED	Social and Emotional Development
UNESCO	United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UM	University of Malta
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
UREC	University Research Ethics Committee
VSDs	Video Stimulated Discussion(s)
WHO	World Health Organisation
ZPD	Zone of Proximal Development

Declaration of Authenticity

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 presented for an award at this, or any other, university. All material and work that has been presented in this thesis which is not my own have been acknowledged and referenced according to the University regulations.

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Georgina Anne Fardoe

19th September 2023

Date

Chapter I Introduction

Chapter Introduction

This thesis presents the stages of my academic and professional development that formed part of my PhD candidature. An “odyssey” which reflects how as a novice researcher, I transitioned from “one state to another” (Amran & Ibrahim, 2012, p. 529). I began this journey full of enthusiasm, hope and ambition with an acute curiosity to explore the social interactions held between early years practitioners and young children attending a private Maltese Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) setting. This thesis is, therefore, testimony to not only the study inquiry and contribution to understanding quality but also the unfolding of my professional career as an early academic researcher.

This introductory chapter provides a synopsis of this exploratory study. Positioned within a Maltese ECEC context, this study set out to interpret early years practitioners’ perspectives on quality Practitioner-Child Interaction (PCI). This is defined as the space in which social interaction between a practitioner and child takes place within an ECEC context. This chapter offers an overview of the research aim, the Maltese ECEC landscape and how the research inquiry originated and evolved. Furthermore, this chapter contextualises the research focus within an interpretivist worldview.

Chapter Organisation

This chapter is divided into four sections. The first section presents the aim of the thesis, background information and position of this thesis, before summarising the geographical and cultural background of where the study was situated. The second section provides an overview of the research focus, the research questions and how these

two were designed to suit the inductive methodological approach, namely Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) (Charmaz, 2014). Furthermore, this section presents the philosophical orientation of the study in which the study was situated within a social constructivist paradigm, explaining how my values and the collaborative nature of my researcher-participant relationship formed an integral part of the research process. The third section provides a synopsis of my motivation behind this study and its significance to the wider existing ECEC research within the local Maltese context. This chapter is brought to a close by the last section which provides the thesis chapter overview and chapter descriptions which illustrates the contribution of each chapter to the wider thesis purpose.

Section I Thesis Background Information & Position

1.1 Aim of Thesis

This study is positioned within the ECEC service sector which refers to “any regulated arrangement that provides education and care for children from birth to compulsory primary school age” (European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth Sport and Culture, 2021 p. 14). I chose to conduct this qualitative exploratory study within a registered ECEC educational private setting for young children (18 months to 4 years), which is typically referred to as a non-formal ECEC childcare setting. The Maltese Foundation for Educational Services [FES] (2023) describes ECEC as an educational service that offers a safe environment, supportive and structured programme that offers “an enriching experience to all our learners, their families and all stakeholders”.

This study took place in the Southern subregion of Europe, in The Republic of Malta and is intended for early years academics, researchers and professionals who work alongside young children within ECEC services. This study may equally interest professionals who share an interest in social science, psychology, sociology and early years pedagogy since the focus is on practitioners' perspectives and enactment of quality interaction with young children within an ECEC setting. The ambition of this thesis is to invite early years practitioners, managers and leaders to reflect on their practice which is understood as “the learning context, interaction and planning” of an ECEC setting (Moyles et al., 2002a).

1.2 Geographical & Cultural Background

Positioned between three continents The Republic of Malta is an archipelago of five islands and is referred to as a small island state with a population of 516 thousand (National Statistics Office [NSO], 2022). As presented in Chapter III, the Maltese ECEC education landscape has radically transformed over the past century, reflecting the country's transition from colonial times to Independence in 1964 to becoming a Republic in 1974. Since joining the European Union [EU] in 2004, the modernisation of corporate financial industries, tourism, the public service sector and educational settings has been unprecedented. As a consequence, the country has witnessed an increase in migrant communities. The composition of Maltese nationals has additionally been affected by the steady depletion in live births and an increase in women returning to the labour market which has resulted in less reliance on extended family members for childcare (Ministry for the Family and Social Solidarity [MFSS], 2016).

As a consequence of the varying societal changes in Malta (that are shared similarities across neighbouring European countries) the demand for ECEC services has increased in non-formal educational settings (MFSS, 2016; Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2014; Sollars 2018). Although Roman Catholic traditions (baptism, confirmation, confession, marriage, fiestas and unlawful abortion) remain a visible part of Maltese culture, society is becoming increasingly secular. Despite these sociological changes, societal norms remain wedded to a typical Mediterranean village life where families prioritise their time with families within their local communities. This has ensured that a strong sense of community prevails where the parish, extended families and ECEC services play an active role in child-rearing practices.

Since the 1990s there has been an increasing demand for first out-of-home ECEC services, namely non-formal educational settings (Sollars, 2018). Within the local context, a regulated private ECEC service (catering for infants 3 months to 3-4 y/o children) is typically called a “private childcare” setting. It is also optional for children to attend a registered Kindergarten (KG) setting (catering for 3-5 y/o children) before compulsory education at 5 years (refer to Chapter III). This study took place in a registered ECEC private childcare setting that specifically catered for young children aged 18 months to 4 years old. Therefore, the terms “childcare” and “ECEC setting” are used interchangeably throughout this thesis.

The growth of ECEC settings has exponentially doubled during the past six years (Sollars, 2017, 2018) due to the introduction of family tax deductions and more recently the Free Childcare Scheme (FCS) (Borg, 2015; European Commission, 2015, 2022). Both initiatives have been economic drivers to encourage women to return to or begin

employment. On one hand, this is economic progression however, there is a growing concern about the quality of childcare settings in Malta as there is no existing research that has analysed child outcomes, nor explored young children's/families' experiences of ECEC settings at a national level (Sollars, 2018). Thus, the current ECEC sector has what Sollars (2018, p.337) claims has an "under-researched history". Despite this, the ECEC quality discourse has proliferated since the regulating body for childcare settings became centralised within the Ministry for Education [MFED]¹ and the Directorate for Quality & Standards in Education [DQSE]. To date, research into conceptualising ECEC quality within the local Maltese context has begun, yet it remains in its infancy which is not surprising given its history and the recent overhaul of the ECEC system since the early 1990s. Suffice it to say, that governing ministries and leading academics collectively advocate for the importance of quality ECEC. By doing so, notions and perspectives of ECEC quality are becoming publicised (Sollars, 2019 a, 2020a, 2020b) and have begun to shift the stereotypical view that childcare is simply a "babysitting" service. Moreover, the development of ECEC standardisation updated ECEC and welfare policies and stringent licensing procedures for new childcare settings have come into force. Whilst this is positive progress, there remains a gap in knowledge and a limitation of resources aimed at improving and sustaining the quality across the existing workforce.

Section II Study Focus, Research Questions & Interpretivist Stance

As this study discusses, there are varying ways to define quality ECEC. This largely depends on subjective interpretation and whether quality in ECEC is seen to be the attainment of acceptable levels of performance, or in terms of children's learning,

¹ The MFED was formerly referred to as the Ministry for Education and Employment [MEDE] and are used interchangeably throughout the thesis.

development outcomes and adulthood trajectories (as discussed in Chapter III). An agreed universal definition of ECEC quality does not exist. However, the consensus remains that high-quality ECEC settings have a positive, long-lasting impact on young children's holistic development, learning and well-being, thus, remains a prime global concern (Dalli et al., 2011; European Parliament 2013; Lindeboom & Buiskool, 2013; Melhuish et al., 2013, 2015; Trevarthen et al., 2003). Throughout my professional ECEC career, I have witnessed first-hand a degree of ambiguity concerning the idea of high-quality ECEC. Across varying professional educational settings, both in England and in Malta, I have been part of several discussions with educators, colleagues, and parents (and in some instances children) about what quality ECEC is and what it means to them. At the beginning of my career, I naively assumed ECEC professionals shared a similar understanding of ECEC quality. It transpires that we all have our interpretation of ECEC quality, as subjective perception is rooted in our experience, thoughts and beliefs about childrearing norms and practices. As this study discusses (in Chapter III) there are various facets of a high-quality ECEC programme that are typically divided between *structural* facets (the physical environment) of a setting and classroom *process* elements (the aspects of pedagogy) (Melhuish, 2015). Although both divisions of ECEC quality are interconnected and carry equal importance, process quality is considered to be the “most proximal to children's learning, development and wellbeing” (OECD, 2020b, p.21). This places the practitioner at the forefront of responsibility to ensure that *what* and *how* they educate and care for young children has a direct influence on the child.

This study aspired to explore this distinct area of process quality, which I call the Practitioner-Child Interaction (PCI) (as presented in Chapter IV). The decision to focus

on this communicative space was partly based on recognising its influence on young children's trajectories, moreover because practitioners' perspectives of high-quality interactions remain an under-discussed area, specifically within Malta. Since starting this study, there have been progressive steps towards investigating stakeholders' perspectives of Maltese ECEC quality. Most notably, Professor Valerie Sollars from the University of Malta [UM] (Sollars, 2020a, 2020b) has led the way with research that considers practitioners' and parents' quality perspectives across 0-7 years ECEC settings. Whilst there is early evidence to suggest that parents and practitioners equally value the importance of practitioners' early reciprocal relationships with young children in practice, a gap remains within the local ECEC landscape, one that considers the practitioners' perspectives and enactment of quality interactions with young children.

As this study has evolved and transitioned through the design and development phases (Chapters V and VI), the research questions reflect my professional interest in the PCI by asking: What are practitioners' perspectives of quality interactions, and how do they enact quality interactions with young children in a Maltese ECEC setting? The research questions were akin to an inductive methodology that would explore and interpret multiple realities and perspectives of quality PCI. As presented and justified in Chapter VI, the methodological framework of choice was a Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) (Charmaz, 2014, 2017) as the cyclical and iterative nature of CGT was conducive to the nature of inquiry.

2.1 Philosophical Orientation

The philosophical orientation of this study is positioned within a constructivist paradigm which assumes the nature of reality and theory of knowledge is socially

constructed as opposed to being discovered (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Crotty (1998) proposes that human beings form an interpretation of the world based on their cultural, historical, and social views. As the researcher, I viewed the practitioners' responses from a social constructivism stance, as the aim was to explore and interpret their subjective experiences of interacting with their children. Therefore, my values and lived experience as the researcher (as discussed in Chapter V) were not independent of the study. My lens was that of a professional who shared experience of the early years sectors and was influenced by an understanding of the psychological principles of human behaviour, interaction and early years of child development. Therefore, from a social constructivism perspective, I was able to see how practitioners' responses were formed through the interaction they shared with their children, their colleagues, furthermore, with me throughout the study. As a collaboration, we interpreted each other whilst simultaneously co-constructing a mutual understanding of quality interactions. This conversation was facilitated by applying Video Stimulated Discussions (VSDs) that entailed watching and reflecting on a series of pre-recorded PCIs of the practitioners in the setting, interacting with their groups of young children (as further discussed in Chapter VI).

The closing chapters (Chapters XI and XII) of this thesis present practitioners' responses as the findings chapters and include the conceptual and theoretical categories that emerged from collaborating with practitioners by interpreting their responses. I could elicit practitioners' perspectives of quality interactions by reflecting on the pre-recorded PCIs and using open-ended questions during the VSDs. I did not impose the notion of quality interaction during the VSD discussions. Instead, I used the pre-video recordings as

a platform for participants to reflect on and describe their actions and experiences during the interactions.

Section III Study Motivation & Significance

As a professional working within the ECEC sector, this study originated from my interest in exploring ECEC process quality. Since emigrating to Malta in 2013, I have been fortunate to manage and lead ECEC practitioners within private childcare settings whilst developing vocational accredited qualifications for practitioners within the private Further and Higher Education [FHE] sector. This has entailed training, mentoring, and coaching practitioners of all ages, recently leading to the launch of one of the first private consultancy companies in ECEC on the islands. Consequently, the construct of ECEC quality has been featured across all areas of my career, hence becoming an integral part of my role within the local ECEC community. This resonates with the underpinning motivation of this thesis which is to contribute to the wider discourse of those academic and professional leaders who advocate ECEC childcare quality. In doing so, it is hoped that the voices of practitioners represented in this study will contribute to inclusivity and equality within the ECEC workforce.

As I reflect on my professional and academic experience, it is my interpretation that practitioners remain reluctant to voice their personhood as childcare practitioners. Whether this is because it is deemed unprofessional or because practitioners are not given regular opportunities to express their thoughts and beliefs remains unknown within the local context. Despite this, I believe there is a level of responsibility that falls to childcare managers and owners to respectfully address the psychological dynamics of their teams. Not only do opportunities for professional reflection, sharing and discussion sustain a

positive setting culture, but they also contribute towards employees' sense of value and purpose. This, in turn, contributes to minimising the crippling effects of high staff turnover that is notorious across the childcare sector (further discussed in Chapter III).

As I elaborate in Chapter V, I consider myself fortunate enough to have had the opportunity to conduct this study in a foreign country and to have been accepted into a small ECEC community. As the researcher, I have taken this responsibility seriously and feel bound to ensure that the findings of this study are disseminated across the sector by continuing to provide professional development and training opportunities directly to ECEC settings (as discussed in the concluding Chapter XI, Section 2.2).

This study has evolved over a period in history where the 2020 COVID-19 health pandemic has highlighted the importance of human connection and face-to-face interaction. Therefore, I suggest that this study is timely as it exemplifies the importance of social and physical connection between practitioners and young children within ECEC settings. This study suggests facets of practitioners' individualism (such as thoughts, beliefs and lived experience) contribute to the quality of their interaction with young children. Despite which early years framework/curriculum or theoretical approach childcare settings prescribe, practitioners are seldom encouraged to regularly consider what they bring to their role as ECEC professionals. This uncertainty is further intensified when we consider the various vocational qualifications and certified training routes that are available (specifically within the local context, refer to Appendix IV) to become an ECEC practitioner (Sollars, 2018).

From practising in several childcare settings I have witnessed the limited opportunities to engage in regular professional reflective practice within a childcare

setting when compared to compulsory sectors of education. Furthermore, from my experience of developing and accrediting vocational ECEC qualifications the theoretical and practical application of the topic itself (professional reflective practice) varies across different certified courses. It is a module that is typically marginalised or, in many cases, omitted in favour of dominant areas of professional ECEC training, such as young children's development, attachment, learning, literacy, numeracy, safeguarding and health/safety.

There is limited local inquiry that considers the thoughts, beliefs and socio-history of the practitioners working within this sector (Sollars, 2018) (For the purpose of this study, socio-history is understood as the interdisciplinary approach connecting sociological theory and historical context. In this thesis, I have used the concept to relate to how an individual's life is shaped by broader historical, social and cultural contexts in Chapter IV, Section 2.1).

To date, research that focuses on Maltese childcare services is in its infancy. Hence, there is a niche that considers the local landscape from an exploratory approach. Conducting exploratory qualitative research is not only congruent to accounting for the practitioners' voice but furthermore, offers the local context further opportunities to understand its workforce. This study is an opportunity to consider the psychological, social and environmental facets that form part of practitioners' perspectives and enactment of quality interaction.

Section IV Thesis Overview & Chapter Descriptions

The thesis is divided into eleven chapters, each relating to the purpose of presenting original research findings. Each chapter begins with a summary and a description of its

structure, with signposting used throughout to help readers recall previous points and ensure fluidity. The chapters are divided into three parts. The first part, including Chapters II, III and IV, opens the research inquiry and comprises the literature review structured through theoretical and conceptual ECEC lenses. This approach highlights the interconnectedness of philosophy and contemporary ECEC practice rather than presenting a standalone literature review chapter. This chapter collectively introduces the study's organising principle while offering historical and contemporary perspectives and reveals a gap in the early years of pedagogical research. Chapter IV concludes the first part by focusing on quality practitioner-child interactions through relational, dialogical, and care ethics perspectives, drawing on the perspectives of philosophers Martin Buber and Nel Noddings. The second part of the thesis focuses on the researcher's positionality (Chapter V), the origins of inquiry, the study's philosophical and practical foundations (Chapter VI), and an in-depth discussion of the chosen inductive CGT analysis (Chapter VII).

The second part of the thesis focuses on the researcher's positionality (Chapter V), the origins of inquiry, the study's philosophical and practical foundations (Chapter VI), and an in-depth discussion of the chosen inductive CGT analysis (Chapter VII).

The final part presents the findings from interpreting practitioners' VSD responses (Chapters VIII and IX), followed by a discussion (Chapter X) that explores the significance of the findings and proposes a set of professional reflective cards. These cards are not presented as a definitive outcome but as a potential tool for future research. The conclusion (Chapter XI) addresses the study's limitations, recommendations, contributions, and the researcher's final reflections.

4.1 Chapter Descriptions

Chapter I Introduction: This chapter introduces the study, highlighting its geographical and cultural context. It outlines the study's purpose and aim, grounded in an interpretivist and social constructivist worldview.

Chapter II The History of Early Years Pedagogical Approaches: This chapter situates the study within the ECEC landscape, discussing historical and theoretical perspectives in early years education. It explores how various pedagogical approaches from Northern thinkers have co-existed and continue to influence contemporary Maltese early years pedagogy.

Chapter III The ECEC Landscape & Issues of Quality: This chapter examines the contemporary ECEC sector, addressing changes in family dynamics and the growing reliance on ECEC services. It highlights the gap in research related to high-quality ECEC, focusing on the importance of practitioner-child interaction in process quality.

Chapter IV The Practitioner-Child Interaction: Focusing on process quality, this chapter examines practitioner-child interactions in ECEC settings. It explores the role of relational pedagogy, care, reciprocity, and the practitioner's repertoire in these interactions.

Chapter V Positionality & Origins of the Research Inquiry: This chapter outlines the researcher's positionality, explaining how personal values and experiences influenced the research aim and questions. It also discusses logistical considerations and the foundational aspects leading to the study's design.

Chapter VI, The Methodological Framework: This chapter presents the study's theoretical and practical elements, including its interpretivist paradigm, ontological and epistemological stance, and methodological framework. It justifies using Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) and describes the research process. Furthermore, this chapter

presents the ethical considerations that were considered and approved by the University of Sheffield Ethical Board, in addition to the aspects of research rigour that were addressed during the design phase of the study.

Chapter VII The Constructivist Grounded Theory Analysis: This chapter details the analysis process using Charmaz's (2014) Constructivist Grounded Theory. It provides an audit trail of the coding phases, demonstrating the cyclical nature of CGT analysis.

Chapter VIII The Findings Part One: The first findings chapter presents practitioners' responses to their pre-recorded PCIs, focusing on two conceptual categories: practitioners' repertoire and beliefs. These categories are defined, discussed, and contextualised within the broader ECEC field.

Chapter IX The Findings Part Two: The second findings chapter extends the analysis, presenting three more conceptual categories: practitioners' interaction episodes, identity, and centre context. It concludes with an overarching theoretical category of practitioners' emotionality, with each category discussed and supported by practitioners' extracts.

Chapter X Discussion: This chapter discusses the findings, organising them into themes that address practitioners' perspectives and the enactment of quality interactions in ECEC. It positions the findings within relational pedagogy and quality ECEC research and proposes a set of reflective cards, not as definitive outcomes but as potential tools for future research.

Chapter XII Conclusion: The concluding chapter summarises how the findings address the research questions, highlighting the subjective, individualised, and emotional nature of quality interaction. It also discusses study limitations, recommendations for future research, and the researcher's final reflections while noting the original contribution to ECEC practice.

Chapter II The History of Early Years Pedagogy

Chapter Introduction

This study is placed within the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) context, representing the theory and practice of educating and caring for young children (Farquhar & White, 2014). The aim of this research is to explore the communicative space shared between ECEC practitioners and young children from the practitioners' perspective. Throughout this study, this interaction is referred to as the Practitioner-Child Interaction (PCI) (as further discussed in Chapter IV). Before delving into the current understanding of the PCI, it is essential to review the historical and theoretical foundations that have influenced the current conceptualisation of the child, childhood and ECEC. This chapter, therefore, begins with a review of the traditional knowledge and philosophies that have significantly shaped our current understanding of childhood and how contemporary practices in ECEC have been shaped as a consequence. This historical perspective is essential for understanding why certain practices and theories are still prevalent in ECEC settings today, especially how these global-North theorists continue to shape the Maltese ECEC landscape.

Chapter Organisation

This chapter is divided into three sections, each laying the foundation for exploring practitioners' perspectives of quality interactions with children in ECEC. The first section presents a brief historical view of the changing perceptions of child/hood from some of the global-North thinkers since the 18th century. The second section extends the historical summary of child/hood by demonstrating how ideas of child/hood have shaped the evolution of ECEC perspectives. The final section of this chapter focuses on ECEC

pedagogy by reviewing existing literature that focuses on varying approaches to caring for and educating young children. The following sections are crucial as they demonstrate how evolving childhood perspectives have influenced contemporary ECEC practices and explain how theoretical underpinning influences practitioners' perspectives. The ideas presented here refer to varying ECEC pedagogical approaches and offer insight into how quality practitioner-child interactions are fostered. Furthermore, they begin to highlight gaps in existing research.

Section I Perspectives of child/hood

History and the traditional knowledge base of ECEC are the starting points for this literature review, particularly in the context of Malta's ECEC current leading policy frameworks and standards: the *Early Childhood Education and Care (0-7 years) National Policy Framework for Malta and Gozo* (MFED, 2021), the *National Standards for Early Childhood Education and care Services (0-3 years)* (MFED, 2022) and the *Toolkit for the Early Years Cycle (0-7 years): Using a learning outcomes approach - Educators' guide for pedagogy and assessment* [LOF] (DQSE, 2015). These key documents are the primary policy frameworks currently guiding registered early years settings in Malta. These leading documents will be used throughout the thesis to anchor my discussion in current standards, support the critique of traditional views on quality in ECEC and justify a shift towards a more inclusive perspective of quality given the evolving Maltese context. These national ECEC frameworks (DQSE, 2015; MFED, 2021; MFED, 2022) are rooted in global-North philosophies. They blend the holistic nature of early childhood development and the important role of families while incorporating concepts on quality, inclusion, and sustainable development to create a sturdy and inclusive early childhood

education system. All three documents reflect Malta's colonial past, including structured educational practices, the country's bilingual language policy and centralised administrative approaches characteristic of the British colonial period. Therefore, the theorists and concepts presented in this chapter have been chosen as they emphasise the active role of young children in their learning processes, the importance of social interactions and the value of an engaging environment that recognises children's emerging interests. The theories presented here underpin the current childcare structure in Malta, fostering an educational and caring environment that is attuned to children's needs and development. Therefore, exploring the historical accounts of these concepts is essential to fully understand the evolution and current trajectory of ECEC in Malta. In doing so, this chapter emphasises the significance of early environments, experiences and relationships in a child's development and frames the role of quality interactions between practitioners and children.

1.1 History of ECEC

History not only allows contemporary thinkers (indeed practitioners) to learn from past ideas or to find inspiration by recalling historical events, but history also brings a new light to present-day notions of contemporary ECEC practice, which remains embedded within the history of socialisation in children, childhood, and the early years. Contemporary inter/national early years policies circulating early years education are predominately centred on the Westernised social construct of childhood and, thus, the child. Taggart (2016) claims that a polarity of care and rights permeates the discourse of the early years, reflecting how society views its youngest members, children. Historically, society's interpretation was primarily shaped by philosophers and subsequently by scientists (Sameroff, 2010), resulting in a contemporary notion that children are

independent *active agents* within their rights (James & Prout, 1997). This paradigm of childhood is a response to an amalgamation of different perspectives across the course of history and are all equally important when conceptualising the complexity of child development, socialisation and childhood.

As Hagan (2016) discusses, throughout history the view of the child has considerably changed. From the Puritan view of disciplining a wicked evil child to assume children are born blank slates' during the 17th-18th Enlightenment period, misconceptions of child/hood were predominantly driven by myth and lack of knowledge. Philosopher John Locke (1632-1704) was one of the first to conceptualise childhood less harshly than previous attempts (Benzaquén, 2011; McBlain, 2018). Locke claimed infants were born as a *tabula rasa* (a blank slate) and introduced the concept of influencing others such as *the good educator*. With the emergence of empiricism, the systematic approach of observing, quantifying and analysing behaviour (McBlain, 2018), Locke contributed towards shaping our current Westernised perspective of childhood and education (Heywood, 2018; McNamme, 2016; Slee & Shute, 2003). Locke's considerate view of childhood suggested that only those (typically white privileged males) who were more fortunate would be educated by an educator (Benzaquén, 2011). The notion of raising children to be fair-minded, morally capable members of society through a process of education was born (McNamme, 2016; Sameroff, 2010). Furthermore, Locke was the first of many to consider the importance of play as a vehicle for learning and the cultivation of early years creativity (MacBlain, 2018). Despite Locke's influential ideas in moulding educational theory, he fails to account for the racial disparities in contemporary education, as research demonstrates that systematic inequalities remain and challenges the idea that educational opportunities are accessible to all (Gaias et al., 2020).

The existing Maltese ECEC standards (DQSE, 2015; MFED, 2021; MFED, 2022) resonate with Locke's ideas by emphasising the practitioner's pivotal role in supporting children's moral, social, and cognitive development within nurturing, secure environments. These standards support child-centred, play-based learning, reflecting Locke's belief that experiences, including those in early years settings with practitioners, fundamentally shape children's development. By aligning with Locke's concept of *tabula rasa*, the national standards underscore the educator's responsibility to foster an environment that promotes the moral development of young children.

Following Locke's ideas, the 18th-century view of the child through an inherently innocent lens, proposed by Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) (Heywood, 2018; Sameroff, 2010), who defined childhood as a distinct part of life requiring safety, security, input and education (Burnman, 2017). Rousseau's perspective of childhood shifted the discourse to recognise children as virtuous individuals needing nurturing, safeguarding, and protection (MacBlain, 2018). During the early 1800s, as a consequence of child labour laws being introduced in England, the concept of childhood was recognised as a distinctive phase in human development (Slee & Shute, 2003). In reaction to the *Child-Study* movement (Zhao, 2011) (which was the first biological approach to studying childhood during the early 1900s), notable changes occurred that contributed towards building the foundations of contemporary child psychology.

It was during this time that many of the great scientists and philosophers (such as Darwin, Tiedemann and Binet) centred their research on studying their own children's development. This resulted in the publication of an article *Baby Biographies* which considered stages of young infant development (Hagan, 2016; Heywood, 2018; Slee & Shute, 2003). This evolutionary psychology movement introduced the idea of comparing

behaviours between animals and humans, which led to exploring the significance of heredity behaviours (Burnman, 2017). Throughout the history of conceptualising children and childhood, the depiction of children's innocence, lack of reason and passiveness contributed to this era of modernity. Until the Soviet and Swiss psychologists Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934) and Jean Piaget (1896-1980) rejected such notions that the child was passive by changing the discourse to portraying the child as *agentic*, understood as the child being an active agent within their childhood (James & Prout, 2017). As Wood and Hedges (2016) discuss, the dominance of positivist developmental and educational psychology discourse inevitably leads to the "ages and stages" view of child/hood.

From the changes in child/hood discourse, it is unsurprising that the visualisation of the child as *being* and *becoming* has been the focus of considerable debate. Towards the end of the 20th and beginning of the 21st century, notions of development remained fractured between viewing the child as *becoming*; an adult through development, compared to the child as *being*; a social actor whilst constructing childhood (Uprichard, 2008). Despite the enactment of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC, 1989) and *General Comment No.7* (United Nations, 2005), endeavours to positively transform the orientation of children within society were enacted. Mandates claimed, "young children as right holders" calling for "diversity, cultural orientation to be respected" recognised the child's contribution to society. This was based on considering children as "active social actors" (persons) in their own right (United Nations, 2005). Mandates such as this have essentially changed the direction and attention given to ECEC. Consequently, such mandates have strengthened our understanding of early years development (childhood) and have guided society's obligations towards its youngest members of society.

The historical and theoretical shifts presented thus far reflect how the concept of childhood has undergone significant transformations with profound implications for the theories and practices underpinning the Maltese national ECEC policies and frameworks (DQSE, 2015; MFED, 2021; MFED, 2022). They have been guided by frameworks and mandates such as the UNCRC, which emphasise recognising young children as active participants in their development and acknowledging their agency. All three documents firmly position young children as central to learning, valuing their rights and perspectives. However, Zhao (2011) contends that a dichotomy between *us* (adults) and *them* (children) remains. Zhao (2011) states that the downfall of our view of children is contributed by the “systematic theorising and practising of their nature to deny their voice and stifle their agency” (p.255). Moreover, Murriss (2016, p.188) adds to this criticism by stating that whilst the UNCRC was a “quantum leap” for children’s rights, it implies that the child remains wedded to a developmental perspective where they are still an “adult-in-the-making”. This has led to “immaturity remaining synonymous with childhood” (Murriss, 2016, p.188). It is clear that regardless of the efforts to radically change perceptions of child/hood, the passing of time and the success of changing human beliefs take time to shift. However, the point that Zhao (2011) and Murriss (2016) were making is that truly listening to the voice and perspective of the individual (in this case the child), stepping aside from structurally hypothesising (assuming their) childhood, provides a platform for the child’s perspective to be understood and heard. Although Zhao was arguing from a researcher’s perspective to a degree, his point remains relevant when applied to professional ECEC practice. It is evident that within an ECEC setting, as an ‘adult’ working alongside young children, there is a tendency to assume (hypothesise) the child’s perspective. As Murriss (2016, p.187) argues, a developmentalism perspective has

resulted in practitioners/teachers “distancing themselves” from children in the classroom, furthermore “from our childhood selves”. Adopting an “I know better, as I am the adult” attitude not only overlooks the perspective and voice of the child but also has a negative impact on the holistic development of the child as their rights are ignored.

This literature review thus far has highlighted that there are critical tensions between theoretical frameworks and the practical realities in ECEC, particularly in the Maltese context. Although historical developments have increasingly recognised young children as active and agentic citizens, dominating adult-centric perspectives prevail. The critiques by Zhao (2011) and Murriss (2016) emphasise the persistent dichotomy between adults and children, where adults can impose their interpretations and expectations on young children, thus potentially stifling their voice and agency. This critique supports the importance of exploring practitioners’ perspectives of quality interactions. Despite Maltese policy frameworks advocating for child-centred approaches, it remains worth exploring how far adult-centric views are present in the local practitioners’ perspectives of quality interactions.

This chapter has thus far traced the evolution of childhood perceptions from a modern (objective) to a post-modern (subjective) framework, as discussed by Tierney (2001). Slee and Shute (2003) emphasise a contemporary view of the child as a valued being rather than merely a preparatory stage of adulthood as;

one who is valued for him - or herself rather than simply as a means of undertaking the adult condition; one whom the researcher strives to understand without exploitation and whom the practitioner seems to help in a full understanding of the social and historical contexts within which the child, practitioner and other relevant parties operate (Slee & Shute, 2003, p. 25)

Slee and Shute (2003) advocate for an approach that understands children within their social and historical contexts and, in doing so, urges practitioners to listen, value and accept children's individuality. However, while Western perspectives have shaped contemporary ECEC, it is worth reconsidering these views in the context of current global and local challenges, such as multiculturalism within the ECEC sector (refer to Chapter III, Section II for further discussion). The philosophical discussion by Peters et al., (2018) reflects an era of post-postmodernism, marked by uncertainty and a lack of consensus, where the traditional paradigms of the 19th and 20th centuries no longer fully apply. In this context, Malta's multiculturalism and colonial legacy demand a re-examination and expansion of the traditional knowledge base of ECEC. It remains necessary to conceptualise the child/hood not only from a Westernised global perspective but also within a contemporary and culturally specific context such as Malta. This is because the local context provides information concerning how adults respond to young children based on their customs and beliefs of child/hood.

Section II “Standing on the Shoulders of Giants” in ECEC

From considering a historical account of child/hood, this second section develops the discussion by presenting a range of ECEC approaches that have shaped the foundation of Maltese early years education. This influence is predominantly owed to a cluster of Western philosophers and great thinkers who lived during the 19th and 20th centuries. Figures such as Pestalozzi, Froebel, Dewey, Steiner, Montessori and the advocates for the Reggio Emilia approach have contributed to the educational philosophies that guide current ECEC practices in Malta and are evident across dominant ECEC policies and frameworks (DQSE, 2015; MFED, 2021; MFED, 2022). Notions of experiential learning and the importance of play to ideas of democracy, social justice and active engagement

have permeated the ancestry of contemporary early years education. In Malta, where private ECEC settings are known to adopt Montessori, Waldorf, and Reggio Emilia's approaches, understanding these philosophical underpinnings is important, as they likely shape how practitioners enact quality interactions with young children.

Influenced by Rousseau's ideas, Johann Pestalozzi (1746-1827) (a Swiss educational reformer) believed education should be accessible to all (Latorre, 2007). He emphasised that a teacher's approach should include a clear vision, a warm heart and a firm hand, which became the well-known "head, heart, hand" slogan (Horlacher, 2019). Pestalozzi's approach suggests that teaching combines passing on knowledge, respecting the child and encouraging participation (Islam et al., 2022). However, the "head, heart, hand" approach can be interpreted differently depending on practitioners' cultural and individual perspectives (Gazibara, 2013), potentially leading to variations in how these principles are applied in ECEC practice. Pestalozzi believed learning was *experiential*, where both children and adults engage with their environment and nature to foster higher-order thinking skills (Valkanova, 2015). Pestalozzi's ideas of equality and freedom through active experiential learning remain important in contemporary education (Horlacher, 2019; Latorre, 2007) and are reflected in the local ECEC policy discourse (MFED, 2021). In relation to my study on practitioners' perspectives of quality interactions in Malta, it will be interesting to see if practitioners incorporate aspects of Pestalozzi's "head, hand, heart" approach. While not seeking direct evidence of his principles, the study may reveal how practitioners balance intellectual, emotional and physical engagement in shaping their understanding of quality in early childhood education.

2.1 The Child's Garden; Kindergarten

The foundation of the global north early childhood Kindergarten movement was largely contributed by the work of Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852)(Best, 2016). Seen as the German father of Kindergarten (4-6 years) education, Froebel emphasised play as a vehicle for learning within early childhood (Best, 2016; Bruce, 2015). Froebel's theory focused on the use of play, outdoor nature and the wider community, where the child's "self-direct play was an expression of their imagination, creativity and understanding" (Smedley & Hoskins, 2020, p.1203). Froebel believed in educating people "to think for themselves, and not to rely on the thinking of others" (Bruce, 2015, p. 20). Through adopting a child-centred play approach, the ideology of the unique child was born and remains a prominent feature of contemporary KG education. Furthermore, his approach emphasised relationships with nature and the unity of others (Best, 2016). Froebel refrained from an overt didactic approach and instead placed significance on the spirituality of education by educating the whole child (Best, 2016). However, as Bruce (2015) argues many of the original "Froebel's methods" that founded the Froebelian practice (such as the three Forms of Life, Knowledge, Beauty, Gifts and Occupations) were obsolete by the 1950s due to concerns that such practices were "constraining and destroying the philosophy and thinking" before Froebel died in the 1850s (Bruce, 2015, p. 22). Therefore, in exploring practitioner-child interactions, it will be interesting to see if practitioners fully embrace the role of play in quality interactions and whether there are tensions between play-based learning and more structured approaches. This could reveal valuable insights into the practitioners' daily challenges.

2.2 The Journey from Rote to Progressive

Towards the turn of the 20th century, traditional rote learning shifted toward holistic health and welfare of the child. It was during the same period that American philosopher John Dewey (1859-1952) became a prominent educational reformer. Influenced by his forefathers, Rousseau and Froebel, his seminal work *Democracy and Education* (1916) focused on democracy within society and its relation to education. Dewey coined the term *progressivism*, advocating cultural and political educational reform to equip students with the skills needed for a democratic society (Striano, 2016). Dewey's notions of democracy remain evident throughout contemporary education and examples such as a *whole-child approach* and emphasis on *personal growth* remain hallmarks of Dewey's philosophy of education (Lally, 2007; MacBlain, 2018). Dewey advocated social justice within education, with learning enacted through active engagement, experimentation and application to real-life scenarios (Lally, 2007). Though *progressive education* lost momentum during the late 1950s, threads of Dewey's philosophy remain visible in today's private and alternative ECEC approaches, such as Steiner, Montessori and Reggio Emilia. Although Dewey's ideas have had a lasting impact, exploring practitioners' perspectives of quality interactions offers a valuable lens through which to see the extent of Dewey's philosophy and whether practitioners incorporate democratic principles and social justice into their interactions with children.

Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925) advocated for children's personal growth and development within education (Uhrmacher, 1995) and agreed with Rousseau's ideas of being responsive to children's caring needs. The first Waldorf school opened in 1919 with an approach that places *spirituality* central to the child's development and well-being, viewing it as a lifestyle. Central to this approach is *imitation*, where children learn

by imitating from those around them. Steiner believed art was a vehicle to nurture the soul, providing opportunities for children to express emotion and understand themselves. Steiner frequently referred to the *art of education* as orientating the child's soul, not transferring knowledge (Goldsmidt, 2017; Uhrmacher, 1995). Similar to Dewey's progressive ideas, Steiner's pedagogy nurtured the child's sense of empowerment, willpower, desire and wellbeing. Although the Waldorf approach is compelling, it may cause tension in Malta, where spiritual and cultural values are significant (for further discussion, refer to Chapter III, Section 2.1). Furthermore, the non-prescriptive nature of Waldorf may conflict with more structured expectations within Maltese early years education. Therefore, as I explore the practitioner-child interactions, it will be interesting to see whether there might be varying degrees of spiritual aspects to the practitioners' perspectives.

2.3 The Influencing Environment

Influenced by the work of Rousseau, Maria Montessori (1870-1952) shared Dewey's, Froebel's and Steiner's sentiments of recognising the child's needs through less authoritarian pedagogy. However, she believed that the existing pedagogy (at that time) was largely influenced by Froebel and Pestalozzi who "failed to embrace the importance of studying each of the children before educating them" (Giardiello, 2015, p. 28). Montessori developed her philosophy of child development through observation and experimentation with underprivileged children (Frierson, 2014; Lash et al., 2016), leading to the "Montessori method". In 1907, the first Montessori school *Casa dei Bambini*, opened in Rome, marking the beginning of the current 20,000 registered Montessori schools across the globe (National Centre for Montessori in the Public Sector, 2021). Montessori believed in focusing on the *senses* as the foundation of cognitive

development, where creating an accessible and supportive environment allows the child to navigate independently through self-activity, self-selection and self-pacing play activities (Frierson, 2014). The environment, previously prepared by the adult facilitator, enables the child to self-correct through stages of learning using didactic materials of choice (Lash et al., 2016). Montessori emphasised the influence of the environment on the child, which has been criticised for its lack of relation and interaction between practitioner and child within the setting. Montessori believed that the role of the teacher was not to address the child's needs but to remain on the periphery, allowing the child to develop independence (Giardiello, 2015). Although Montessori's ECEC approach is practised in Malta, the emphasis on independence may limit the potential for meaningful quality interactions within the Mediterranean cultural context, where direct, tactile engagement is highly valued (refer to Chapter III, Section 2.1). This cultural difference could influence how practitioners perceive and enact quality interactions.

2.4 The Power of Rapport

Rapport and building a strong practitioner-child relationship are central to early years practice. Through relationships, practitioners gain insight into the inner emotional states of young children. English psychoanalyst Susan Isaacs (1885-1948) is notable for her child-centred philosophy that focuses on the internal emotions of young children. This notion of relationship within settings is demonstrated through the Reggio Emilia approach (Lash et al., 2016). The educational psychologist Loris Malaguzzi (1920-1994) became integral to what is commonly referred to as the Reggio Emilia approach (McNally & Slutsky, 2017). Influenced by Dewey's philosophy, Malaguzzi contributed to the Reggio Emilia philosophy, which views children as active protagonists with an innate need to communicate and build their knowledge by interacting with the world, where the child's

environment is regarded as the third teacher (Lash et al., 2016). The Reggio Emilia approach is built on a social constructivist framework, where learning is an active participation between the practitioner and child, with close synergy that is not bounded by pre-determined instruction. The approach emphasises collective interconnectedness, where practitioners are co-learners and facilitators working alongside the child's interests and are encouraged to engage in regular professional reflection (Dodd-Nufrio, 2011; Hewett, 2001; Reggio Emilia Approach®, 2020). The importance of practitioner-child communication is a core pillar of this approach. However, it can be critiqued for its complexity and high demands on practitioners, particularly practitioners' need for self-awareness and ability to adapt to Italian cultural norms, such as citizenship to different contexts. Emerson and Linder (2021) argue that research outside Italy is often fragmented, lacking comprehensive studies that provide sufficient contextual information. Therefore, this fragmentation creates uncertainty about how the approach is adapted and implemented globally. Authors additionally highlight gaps in longitudinal research, especially research that includes children under two years old and contributions from non-English speaking contexts, which further limits a cohesive understanding of the Reggio Emilia approach. In Malta, while not all practitioners may follow the Reggio Emilia approach, its principles could still influence their perspectives of quality interactions with children, given the approach's presence in the country and Malta's cultural ties to Italy. As the approach focuses on relationships, collaboration and reflective practice, these principles may emerge in how practitioners perceive and enact quality interactions. Therefore, in this study, it will be interesting to explore whether an emphasis on relationships shapes practitioners' perspectives on fostering quality interactions (even if

they are not directly implementing the approach) and whether these principles present opportunities or challenges in their communication with children.

2.5 Western Philosophical Influence

The Maltese ECEC policy discourse (DQSE, 2005; MFED, 2021; MFED, 2021) has been significantly shaped by Western philosophical thought and reflects the broader global influence of key Western thinkers. While these philosophers have played a crucial role in the development of ECEC, their dominance raises important questions about how well they align with the unique cultural and contextual realities of the Maltese ECEC (refer to Chapter III, Section 2.1 for a more in-depth description of Maltese culture). Therefore, it is worth exploring whether these ideas resonate with local practitioners' perspectives and to explore whether they adequately represent the complexities of Maltese ECEC. While acknowledging the historical importance of these philosophical foundations in ECEC, it is important to consider how they will likely shape practitioners' perspectives of quality interaction with young children, consciously or unconsciously. Therefore, exploring practitioners' perspectives will provide further insight into how these ideas are ingrained and whether practitioners feel constrained by traditional frameworks or if they offer a different perspective of quality interactions within the local context. This understanding will contribute towards identifying areas where local practices might diverge from or align with traditional ideas and whether the dominance limits the exploration of more diverse approaches that could offer alternative perspectives of quality interactions.

Section III ECEC Pedagogy & Curriculum

This chapter has thus far accounted for the historical foundations of how childhood has been conceptualised, alongside the evolution of ECEC approaches. In this third

section, the focus is refined to explore the complexities of conceptualising ECEC pedagogy and curriculum and how these contribute to understanding the Maltese ECEC context, which is further discussed in the next chapter. ECEC pedagogy and curriculum work in tandem. For the purpose of this section, I will first review the existing literature on pedagogy, followed by the curriculum. This is important as pedagogy and curriculum are central to understanding how ECEC practices are aligned to enhance quality in ECEC, specifically practitioner-child interactions.

3.1 ECEC Pedagogy & Curriculum

Pedagogy is politically and culturally oriented and, thus, cannot be defined by a single universal meaning. As a synonym for teaching, it is frequently used to describe a teaching approach that characterises the practitioner/teacher-child relation (OECD, 2018b). Derived from the Greek *paísagōgos*, translated to *child* and *guide*, infers the “adult leading the child” (Farquhar & White, 2014, p. 822), similar to Papatheodorou and Moyles (2009, p.4) description of an “adult and the child embarking on a journey together”. This traditional view infers a close association with child socialisation (understood as the child’s acquisition of cultural norms, values, attitudes and actions). However, pedagogy was traditionally regarded as the “transfer of content from one person to another” (OECD, 2018b, p.8). A conservative view that Farquhar and White (2014) claim typically positions the teacher as an authoritative figure over the student.

Over time, contemporary pedagogy has shifted beyond this limited scope, evolving into a practice that integrates various elements, including communication, social norms and emotional responsiveness. This shift in pedagogy has led to its reconceptualisation that pedagogy is the art, science and craft of teaching (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002).

The seminal work of Siraj-Blatchford et al. (2002, 2004), *Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE)* and *Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years (EPEY)*, have been widely used across existing ECEC policies and UK and Maltese educational reforms (refer to the DfE, 2015; MEDE, 2012 and OECD, 2015). As a result authors refer to pedagogy as;

set of instructional techniques and strategies which enable learning to take place and provide opportunities for the acquisition of knowledge, skills, attitudes and dispositions within a particular social and material context. It refers to the interactive process between teacher and learner and to the learning environment (Siraj-Blatchford, et al., 2002, p.10)

The EPPE project was a large-scale longitudinal study in England (between 1997 and 2003) that examined the impact of different types of early childhood education settings on children's cognitive, social, and behavioural outcomes from ages 3 to 7. The study highlighted the importance of high-quality early education, particularly identifying the role of *Sustained Shared Thinking (SST)* which authors defined as the occurrence;

when two or more individuals 'work together' in an intellectual way to solve a problem, clarify a concept, evaluate activities, extend a narrative etc. Both parties must contribute to the thinking, and it must develop and extend the understanding in promoting positive developmental outcomes (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002, p. 8)

Building on EPPE's findings, the EPEY project (2002-2004) focused more on identifying the most effective pedagogical practices in ECEC. It explored the strategies, such as SST, that were most beneficial for children's learning and linked high-quality pedagogy to well-qualified practitioners. Both studies significantly influenced early years education policy, with EPEY expanding on the pedagogical insights of EPPE.

Reviewing the most common pedagogical approaches shows that variance exists across inter/national pedagogical discourse. Table 1 summarises international pedagogical

approaches and illustrates the variations in how different countries conceptualise and implement pedagogy. It highlights how cultural, social and political contexts influence the education framework, demonstrating that certain pedagogical elements are prioritised differently depending on the context. As an example, the Australian early years' framework *Belonging, Being & Becoming* (Department of Education & Training, 2019, p.10) defines pedagogy as the “holistic nature of early childhood educator’s professional practice; especially building and nurturing relationships, curriculum decision-making, teaching and learning”. By providing this comparative overview, Table 1 allows this literature review to contextualise the local Maltese approach to ECEC pedagogy within a global framework, demonstrating the similarities in pedagogical traits.

A cross-cultural overview of the approaches in New Zealand, Japan, Denmark, France, and the UK reveals shared pedagogical emphases on interactions, child-centred learning and the ethics of care. For example, both New Zealand’s Te Whāriki and Japan’s Theory of Three Activities prioritise the holistic development of the child, placing significant importance on the sociocultural context of education. Likewise, the Danish socio-pedagogic model and the UK’s child-centred, play-based frameworks highlight the role of adult-child interactions and the co-construction of knowledge through dialogue and guided play. Whilst these similarities resonate with the Maltese pedagogy, this suggests that approaches are contextually distinct and are committed to the child’s well-being and development.

Table 1
International Pedagogical Approaches

Country	Main Pedagogical Approach	Description & Pedagogical Emphasis
New Zealand	Te Whāriki	Socio-cultural acknowledgement of cultural/social national context. Emphasis on social interaction Grounded in theories; Vygotsky, Bronfenbrenner, Rogoff
Japan	Guiding Child Are Theory Theory of Three activities	Educators sympathetically support the “free” child Emphasis on; free play, re-construction of main elements, direct literacy, numeracy, art concepts & skills. Inspired by theories; Montessori, Reggio Emilia
Denmark	Child-centred Socio-pedagogic	Open-ended enriched learning environment Emphasis on adult-child dialogue, arts, creativity, open discussion 7 reflections
France	Didactic Pedagogy Constructivist/ Interactive	Direct adult instruction, repetition, traditional learning. Active stage process of learning between child-environment - stimulus learning Inspired by; Piaget, Vygotsky & Bruner
UK	Child-centred Teacher-directed Constructivist/ Interactive Play-based Sustained shared thinking Scaffolding	Open-end enriched learning environments Programmed learning initiated by adults Active stage process of learning between child-environment - stimulus learning Guided play opportunities Collaborative problem-solving, equal contribution to developing thinking Recognised as an active learner, adult advocates state of “flow” in focused play Derived from: REPEY, (2002) EPEY (2004) Early Years Foundation Stage Review (2011)

Note Adapted from OECD (2015, p. 100) and DfE (2015)

In the Maltese LOF (DQSE, 2015, p.29), practitioners are encouraged to adapt to children’s evolving needs by “prioritising different areas of learning at different times and scaffolding children’s self-initiated activities to levels of competence”. This flexibility

suggests that no single pedagogical approach is favoured, allowing room for practitioners to draw from multiple educational theories as they support children's learning and development. Nevertheless, the influence of thinkers from the global North remains apparent within the Maltese ECEC discourse. For example, the LOFs (DQSE, 2015, p. 23 & p. 29) promote a pedagogical approach that values young children as "unique individuals" who "develop at their own pace" emphasising the importance of "enabling, play-based environments" "positive relationships" and fostering an "I can do" attitude. These principles reflect the enduring influence of Montessori's philosophy of independence and Dewey's advocacy for freely chosen play as important aspects of early childhood education.

The LOF (DQSE, 2015, p.23), states that ECEC pedagogy (specifically for 0-3 years) is "more intimate and requires higher levels of emotional nurturing than with older children" and that the practitioners' ability to respond effectively is determined on the practitioner-child relationship, governed by an "ethics of care and listening pedagogical approach". Maltese ECEC pedagogy is a less prescriptive approach, with marginal reference to the notion of *educating* and *learning* when compared to other countries (as illustrated in Table 1). However, the global discourse outlined above resonates with the Maltese emphasis on care and nurturing, and this suggests that the two are not mutually exclusive but interconnected aspects of early childhood pedagogy. Having said this (as I will present in the next chapter), the local discourse of early years pedagogy remains rooted in an assumed understanding of maternalism, often taking for granted the practitioner's subjective interpretation of what it means to build a harmonious professional relationship with young children. Therefore, discursive comparisons reinforce previous claims that ECEC prioritises the role of *care* compared to formal

educational sectors. Whilst tenets such as *intimacy*, *emotional nurturing*, *ethics of care* and *listening* are vital facets of the practitioners' repertoire, there is a pressing need to better understand these concepts from the practitioners' perspective and, crucially, to contextualise them within Maltese practice.

Contemporary approaches to ECEC increasingly emphasise collaborative and democratic pedagogies, where learning is viewed as an interactive, dynamic process rather than a one-way transmission of knowledge (as previously discussed). As the OECD (2021) highlights, ECEC environments are now understood as vibrant spaces in which both formal and informal learning experiences occur simultaneously. This perspective aligns with the notion that a curriculum is not a fixed entity but evolves through the quality interactions between practitioners and children, bringing it to life in meaningful ways. This approach resonates deeply with the Maltese LOF (DQSE, 2015), which adopts an emergent curriculum model. Here, learning is seen as fluid, emerging from children's interests and their wider social and familial contexts.

The concept of the ECEC curriculum has evolved significantly since Philip Jackson's (1928-2015) seminal work *Life in Classrooms* (1968), which revolutionised the understanding of pedagogy, particularly through his concept of the "hidden curriculum". Initially trained as a psychologist, Jackson transitioned to an anthropological approach to studying classroom environments, applying ethnographic methods to observe students' experiences (Craig & Flores, 2020). His work revealed that schools were not simply environments of formal instruction but complex social spaces where unstated norms, values, and beliefs shaped students' social and moral development. Jackson's understanding of these hidden educational processes suggests that curriculum goes beyond simply formal instruction.

Giroux and Penna (1979) expanded on Jackson's ideas and argued that schools' implicit expectations regarding conformity, authority and social hierarchy subtly influenced students' behaviour and interactions. They also highlighted the power dynamics within classrooms, describing schools as places where "powerful teachers and powerless students" (p.31) create a culture of isolating independence that shapes and influences the students' experiences. In doing so, they suggested that "the hidden curriculum should be seen not as an impassable boundary, but as providing a possible direction for focusing educational change" (p. 31). This perspective is relevant in the Maltese ECEC context, where the emergent curriculum model emphasises flexibility and child-led exploration (DQSE, 2015), but it must also navigate these unspoken norms that shape ECEC environments. For example, whilst Malta's emergent approach prioritises play and exploration, implicit expectations about children's behaviour and interactions still play a significant role in shaping their learning. Drawing on the work from Wood and Hedges (2016), they emphasise the complexities within ECEC by describing a "laissez-faire approach" where there is less structured attention to formal content knowledge and outcomes, instead prioritising child-led learning through play, discovery, and exploration (p. 388). In this context, Malta's emergent curriculum reflects the tensions identified by Jackson (and later Giroux & Penna, 1979) and raises important questions about how the emergent approach negotiates the hidden power dynamics that shape educational spaces. Therefore, understanding these dynamics is important for exploring how Maltese practitioners perceive and enact quality interventions in their settings. Practitioners' perspectives can provide valuable insights into how they balance child-led exploration with managing the unstated norms and power relations that influence the learning environment. Furthermore, whilst an emergent curriculum offers flexibility,

acknowledging Wood and Hedges's (2016) concept of “working theories” suggests that integrating a balance between play and structured learning allows children to build understanding through a more balanced approach.

The OECD (2021) defines a curriculum as the planned content and activities designed to achieve children’s educational goals. While curriculum and pedagogy are distinct, they are closely related, as pedagogy determines how the curriculum is implemented in practice. The Maltese NCF (MEDE, 2012) outlines objectives for children aged 0-5, focusing on play, experiential learning, and balancing child-initiated and adult-led activities. However, these frameworks provide limited guidance on adapting ECEC pedagogy to reflect Malta’s increasingly multicultural reality, where diverse linguistic, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds are now common (for further discussion, refer to Chapter III, Section 2). This gap points to a need for more comprehensive strategies to support inclusive and responsive practices, particularly for non-native children and their families in ECEC. Therefore, exploring practitioners’ perspectives of quality interactions may identify challenges and areas where existing frameworks can better support inclusive and responsive interactions.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has provided a brief historical conceptualisation of the child/hood and has demonstrated how these ideas have shaped approaches to early years pedagogy, theorised by some of the global-North seminal thinkers of the 20th century. In doing so, this chapter provides the foundation of the study inquiry that is discussed in Chapter IV The Practitioner-Child Interaction. Before drawing attention to the focus of the study, it is necessary to situate the study within the local Maltese ECEC context which is addressed in the following Chapter III The ECEC Landscape & Issues of Quality.

Chapter III The ECEC Landscape & Issues of Quality

Chapter Introduction

This chapter builds on the research inquiry by reviewing the contemporary Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) landscape. It explores how shifts in family dynamics have transformed roles and responsibilities, leading to an increased reliance on ECEC services globally over the past fifty years. The chapter continues from the historical overview, focusing on the present ECEC context in the Republic of Malta. It also discusses ECEC quality, highlighting the importance of practitioner-child interaction (PCI) as key to high-process quality. This discussion moves beyond quantitative measures to emphasise practitioners' perspectives on PCI.

By the late 20th century, discussions of high-quality ECEC became prominent in global reform and policy (Farquhar, 1990). Given the challenges of defining quality, this chapter concludes by examining facets of quality, focusing particularly on early years pedagogy and the PCI. While not disregarding structural aspects, the PCI is emphasised as a route to better understanding practitioners' perspectives. The chapter ends by introducing Chapter IV: The Practitioner-Child Interaction, which highlights the significance of PCI in defining ECEC quality.

Chapter Organisation

This chapter is divided into three sections. It begins by introducing changes in family dynamics within the Maltese context, the structure of ECEC services and an overview of ECEC practitioners' attributes and knowledge of ECEC. In the latter half, the chapter discusses how quality is interpreted in the literature, arguing that all quality aspects rely on the practitioner's perspectives and role.

Section I Inter/national ECEC Landscape

1.1 Global Family Paradigm Shift

A surge in formal out-of-home early years care revolutionised societal perceptions of early childhood development and learning (Dali et al., 2011; Dalli & White, 2016; Melhuish, 2015). ECEC has reshaped parental childrearing practices and the economic labour market that was originally designed to incentivise women to enter employment and vice-versa (Carroll-Lind & Angus, 2011; Dalli & White, 2016; OECD, 2020; Sollars, 2016). Consequently, family dynamics and cultural and employment trends have radically transformed over the past sixty years (Melhuish, 2015; OECD, 2007; Sollars, 2016). Internationally, there has been a family dynamic shift from what was a typical nuclear family with one parent working and one (typically the mother) at home to both parents working, sharing parenting roles and financial responsibilities (Heyman & McNeil, 2012). As stated by Abela et al. (2014), in Malta, it is now common for mothers to return to work shortly after childbirth, making the stay-at-home mother a rarity. While this shift reflects social and economic progress, it underlines the importance of understanding the role of ECEC in supporting the well-being of future generations. The concept of delivering high-quality ECEC is complex and begins with understanding how quality is perceived within the Maltese context. This involves examining cultural expectations, policy frameworks, and the practitioners' perspectives as these are central to defining and achieving high standards of care and education for young children.

1.2 ECEC Global Context

ECEC refers to the first out-of-home settings that are grounded in practice and research where the primary goal is supporting children's learning and development (Sylva et al., 2006; Tonge et al., 2019). As Taggart (2016, p. 174) describes, during the postwar

era, provisions were designed to be an extension of the home where the practitioner's role was to “replicate the child/mother relationships as much as possible” As research has shown ECEC includes complex social processes, interaction, emotional support, care, teaching, learning, child development, socialisation, and peer influence (OECD, 2018, 2020; Thornberg et al., 2014; WHO, 2018). As Shonkoff (2014) claims, the first five years of life in ECEC are critical in shaping the foundation for lifelong learning and development. Supranational organisations such as the European Union have been instrumental in the development of the early years sector, and define ECEC as;

the essential foundation for successful lifelong learning, social integration, personal development and later employability. It is also particularly beneficial for the disadvantaged, including those from migrant and low-income backgrounds. It can help to lift children out of poverty and family dysfunction (European Commission, 2011, p. 1).

As Thornberg et al. (2014) state, at its core, ECEC is characterised as a dynamic, interwoven haven of play and inquiry-based activities that supports independence and recognises children as active social participants. ECEC is a hybrid of guiding young children through social negotiations and meaning-making experiences with peers and adults (Thornberg et al., 2014). According to WHO (2018), the key to an effective ECEC environment is the practitioners' emotional sensitivity, responsiveness, and neurological development support. Given the importance that literature shows ECEC is foundational to young children's development, it is crucial to recognise the role practitioners play in shaping these experiences. As suggested by Sim et al. (2018), this highlights the need in the global North to understand not only what practitioners do but how they conduct their daily practices and interact with children. However, this is also related to whether an

ECEC provision is effective and genuinely contributes to children's learning and development. Keeping updated on practitioners' perceptions, strategies, and challenges is essential for ensuring ECEC aligns with best practices and supports optimal development, benefiting children's overall growth.

The literature that addresses ECEC efficacy highlights the crucial role of social context in determining whether ECEC experiences have a positive or negative experience on child development (Dalli et al., 2011; Melhuish, 2004; UNICEF, 2015). This perspective is rooted in Vygotsky's belief in heteronomy, defined as the exterior context (social environment or imposed social norms) governing the child's development (Lourenço, 2012). As Slee and Shute (2003, p.3) state, early years development/learning does not occur in isolation, arguing that young children do not grow within a "historical, cultural or philosophical vacuum". The relationship between the developing child and the ECEC environment influences child outcomes, thus, implying that if the environment is conducive to learning and development, then the child will develop accordingly. This is akin to Vygotsky's theory of social constructivism, which is understood as the belief that humans construct knowledge and resolve issues through participating in social interactions and communication with others (Wells, 2001). From a Vygotskian lens, the emphasis is on the collective (Wells, 2001) and the social context in which child development and learning occur.

The existing literature reveals significant cultural variability in ECEC across different countries. In his review, Melhuish (2004) claims that each country has responded differently to the introduction of ECEC internationally, meaning that the contemporary landscape includes variance amongst environments, pedagogy, affordability, accessibility, and influence. These differences have affected the quality of

provision and shaped the overall efficacy of ECEC (Admas, 2019; Carroll-Lind & Angus, 2011; Dali et al., 2011; Melhuish, 2004). When evaluating ECEC effectiveness, much of the focus has been on structured pedagogy, quality assurance and age-appropriate curricula (DfE, 2015; MEDE, 2013). However, these approaches often overlooked the subjective human experience that influences ECEC effectiveness, making it difficult to draw clear conclusions about ECEC's impact across different settings. The European Commission (2011) further raises important questions concerning the appropriate age for children to begin ECEC. There is an ongoing debate about whether infants beginning ECEC at 3 months experience different learning and development outcomes than those starting at two years. As Gooch and Powell (2013) highlight, children at different developmental stages require varying approaches to care and education. This is worth considering for Malta, as there is no research to date that has tracked the long-term outcomes of young children attending ECEC in the country.

Children at risk due to restricted access to ECEC services remain a global concern, worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic (OECD, 2020; UNICEF, 2020). As stated by UNICEF (2015), at-risk children include those from socially or economically deprived backgrounds, facing discrimination due to disability or ethnicity, or living in conflict situations. The WHO (2018) estimates that 250 million young children without regular ECEC access risk not reaching their full potential in the first five years. Although programs like Headstart, High Scope, and Sure Start have made progress in supporting disadvantaged families through significant funding, their success is attributed to both the programs' content and implementation conditions. This demonstrates ECEC's crucial positive impact on early development and learning (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2008; Sylva et

al., 2004). The European Commission (2011) emphasises the need for accessibility in lower socioeconomic communities, a focus also relevant to at-risk families in Malta.

According to the recent Maltese National Statistics Office [NSO] (2020b), there are approximately 82,758 families currently living below the at-risk-of-poverty line [ARP] (an increase of 0.3% in 2018), representing an ARP rate of 17.1 % of the Maltese population (NSO, 2020b). Although societal deprivation and ECEC accessibility are not the focus of this study, it is necessary to present the study in context, highlighting the need for exploring ECEC efficacy and quality. Especially when one of the reasons to invest in ECEC is to minimise generations of early school leavers and underachieving young adults in Malta. Currently, Malta's ongoing national priority is to reduce these two educational and social issues respectively. Almost 17.5% of 18-24-year-olds early school leavers (above the EU average of 10.6% in 2018) (European Commission, 2019b; MEDE, 2014), coupled with a third of 15-year-olds underachieving in core skills, mathematics, and reading and science (European Commission, 2019b; MEDE, 2014), investing and participating in ECEC is now a national priority. Based on the premise that "high-quality early childhood education and care may help prevent later early school leaving" (European Commission, 2019, p. 6). Therefore, recognising how Malta can improve the quality of ECEC participation, particularly for families who need it most, directly addresses the broader global concern highlighted by WHO (2018).

It is unsurprising that MEDE (2013) emphasises the importance of qualifications in ECEC, given their critical role in supporting both ECEC efficacy and quality. Steps have been taken towards up-skilling practitioners, starting with an MQF Level 4 Award in ECEC to an MQF Level 6 Bachelor's degree in ECEC offered by the UM and recognising prior ECEC experience (Jobsplus & NCFHE n.d; Sollars, 2017). Practitioners wishing to

work within a private 0-4 years provision (as a childcare educator) must have completed an MQF Level 4 in ECEC (Sollars, 2017) (refer to Appendix VI) .

Whilst recognising the ECEC workforce as being significant, there is a scarcity of existing research that discusses the characteristics of the staff working within the provision (OECD, 2012, p.294). A gap within the literature exists, one that reaches beyond the demographics and the sociological profile of an ECEC practitioner. What is common across the literature is that early years practitioners represent diversity in terms of remuneration, qualifications, role preparation, employed responsibilities and allocated status (Goouch & Powell, 2013; Nutbrown, 2012, 2013; Moloney, 2010; Rao et al., 2022). Historically, the professional status of early years practitioners was considered to be of lower status when compared to other roles within the education sector (Rao et al., 2022; Read, 2019). As Taggart (2016) states, a modernistic discourse of the ECEC workforce centred on the idea that practitioners would replace the maternal figure, to permit women into the labour market. Consequently and partly due to what Moloney (2010, p.170) claims as the “bifurcation of care and education”, the professional profile of an ECEC practitioner continues to be marginalised (Nutbrown, 2013), as the notion of *care* and *education* remains unitary (Read, 2019). This has compounded the professional status further and is the stereotypical traditional view that women are better suited to “care” for babies and infants, which is a far cry from the academic connotations a Teacher warrant status inherits (Goouch & Powell, 2013). The childcare sector in Malta has witnessed progressive steps towards ECEC professionalisation, however, the approach has predominately remained rooted in professional development, enhancing the knowledge, skills and competencies of existing practitioners and revisions of mandatory

sector policy and curriculum frameworks (Sollars, 2017). As Dalli (2008) suggest, there is a further way to approach the professionalisation of practitioners, and that is to conduct a critical inquiry into practitioners' pedagogy given ECEC landscapes. This "ground-up" approach includes engaging practitioners in professional reflective practice and exploring their approach to interacting with young children.

Section II Maltese ECEC Landscape

2.1 Country & Culture

The Republic of Malta is an archipelago of five small islands, with Malta being the largest it is positioned between three continents in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea, 58 miles from neighbouring Sicily and 186 miles from the North African coast of Tunisia. With a population of 516 thousand (NSO, 2022) and an unemployment rate of 3.2 per cent (at the end of 2019), 61.5 per cent of the total unemployment rate is females, whilst 40 per cent of this figure represents retired women (NSO, 2020a). Consequently, Malta has witnessed a drop in live births and an increase in women entering the labour market. With one of the lowest fertility rates in Europe, younger generations are progressively becoming dual-earning families which has contributed to the steady rise in female employment and young families' reliance on out-of-home childcare services (MEDE, 2013; MFSS, 2016; OECD, 2014). As a consequence, the traditional ideology of women remaining at home as housewives/mothers has rapidly changed. This is partly due to the recent national modernisation in technology, financial and gaming industries, a multiculturalism hub that has progressively permeated the Maltese culture since its independence in 1974 (MEDE, 2013). Despite the rapid changes, Malta predominately remains a catholic society, where the role of Catholicism plays an inherent role

throughout its villages, communities, social services and educational sectors.

Traditionally, the people of Malta are characteristically self-determining, passionately proud and protective of their country, owing to its long history of colonisation and dependence.

One of my earliest memories when arriving in Malta was the frequency with which I witnessed young children out late in the evening with their parents. This is a common sight that resonates with how Goldschmied & Jackson (2004, p.9) describes the Mediterranean's "microcosm of life". A cultural norm of the Mediterranean is spending time each evening leisurely meandering around their village, connecting with other (extended) family members, friends and neighbours. A custom which garners a strong sense of community to anyone visiting the islands. As the researcher exploring the interplay between cultural values and early childhood education in Malta, I have observed that the tactile nature of interactions with children is a key aspect of Maltese family life, deeply rooted in the country's Mediterranean heritage. Maltese parents and caregivers express love and care through physical closeness, such as hugging, holding, and other forms of affectionate touch. These tactile interactions are central to how Maltese society perceives nurturing and are a reflection of broader Mediterranean values, where warmth, family, and togetherness are highly prioritised (Abela & Grech Lanfranco, 2013).

This cultural inclination extends to Maltese ECEC settings, where educators create a secure and loving environment, reflecting the priority of "loving our children" while supporting their emotional and social development. This aligns with Page's (2011) concept of *professional love*, defined as "the emotional bond between a practitioner and a child," where educators balance emotional care with professional responsibilities. However, Dalli (2014) highlights the ambiguity surrounding professional love, noting the

pressure it places on practitioners to manage personal attachments in a professional context, potentially affecting their professional identity. Colley's (2006) work on *emotional labour* further critiques this, emphasising the emotional toll on ECEC practitioners, who often manage their own emotions and those of others to maintain professionalism, even when it requires suppressing their own feelings. This concept is crucial in understanding the emotional demands on educators as they continually balance their emotional responses while caring for children.

Whilst mothers re/enter the labour market, becoming reliant on out-of-home services, the contribution of extended family members and local parishes continues to play an active role within national child-rearing practices (Abela et al., 2014; MEDE, 2015; MFSS, 2016; Sollars, 2016). However, similarly to neighbouring European countries, children in Malta are considered to be an integral part of the family, community and wider society as citizens. Because of advancing democratic societal participation, in 2014, former Maltese president H.E. Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca inaugurated a non-profit entity *The Malta Foundation for the Well-being of Society* (MFWS). With a focus on improving social relationships and well-being, admittedly, Maltese children are now one of the top priorities being addressed by *Malta's National Reform Programme* (NRP) (MFCS, 2016). In brief, Malta has adapted to vast societal and economic modifications and even though many traditional customs remain, the focus on *active* child participation, coupled with providing spaces for children to exercise their rights to be heard is unfolding (Bonello, 2020). As small Maltese communities gradually grow accustomed to the influence of change and diversity, so too, will the held beliefs of the people living in these communities. Consequently, it is evident how long-held beliefs regarding child rearing

and socialisation are equally adjusting to the reliance on ECEC services, therefore, the context in which ECEC has adapted calls for further attention.

2.2 Changes in ECEC

Given current societal changes, the recent *National Children's Policy* (MFCS, 2016) equally acknowledges and supports how gendered, traditional cultural norms of women have changed. Besides the influence of globalisation and becoming members of the European Union in 2004, the fabric of Maltese child socialisation and ECEC continues to modify. With the presence of multiculturalism infiltrating all areas of society, the educational sectors have equally transformed. Even though Malta is a bilingual country, where both Maltese and English are spoken in varying degrees throughout different geographical areas, it is one of the very few European countries to “officially mention a second language in the pre-primary curriculum” (MEDE, 2018, p.9). In doing so, recognises the long-term developmental, social and economic benefits of bilingualism (MEDE, 2014, 2018). Although this may be true, it is evident that tensions exist within the multicultural context of educational settings. Whilst national academics collectively emphasise the advantages of the country to have cross-cultural opportunities, there is severe unrest among educational leaders and educators having to navigate school development, management and classroom equity (Bezzina & Camilleri, 2001, 2017; Vassallo, 2016). It is clear that such discord has been voiced across formal educational sectors, however, little has been gleaned from non-formal ECEC settings, specifically childcare settings. It is certainly not the case that multicultural tensions do not exist in ECEC settings, rather it seems that the sector lacks unanimous voice and representation, especially within the private childcare domain. Moreover, such agitation is further exacerbated when typically, the workforce is inexperienced in navigating multilingual

communicative cultures, and professional reflection, with a limited suite of resources at their disposal. This is exacerbated further when typically private provisions stand on the periphery and lack consistent collaboration and unison with experienced heads in education. Similarly to international ECEC environments, the childcare sector is predominantly occupied with MQF Level 3-5 childcare vocational qualifications, categorised as below degree level (Nutbrown, 2012, 2013; Sollars, 2017). The intention here is not to criticise or marginalise the capabilities of the childcare workforce.

Alternatively, the goal is to provoke a discussion. Doing so highlights the reasons *why* the sector deserves a spot-light exploratory and non-judgmental inquiry. It is not a question of meeting the demand for ECEC services or *up-skilling* an existing workforce, it is a case of *listening* to those who experience, work within and shape the changing childcare landscape daily.

2.3 Maltese ECEC Composition & Services

To date, the non-compulsory ECEC sector (0-5 y/o) is operated by three entities; the State, the Roman Catholic Church and Independent Schools. Made up of early years practitioners (centre owners, managers, child carers and/or child care assistants) who are responsible for children aged 3 months up to 3/4-year-olds (within private, non-registered KG settings) and Kindergarten teachers and/or assistants (within registered KG settings) who work with children aged 3-5-year-olds (Ministry for Education & Employment, (n.d.); European Commission, 2019a; Sollars, 2017). Once children reach compulsory school age (5 years old), they enter an 11-year formal programme divided into two cycles: primary, 5 to 11 years old and secondary, 11 to 16 years old (European Commission, 2019a). Since 2016, the non-compulsory ECEC sector currently falls under the responsibility of the MFED (Sollars, 2021). The MFED must support and guide both

state-funded FES and privately owned ECEC provisions. Within the MFED, additional departments coexist: the Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education [DQSE], the Quality Assurance Department [QAD], and the Directorate for Educational Services [DES]. Collectively, all departments are underpinned by equity and quality, whilst mutually implementing and maintaining student services, regulation of quality standards, provision audits and the issuing of provision registrations (Education.Gov.MT, (n.d.); European Commission, 2019a; Sollars, 2017).

In April 2014, the government launched the Free Childcare Scheme [FCS] (European Commission, 2015; NSO, 2017; MEDE, 2016), based on a Public Private Partnership [PPP] agreement between themselves and EY provisions (0-3 years) (European Commission, 2015). The political driving force behind the scheme was largely based on the need to facilitate working families, specifically mothers, to enter the formal labour market (Abela et al., 2014; Borg, 2016; European Commission, 2015, 2018; MEDE, 2015). Since then, Malta has witnessed increased demand for childcare provision (Borg, 2015; NSO, 2017; Sollars, 2011, 2016). In 2017, 36.6% (above the EU average of 34.2%) of children under 3 years were reported attending childcare, an increase of approximately 27% since 2010 (European Commission, 2019b). The increase in participation is partly due to the rise in registered centres, as in 2016, Malta had 85 (73 private and 12 FES) settings (Sollars, 2016). There are currently more than 170 registered centres (156 private and 14 FES) (MEDE, 2020; Sollars, 2021), increasing by 100 per cent during the past six years. The demand to open additional centres was largely due to FCS. Since its introduction, the scheme has been criticised for being economically driven as opposed to being primarily beneficial for the psychosocial development of young infants and families. Consequently, there is a growing concern amongst Maltese scholars

for those at-risk children unable to access the childcare scheme as eligibility relies on both parents being employed or in training (Borg 2015; Sollars, 2016). It cannot be denied that there is a proportion of children who are therefore denied the opportunity to attend non-formal ECEC services are excluded from additional progressive steps towards the foundation of successful lifelong learning, social integration, personal development and adult employment trajectories (Lindeboom & Buiskool, 2013). Alongside the introduction of the FCS and state-funded Kindergarten education, the government has furthered initiatives to aid parental labour participation by introducing before/after-school clubs and improving maternity/parental/family leave benefits. However, given that the educational system consists of Church, Independent and Government Schools, structural barriers remain due to the variance among school hours, holidays and costs. Hence, these are influential factors that may be affecting current employment rates. The government has not managed to convince a high proportion of women to enter employment by simply providing extra services. There also remains the question of providing a stable provision infrastructure. Evidence supports one fundamental flaw which was overlooked before the launch of the FCS. There remains a shortage of qualified practitioners (Borg, 2015), this alone clearly raises concerns over the assessment of quality, working conditions and overall centre effectiveness in preparing young children for formal education.

2.4 National ECEC Policy & Standards

It is evident through the accumulation of national policies, strategies and initiatives that Malta has taken progressive steps towards recognising the importance of early years education, demonstrating its commitment “in promoting a view of early childhood as an important phase of life in its own right and not just a preparation for adult life” (European Commission, 2019b). The *Positive Parenting National Strategic Policy 2016-2024*

(MFSS, 2016) is a further testament towards recognising the importance of early childhood development and parental responsibility. Furthermore, it reinforces the MFWS's pursuit of recognising children's rights whilst supporting the aim of "building and sustaining a positive culture and infrastructure for parents and their children" (MFSS, 2016, p. 6). In conjunction with the NCF (MEDE, 2012) and the LOF (DQSE, 2015), living national frameworks coexist, advocating an "I can do child-centred approach to education" (DQSE, 2015, p. 29). The NCF (MEDE, 2012) is the second national curriculum framework that recognised the ECEC sector as a time for young children to develop agency within an enriched play-based learning environment (Sollars, 2021).

Whilst a direct analysis of all pertaining national policies is beyond the focus of this study, it is important to review some elements of the most influential policies that have been the driving force behind improving ECEC quality, namely early years pedagogy. *The National Standards for Child Day Care Facilities* (MFSS, 2006) was the first publication and has recently been revised and replaced by the *National Standards for Early Childhood Education & Care Services (0-3 years)* (MFED, 2022). For this discussion and because of the recently revised edition, I begin with evaluating *Standard I Suitable Persons* (from the 2006 version) as this has had a lasting effect on what is occurring in today's settings and reflects the longstanding fixed expectations of early years pedagogy.

2.4.1 National Standards for Childcare

The initial *National Standards for Child Day Care Facilities* (MFSS, 2006), designed specifically for 0-3 years (centre/home-based) provision was the first attempt to synthesise early childhood care and education, while guiding professional practice. As previously discussed (since its publication in 2006) the ECEC landscape has dramatically changed which prompted calls (Sollars, 2011; Sollars, 2016) for a revised and updated set

of standards to be issued for all registered ECEC settings. It remains evident that standards of ECEC quality remain a national concern as despite having the recommended standards (since 2006), the DQSE received 60 reported cases of infant/child maltreatment within early years settings in 2017 alone (Martin, 2017). Admittedly, the DQSE has declared that in-service practitioner training and qualifications are imperative measures to be taken by all registered centres, however, the sociology of all ECEC workforce (including non-registered centres) remains unknown in Malta. Furthermore, mandatory continuous professional development for all non-formal educators also remains an undefined requirement. Having said this, the DQSE spearheaded widespread periodic quality assurance inspections once the childcare scheme was launched in 2013. Before the revised 2022 standards, part of this inspection process registered centres had to demonstrate compliance with all ten recommended standards (MFSS, 2006) including; *Standard One Suitable Persons*. Although the discourse used in the revised 2022 version has progressed by reflecting the current ECEC landscape, as a professional consultant working alongside the workforce, the implications of the discourse used in the initial 2006 publication have had a longstanding effect on the mindset of existing centre owners and managers which is worth discussing.

2.4.2 Focus on “Suitable Persons”


An important point to note is whilst the standards can be adhered to as a national requirement, this does not automatically suggest a centre is providing high-quality educational care. Establishing quality is merely more than satisfying a list of criteria from an inspector's subjective interpretation. The notion of measuring quality is nuanced and open to interpretation (Campbell-Bar & Leeson, 2016) (notions of quality are addressed towards the end of this chapter). The discussion does not aim to cover all aspects of the

national standards, instead, it focuses on *Standard One Suitable Persons* as illustrated in Figure 1. Foremost, defining what is meant by the *suitability* of a practitioner creates tension. Despite meeting the required structural elements of the practitioner's position (such as staff demographics, qualifications and child ratios), evaluating their *suitability* remains vague and open to interpretation. These standards have been used to gauge the suitability of practitioners, yet these standards may not fully capture the diverse qualities that contribute to quality interaction with children. Therefore, by exploring practitioners' perspectives would reveal how practitioners perceive and enact quality interactions in ways that standardised measures of process quality may not fully recognise.


The preceding sub-sections (illustrated in Figure 1) refer to practitioners' aptitude and *skills* in providing quality care. By definition, aptitude implies a *talent*, and a *flair* for working with young children and is typically gained through vocational experience, often mediated by individual differences such as personality and temperament. Whilst aptitude is an important professional attribute, it is however part of a wider picture of providing *good quality care*, it is not a single facet of professional quality. The ability to *respond appropriately*, with a *positive attitude*, in a *warm, affectionate and firm manner* and to *provide individual attention* to young children in practice, is equally open to interpretation.

Figure 1

Extract of Standard One “Suitable Persons”



NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR CHILD DAY CARE FACILITIES



STANDARD I SUITABLE PERSONS

Children are looked after by suitable and qualified staff who have a positive regard for children and who have satisfied the recruitment criteria. The facility maintains the appropriate carer to child ratios.

1. Children will be cared for by qualified staff with the necessary aptitude and skills to provide good quality care.
2. Carers are suitable and trustworthy persons who are able and trained to respond appropriately to children's different needs.
3. Carers have a positive attitude towards children and interact with them in a warm, affectionate and firm manner.
4. The staff members are knowledgeable on issues concerning childcare, and management encourages staff development and provides the necessary supervision to staff members caring for children.
5. The service provides appropriate carer to child ratios, enabling children to receive individual attention from their designated carer.

Note Adapted from National Standards for Child Day Care Facilities (MFSS, 2006)

The amount of time practitioners spend with children, and the ratio of practitioners to children significantly influence the opportunity to provide individual attention. When practitioners have more time and manageable ratios, they are better positioned to form deep, trust-based relationships, engage in meaningful conversations, and respond sensitively to children's needs (Taggart, 2015; Smith, 2004). Lower ratios allow practitioners to give individual attention, fostering high-quality, child-centred practices,

whereas higher ratios and limited time tend to result in rushed, task-oriented engagements, reducing the depth of interactions and the ability to support children's cognitive and emotional development (Elfer, Goldschmied, & Selleck, 2012; Sylva et al., 2004).

Alison Clarke's (2020) concept of "slow knowledge" emphasises the value of slowing down the pace of practitioner-child interactions, allowing time for observation, reflection, and deeper engagement. Clarke argues that meaningful learning and relationships are fostered when practitioners can move beyond surface-level interactions and take the time to fully understand children's individual needs and developmental stages (Clarke, 2020). This aligns with the importance of time and ratios, as slower, more reflective approaches require sufficient resources and attention. When practitioners can engage in this "slow" process, the quality of interaction improves, leading to more holistic support for children's development.

A further point that has been overlooked within this standard is the emphasis on practitioners' knowledge to educate children, not solely caring for them in provision. As Van Laere and Vandebroek (2018) highlight, *education* and *care* concepts should be entwined within ECEC; however, they depend on whether the local context is a split or integrated system. Malta is a split system where childcare provisions operate separately from the Kindergarten settings; however, they can appear within the same school. This is one of the key differences between a child's experience of home and a first-out-of-home ECEC setting. The complexity of the practitioners' role is nothing new across the literature, as it is well documented that those in a position of responsibility are charged with meeting the basic needs of the child, caring for and providing an enriched learning environment, one that is conducive to early years development and learning. However,

the sector is in danger of overusing the notion of care, as Goldstein (1998) emphasised that a repetition of *care* and classifying the professional status of a *caregiver/childcarer* simply contributes towards marginalising the profession. Gooch and Powell (2013, p.90) additionally support how the use of care has contributed towards de-professionalising the sector based on the premise that care is “more of a platitude than a meaningful professional stance” (Goldstein, 1998, p.245). Professional care triggers practitioners to invest in nurturing relations with children by behaving in a certain manner, as Goldstein (1998) describes, care is a set of complex feelings. Without a doubt, there is considerable complexity when trying to understand, judge and interpret one another's feelings, specifically when observing the interplay of practitioner-child communications. A shared meaning of care; gentle smiles, soft intentions and warm hugs exists (Stern, 2004; Goldstein, 1998), however, is simplified across existing policy discourse (such as the standard description quoted here). This suggests that the role of the practitioner is portrayed as a “job any person can do so long as she has the mother instincts or be maternal and can organise herself to respond efficiently” (Gooch & Powell, 2013, p.91). Having worked alongside practitioners within the sector, I am not alone in saying that responsive caring pedagogy is far more complex and warrants further exploration as a “mothering instinct” is not a prescribed method of practice (Nutbrown, 2012). Furthermore, simplifying care also suggests that all mothers’ caring attributes are the same (Stern, 2004), equally the family home environment is different to that of an ECEC centre, therefore the lived experience of care within an ECEC context is different. Therefore, simply applying the notion of an extended-home environment is both naive and insular. Discourses of creating extensions of home are certainly more favourable than advocating and replicating a diluted version of school for young infants. The ideas

presented here concerning the simplified use of caring discourse naturally prompt a discussion of Nel Noddings and her philosophy of education (Noddings, 2005).

Nevertheless, before attending to her theory of care ethics that follows in the next chapter, this chapter defines what is meant by *high-quality* provision and the proposal of the practitioner-child interaction as central to conceptualising high-quality process aspects of ECEC.

Section III Quality of ECEC Practice

3.1 Defining Quality in ECEC

Quality in ECEC is a multifaceted concept shaped by various factors related to affordability, curriculum, parental engagement, access, and governance (OECD, 2012). These interconnected factors have collectively prompted global concerns and efforts towards achieving high-quality ECEC, as they significantly impact the well-being and development of children (Dalli et al., 2011; European Union, 2019; Marty et al., 2004; Melhuish et al., 2015). Defining quality in ECEC is important because it ensures the well-being and developmental support for young children, but as Campbell-Barr and Leeson (2016) discuss, defining quality also raises questions about how quality should be measured and understood.

At first glance, the term *quality* appears to be a simple term, commonly used when describing something (object, place or service) that is of standard when compared to a similar kind (Oxford University Press, 2023). The expression often has connotations of superiority or excellence, yet when applied to ECEC, it becomes complex and entangled within subjectivity. This is mediated by “who” is assessing the quality standard and has led to varying definitions of quality throughout the literature. This is partly due to the subjective perspective being influenced by individual expectations, values and norms,

which results in a value-laden and multi-perspectival view (Farquhar, 1990; Tobin et al., 1991; Tonge et al., 2019).

Dalli and White (2016) highlight variances in ECEC provision and policies globally. There are numerous programmes and policies across the globe, all designed to address ECEC quality from their political and cultural stance (Boller et al., 2014; Dalli et al., 2011). It was during the late 1980s that measuring and assessing high-quality ECEC began which saw the development of varying scales (refer to Table 2 below) (Bryant, 2010). This was also in response to the increasing demands of regulatory systems and forms of quality assessment (a discussion of measuring quality is presented towards the end of this section). As the concept of quality has developed, research now considers ECEC quality from an ecological perspective, implying the quality of ECEC a child experiences not only occurs within an ECEC setting but also includes the child's home environment, social relationship and the child themselves (Fenech, 2011).

In Malta, the national policy emphasises quality in ECEC, however, specific guidance on ways of improving quality is lacking. The recent *National Children's Policy* (MFCS, 2016) includes one policy action which is to “design childcare facilities and schools in such a way that meets the educational, social, emotional and physical needs of children” (p. 23). Whilst this policy aim is broad and does not refer to aspects of quality per se, it lacks direction on *what* and *how* the design of the provision will endeavour to meet the child's needs. In conjunction with the Ministry for Education, the Foundation for Educational Services [FES] (FES, 2023) is more specific in referring to quality by claiming;

to offer quality educational services through structured contemporary programmes ensuring financial sustainability and ethical behaviour. Together we provide a safe

environment and an enriching experience to all our learners, their families and all stakeholders (FES, 2023).

Furthermore, aims to;

offer quality child-care services in order to support and strengthen the family unit, guided by the underlying principle that the family is the best environment for personal growth. The main aim of the centres is to offer a personalised service of quality care for all children (FES, 2023).

Whilst it remains important that early years centres (such as the FES) publicise notions of quality, the claims of providing quality remain in what Campbell-Barr & Leeson (2016, p.19) call a hegemonic view. This is understood as a global view that is influenced by supranational organisations (such as the European Union) and inter/national governments' preconceived assumptions of ECEC quality. Assumptions are, therefore, filtered down to ECEC settings and are potentially at risk of being misunderstood. It is critical to deconstruct this hegemonic view and allow space for individual perspectives, particularly those of practitioners who engage directly with children. Quality cannot be understood merely through the lens of regulatory frameworks but should include subjective reflections on practice. This deconstruction challenges the status quo for a more inclusive, discursive definition of quality that accommodates the lived experiences of those within the ECEC sector.

3.2 Policies Shaping ECEC Quality

The ECEC infrastructure has a duty of care towards the children, families and staff involved in the provision. Moreover, ECEC is responsible for the management and implementation of policies and strategies that are formed from collaborative partnerships within and across provisions (Dalli et al., 2011; Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008; UNICEF, 2015). Given this, the European Commission (2011) identified

five key facets: Political, Legal, & *Financial Frameworks*, *Accessibility & Participation*, *Parent Partnership*, *Curriculum* (including non/cognitive pedagogies) and *Practitioner Professional Requirements*. Each of these domains is interrelated and influences the overall effectiveness of an ECEC service (European Commission in 2011). However, the prevailing policy frameworks tend to emphasise structural aspects of quality, such as governance, accessibility, and curriculum design. While these elements are critical, Burchinal (2018) argue that process quality, which includes the daily interactions between children and practitioners, has a more direct impact on child outcomes than structural elements alone. Integrating political, financial, and legal frameworks into ECEC has primarily been approached from an educational-care perspective, requiring staff to be qualified and experienced in implementing balanced, child-centred curricula. These structural elements, though important, can sometimes overshadow the vital role of relational and pedagogical dynamics, especially during sensitive periods of child development.

An emphasis on structural aspects of quality, as championed by the European Commission in 2011, has shaped quality discourse by promoting a top-down approach that prioritises regulatory compliance, curriculum standards and policy frameworks. This approach has lacked a deeper focus on pedagogy and the holistic needs of young children when emotional, social and educational care must be more dynamically integrated. In contrast, Melhuish (2004) suggested that there are seven core facets of quality in ECEC that prioritise child-centred pedagogical practice. These include an enriching, stimulating early learning environment, responsive child-practitioner interactions, committed and knowledgeable staff, manageable child-practitioner ratios, stable staff, Continuous Professional Development [CPD], and a curriculum that is developmentally appropriate.

Melhuish's (2004) emphasis on the practitioner-child relationships highlights the role that well-supported and responsive practitioners play in ensuring quality, a point that structural policy frameworks often overlook. It is also important to recognise that whilst Melhuish (2004) pre-dates the European Commission's (2011) framework, this divergence demonstrates how the evolution of quality discourse in ECEC has shifted toward a more formalised, school-readiness agenda (refer to Chapter IV, Section 1.3), which arguably dilutes the focus on early pedagogical practice.

It is widely accepted that quality is typically positioned within two divisions; physical *structural* and classroom *process* elements (Dalli & White, 2016; Dowsett et al., 2008; European Union, 2019; Fenech, 2011; Mashburn et al., 2008; OECD, 2020b; Sim et al., 2018). Structural quality refers to the regulatory facets of provision, such as practitioner qualifications/experience, age-appropriate child: practitioner ratio and class size (Fenech, 2011; Howes et al., 2008; OECD, 2020b). Process quality concerns the exact provision experience each child experiences, for instance, the interactions with respective peers, practitioners/adults and the instructional classroom content (Fenech, 2011; Howes et al., 2008; OECD, 2020b). Each domain is entwined with one another, and the main reason why research has divided both "camps" is that it allows research to explore the effect and interaction they both have on one another, thus allowing research to evaluate precisely which facet directly contributes to high-quality ECEC (Morrison & Connor, 20002).

3.3 Measuring *high-quality* ECEC

Attempts have been made to measure all aspects of quality due to the increasing demands of regulatory systems and forms of quality assessment. As Fenech (2011) discusses, "quality" continues to be shaped by paradigms and has predominantly been

explored from a positivist stance, which has led to narrow views of ECEC quality. The notion of assessing and measuring quality has changed since the inception of ECEC services. Existing measures such as those illustrated in Table 2 predominately examine the global quality of provision, where both structural and process elements are combined to provide a global evaluation in an attempt to correlate with child outcomes (Bryant, 2010). In 2002, Morrison and Connor presented evidence to suggest that both structural and process aspects of provision need to be separated for research to determine how interaction directly contributes to quality educational care. Furthermore, international surveys such as the TALIS Staring Strong (OECD, 2020b) have confirmed that process facets of quality such as assisting young children to acquire language, literacy, numeracy skills, social-emotional, group cohesion and individual support and parent collaboration and engagement within ECEC practice are key priorities. As Bryant (2010) discusses, emphasis on certain areas of quality will be important depending on who is researching (or evaluating) high-quality provision.

Table 2
Existing global measures of quality within ECEC

Scale Details	Purpose	Reference
The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) and revised edition ECERS-R	Intended to measure EY environments, within centred-based ages 2.5 to 5 years of age. Focus on; space, personal care, language/ reasoning, activities, interaction, programme structure, parents/staff	Harms & Clifford (1980) Harms, Clifford & Cryer (1998)
Infant Toddler Environment Rating Scale (ITERS) and revised edition ITERS-R	Based on measuring the environment; displays, care routines, interaction, activities, interactions, programme structure and needs adults/parents	Harms, Cryer & Clifford (1990) (2003)
Family Day Care Rating Scale (FDRS) and revised edition FCCERS-R	Intended to measure quality of provision set in a family setting	Harms & Clifford (1989) Harms, Cryer & Clifford (2007)
Classroom Assessment Scoring-System CLASS	Assesses Teacher-child interactions, focus on; instructional & emotional support, classroom organisation. 12 months upwards, group settings.	Pianta, La Paro & Hamre (2008)
Caregiver Interaction Scale CIS	Designed for toddlers, focus on emotional tone, discipline style and practitioners responsiveness (punitiveness, permissiveness, detachment positive interaction)	Arnett (1989)
Leuven Involvement Scale	Focuses on children's involvement & well-being. Evaluates child engagement, related to quality of interaction.	Laevers (1994)
Sustained Shared Thinking Scale SST	Measure quality of PCI, sustained shared thinking, meaningful interactions, joint problem solving	Siraj-Blatchford et al., (2002)

Note Adapted from Bryant (2010)

The current methods of measuring ECEC quality (as presented in Table 2) rely on rating scales and quantifiable metrics that arguably face significant limitations and potential dangers. As shown in Table 2, measures including the Leuven Involvement Scale (Laevers, 1994) present an objective, standardised approach to measuring quality. These scales are examples of how quality is being measured and standardised. While these scales attempt to capture aspects of practitioner-child interaction, their reliance on brief observational periods and predefined categories may oversimplify the complexity of ECEC quality. Therefore, such an approach creates nuances, especially when we consider the existing dynamic, multifaceted, and relational nature of early childhood settings. As an example, the CIP scale was devised to complement the pre-existing ITERS-R/ECERS-R scales (Harms et al., 2003) and attempted to measure the *caregiver interactive competence* construct by focusing on six measurable practitioner skills; *sensitive responsiveness, respect for autonomy, structuring and limit setting, verbal communication, developmental stimulation and fostering positive peer interactions*. One of the dangers of quantifying such skills is that it reinforces a narrow view of what quality means. These assessments may unintentionally marginalise more complex aspects of practitioners' interactions by focusing on certain measurable aspects, such as specific behaviours (as listed above). Factors such as emotional attunement, responsiveness to the specific needs of individual children, and reflective practice are difficult to reduce to a numerical score. In turn, this positivist approach, as critiqued by Fenech (2011), can lead to a kind of “blind spots” to deeper dimensions of quality, such as cultural context, practitioner intuition, and relational dynamics, all of which are vital to understanding the true nature of quality early childhood care.

In the Maltese context, this tension is particularly evident. Global metrics and quality standards increasingly influence Maltese ECEC policy frameworks, especially the national ECEC standards (MFED, 2022). They have now been explicitly categorised into process and structural elements, reflecting an international trend of separating these two dimensions of quality. These standards are used as a checklist for compliance by the DQSE, which monitors ECEC settings based on whether they meet the specified benchmarks in both categories. In agreement with Hunkin and Nolan's (2019) critique, this increasing focus on the measures in ECEC often leads to a prioritisation of measurable and observable facets of quality, often at the cost of more relational aspects of quality, particularly those related to the everyday interactions between practitioners and children. Therefore, this raises the question: do Maltese ECEC policies genuinely improve process quality, or are they contributing to a narrow, prescriptive way of measuring quality in ECEC? Given the complexity of early childhood education, reducing quality to structural and process elements (as illustrated in the ECEC national standards) (MEDE, 2022) risks oversimplifying the rich, relational nature of ECEC practice. As Dalli and White (2016) point out, focusing on the “lived experience” of children and by extension, the practitioners is critical. However, this aspect is often neglected in measures that are heavily weighted towards structural elements and decontextualised practitioner-child interactions. Therefore, the normalising effects of these existing scales and their limitations support the need for research, such as this study, that accounts for practitioners' voices and challenges the dominance of these prescriptive measures.

Professor Valerie Sollars (affiliated with the UM) is leading research on investigating perspectives of quality within Maltese ECEC services (childcare and kindergarten provisions). Through an open-ended questionnaire, Sollars (2020a) invited

parents of young children attending 16 childcare and 34 kindergarten provisions to reflect voluntarily on their perspectives of quality. Findings revealed that parents reported structural elements of provision as a primary “hallmark” of quality, followed by their child’s psychological and physical well-being. When commenting on the practitioners’ role in quality, parents felt ECEC professionals should be “welcoming” and “friendly” where “there is genuine care” and “love [for] children as though there were their own” (p. 8). The findings from Sollars (2020a) are congruent with an existing consensus that quality is complex and multidimensional in nature. Attempting to quantify the construct simply detects its presence within provisions (whether that is structural or process features) and does not detect influencing variables that are affecting the scale results. Specifically, the OECD (2020b) defines process quality as;

the aspect of ECEC that is most proximal to children’s learning, development and well-being. The quality of interactions ECEC settings, including how staff engage with children and with parents/guardians, constraint process quality (p.21)

This supports one of the key statements made by Sollars (2020a) “Parents need to develop a deeper understanding about the values of engaging relationships and rich interactions which are fundamental to quality experience and opportunities for learning and development” (p. 10). Implying that parents lacked an awareness of their contribution within the interplay of both structural and procedural aspects of ECEC. Whilst this is a progressive research step for Malta, current measures lack the voice and perspective of those most intimately involved in ECEC—practitioners themselves. This gap is apparent within Maltese research, as the dominant discourse on quality continues to prioritise the views of external evaluators, researchers, or parents (as shown in Sollars, 2020a), rather than those directly engaging with children on a daily basis. Practitioners’ perspectives on

what constitutes quality are often overlooked or undervalued, yet they are the ones actively shaping children's early learning experiences through their daily interactions. Therefore, there is a need for research that centres on the perspectives of practitioners in Malta. Practitioners' perspectives and enactment of quality interactions offer a rich, contextual understanding of what quality looks like in practice, particularly within the unique socio-cultural and pedagogical frameworks of Maltese ECEC. This study aims to contribute to this much-needed perspective, providing a nuanced critique of the dominant ways of measuring quality. Rather than relying solely on observation-based scales or standardised criteria, the study engages practitioners' perspectives on their interactive practices, revealing how they understand and enact quality. Such an approach may offer valuable insights into the barriers that practitioners face in delivering high-quality interactions, whether those barriers stem from environmental constraints, professional training, or policy pressures. This shift in focus from external assessment to practitioner self-reflection could offer a more holistic view of ECEC quality, one that recognises both the challenges and the complex, context-specific nature of what quality care truly entails.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has provided a brief overview of the inter/national ECEC context in which this study is positioned. In doing so has discussed the current changes to the national ECEC context due to globalisation and the national drive towards encouraging mothers into the labour market through the extensions of ECEC services. Central to this chapter is the proposal that the local discourse surrounding the professional role of the practitioner profile requires re-framing. It is suggested that rather than using ambiguous connotations of "suitability" and "caring" marginalised connotations, policy should reflect equally the professional educating and caring responsibilities taken on by

practitioners. The later section of this chapter presented a discussion of high quality within an ECEC context, demonstrating the complexity of understanding the quality construct and what it signifies to individual stakeholders. The local context concerning quality provision is also presented with a specific focus on the current and ongoing research by Sollars (2020a, 2020b). This chapter, therefore, presents the local ECEC context as a foundation for the next chapter that considers the practitioner-child interaction.

Chapter IV The Practitioner-Child Interaction

Chapter Introduction

The previous chapters have thus far presented a description of the northern global inter/national Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) landscape (Chapters II and III), in addition to conceptualising *structural* and *process* elements of high-quality ECEC (as defined in Chapter III, Section, 3.2). As discussed earlier, the quality discourse has taken centre stage by becoming a familiar concept across international ECEC reform and policy (OECD, 2020b). This has led to the underlying motive of this study, which is the exploration of practitioners' perspectives of one facet of process quality, namely the Practitioner-Child Interaction (PCI) which is presented in this chapter. As existing research has predominantly focused on quantifying the quality of PCI (Chapter III, Section 3), this study chose to account for the practitioners' subjective view of quality interaction as an alternative approach to exploring the communicative space between the practitioner and child.

The ambition of this chapter considers existing notions of the PCI from relational and ethics of care pedagogical perspective, by drawing on the works of the Jewish and American philosophers Martin Buber and Nel Noddings. In doing so, demonstrates how existing empirical research underpins an existing view of PCI, which is said to be the cornerstone of adaptive social and emotional development (SED) in young children (Dalli & White, 2016; Mellhuish, 2006; Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002). On that account, this chapter intends to reveal the research gap, that refers to the (under-discussed) view of quality PCI from the practitioners' perspective. As I will discuss in the upcoming methodology (Chapter VI) the inductive nature of this study was conducive to a

Constructively Grounded Theory (CGT) (Charmaz, 2014) methodological framework. As Charmaz (2014) and Thornberg (2012) claim CGT is a framework that does not set out to *shoehorn* theory into an existing framework, alternatively, CGT inquiries review existing literature as a form of inspiration whilst using it as a heuristic tool to create theoretical associations and connections between research phenomena. Therefore, this chapter continues the previous literature review (Chapters II and III) and sharpens the focus on the existing understanding of the PCI.

Chapter Organisation

This chapter is divided into four sections, each section explores an existing understanding of the PCI. The first section provides a definition and discussion of the PCI by drawing on the existing education and care dichotomy that is evident within the ECEC sector. The second section considered the value of accounting for practitioners' professional epistemological stance and the influence of their socio-cultural histories on reflecting on their approach to quality interaction. The third section provides a discussion of ethical care pedagogy and pulls on the work of Nel Noddings who has been a notable author within the field of early years pedagogy, specifically the interactions between educators and students. From this discussion, the chapter closes by summarising the existing research that has previously considered the features of the PCI, namely the affective dimensions of practitioners interacting with young children in ECEC. These affective dimensions are understood as *assurance*, *attunement* and establishing a *secure attachment* between the practitioner and child (Lim, 2019).

Section I Framing the Practitioner-Child Interaction (PCI)

As previously indicated in Chapters II and III, “early years” is understood as a critical period of maturation, which is a significant time for investing in a child’s

experiences of education and care from a developmental psychology perspective (Shonkoff, 2000; Sylva et al., 2004). It is during these critical experiences that the role of social interaction with significant caregivers (parents or practitioners) has the greatest influence on whether the child's experience is of quality (Brownlee, et al. 2009). Since the early 1990s longitudinal research that was conducted in New Zealand with the *Competent Children/Learners Study* (Hendricks et al., 1993) and Michigan America with the *High/Scope Perry Pre-School Program* (Schweinhart, et al. 1993) and longitudinal research carried out by the *NICHD Early Child Care Research Network* (2002) all suggested that quality ECEC programmes which encouraged young children's active engagement resulted in positive adulthood adjustment (OECD, 2018). At the time, this research demonstrated that the pedagogical approach of the practitioner has profound effects on the educational, social and emotional outcomes of young children. Subsequently, this has been further supported by Siraj-Blatchford et al. (2002), who claim that the notion of (traditional) formal instructive, teacher-led pedagogy within early years is futile as it has been significantly correlated to social and emotional maladjustment (Sylva & Nabuco, 1996). Furthermore, early years learning is often understood as an outcome of the relationships young children form during what is seen as a critical period of maturation (Brooker, 2007, p.14). As a result, pedagogy is said to be a core facet of process quality ECEC (Dali & White 2016; Howes et al., 2008; Tonge et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2016). Therefore, it is argued that the style and focus of this communicative space between caregiver and child remain the cornerstone of adaptive executive function (Moriguchi, 2014) and infant SED (Dali & White, 2016; Sylva et al., 2004). As Mortensen and Barnett (2015) state,

teacher-child interactions may serve as a compensatory mechanism for children whose development may otherwise be compromised because of stressful, unsupportive home environment or poor self-regulatory skills that place children at risk for poor socioemotional and academic adjustment (p. 218)

In light of this research, a niche that considers the practitioners' subjective view of their interaction with young children remains evident within the local Maltese ECEC context. This is not only an under-researched area, but it will equally provide further insight into how childcare centre owners/managers can better understand and support practitioners' perspectives of quality interactions.

1.1 Defining Practitioner-Child Interaction (PCI)

In this study, the PCI is defined as the communicative and relational space between the practitioner and child, where “interactions and experiences are one of the most significant factors explaining the effects of care and early education on children’s learning and development” (DfE, 2015, p.4). Existing research (Gunnar et al., 2010; Groeneveld, et al., 2013) suggests that a secure responsive interaction can buffer against the damaging effects of the neurological stress hormone cortisol found in young children attending ECEC services, based on the premise that children learn to trust adults through responsive interaction. The DfE (2015) reiterates the importance of exploring the PCI regarding ECEC process quality. Practitioners who demonstrate a genuine interest in the child develop a secure influence that enables young children to interpret and co-construct shared meaning through quality responsive relational interactions (Degotardi & Pearson, 2009). Supported by the OECD (2020b, p.22), regardless of who the child’s key person is, responsive, meaningful interactions facilitate early years engagement, forming the foundation for high-process quality in ECEC provisions (Markets, 2005). Therefore, the PCI warrants further exploration from the practitioner's perspective, as it would be

interesting to see if practitioners (within the local context) allude to being engaging, moral and responsive as implied by the existing consensus.

The attempt to explore practitioners' perspectives, requires practitioners to engage in professional reflection to recall moments of their interaction with children. Professional reflective practice is typically understood as the act of critically thinking about and reflecting *prior to, during or after* an event (Bassot, 2016). As previously discussed (Chapter III, Section 2.4.1), it is agreed that research concerning professional reflection, specifically within the ECEC sector, remains scarce. As Potter and Hodgson, (2007) suggest, this may be due to the sector being predominantly staffed by non-graduate professionals, where there is less emphasis on professional reflection when compared to formal sectors. Therefore, (as I discuss further in Chapter VI) I became aware that practitioners' professional reflective practice would be an integral part of the design and logistical aspects of conducting this study.

1.2 The Education & Care Dichotomy

This chapter has so far discussed an existing overview of the PCI. The intention is now to focus on addressing some of the issues that may confuse childcare practitioners' understanding of the PCI. The *education and care dichotomy* considers early years *education* to be divorced from early years *care* within an ECEC setting and is typically abbreviated to the *edu-care* dichotomy (Nutbrown, 2013). As previously discussed (Chapter III) the local ECEC landscape continues to use "childcare" terminology to refer to private 0-4 years settings (exclusive to registered Kindergarten 3-5 settings). This implies that connotations of "babysitting" and "maternalism" remain prevalent despite the recent ECEC education reforms (refer back to Chapter III) and changes to the high-quality education and care discourse for private 0-4 years childcare settings. The local

context is supported by the existing consensus that the *edu-care* dichotomy continues to prevail (Lim, 2019; Nutbrown, 2013; Rentzou, 2019; Van Laere et al., 2012; Wong et al., 2015). The research suggests that practitioners may be confused by whether their role is to *care* for or *educate* children in readiness for formal education. As Van Laere and Vandebroek (2018, p.5) state, those practitioners who prescribe an *educare* pedagogy, are ontologically and epistemologically aware that educating the mind and caring for the body are inseparable responsibilities and coexist within ECEC. As Rentzou (2019) discusses, whilst the European Union claims there is no distinction between education and care, the notion of *nurturance* and relational pedagogy helps to resolve the conflict, however, this requires a shift in the mindset of those working within childcare settings.

Siraj-Blatchford et al., (2002) findings reflect existing differences within ECEC philosophies and priorities of child learning outcomes. This suggests that the effectiveness of provision is not mediated by a certain ECEC approach (Lawrence, et al., 2015). Given the REPEY study was based on observing 3+-year-olds (and not younger infants) may have influenced their definition of pedagogy. Their definition resembles many of the narrow approaches seen within ECEC services, predominantly focusing on learning outcomes and school readiness of young children, typically referred to as the “schoolification” of young children (Van Laere et al., 2012, p. 527). Schoolification is an objective that is typically favoured by numerous government policies and agendas simply preserves the *status quo* of focusing on the cognitive attributes of young children, not necessarily the social and emotional domains of early childhood (Wood & Hedges, 2016; Van Laere et al., 2012, p. 527). As Farquhar and White (2014) state, whilst the pedagogical focus remains centred on early years *thinking skills, schema* and *knowledge acquisition*, it not only maintains the universality of mapping child outcomes but

furthermore continues to support the political and educational agenda. It is, therefore, not surprising that the underlying intentions of government policy, framework and curriculum shape professional pedagogical training and qualifications within formal sectors. As Nutbrown (2012, 2013) has reviewed and contested, the focus of ECEC pedagogy differs between formal and non-formal early years sectors. On one hand, those working within the non-formal provision, are given less exposure to notions of early years learning, education and professional reflective practice. Alternatively, they encouraged to shape their pedagogy through a responsive caregiving pedagogy (Margetts, 2005). On the other hand, those striving towards formal teacher status are more likely to be exposed to theories of early years learning and education. In agreement with Nutbrown (2013), this existing disparity of education and care simply continues to reinforce the pedagogical divide between sectors. Inevitably driving the wedge between the notion of relational/care and teaching/learning pedagogy. As Nutbrown (2013, p.7) has made clear;

what is the difference between a “teacher” and an “educator”? Do teachers not educate, and care, and support, and guide, and observe, and talk with parents? And don’t early years educators do those things too?”

In her statement, Nutbrown makes an indirect reference to the value of Jackson's (1968) hidden curriculum (as previously discussed in Chapter II). In union, both Jackson and Nutbrown, albeit forty-five years apart, equally allude to the presence of practitioners’ norms and beliefs and how individualistic psychological constructs shape pedagogy, regardless of status.

1.3 Relational Pedagogy

As previously discussed in Chapter II, the history of early years pedagogy has transcended from rote to progressive approaches. This has included the recognition of the

relationship between educators and students. Therefore, it is worth exploring how relational pedagogy is presented within the existing literature. Relational pedagogy is understood as an interconnectedness that is centred on interactions, communication and relation (Papatheodorou & Moyles, 2009). Relational pedagogy is therefore focused on active learning, democracy and citizenship, with less emphasis on school readiness (Papatheodorou & Moyles, 2009, p. 10). Woods and Hedges (2016, p. 21) offer an alternative view of school readiness and propose that “school readiness comes primarily from children learning to be learners and thinkers rather than adapting to overly formal approaches to teaching and learning”.

With the emergence of a relational pedagogy, existing research suggests that early years learning is contextualised through the relationships held with others (Degotardi & Pearson, 2009; Nuttal & McEvoy, 2020), therefore, the PCI is based on the relationship between practitioner and child. Contemporary examples of relational pedagogy are evident, for example, the Reggio Emilia approach and Te Whāriki (Lash et al., 2016; MoE, 2017), both focus on the practitioner-child dialogue, relations, autonomy and shared responsibility for one another. It is an approach that “rests on a deep regard for self and others, including the idea that harm to the other inevitably results in harm to the self” (Nuttal & McEvoy, 2020, p. 720). Within the relationship dynamics, the practitioner is also a learner, similarly to the child as the practitioner is open to finding out about the child and perhaps shared interests. This style of pedagogy favours an asymmetrical structure of power when compared to a traditional instructional pedagogy that was typically characterised by the transmission of knowledge (Peters, 2009). Within relational pedagogy, students can explore and compare their lived experiences, ideas and belief systems against existing knowledge within a conducive learning environment (Brownlee

& Bethelsen, 2006). As previously discussed (in Chapter II) it is not surprising that relational pedagogy has gained momentum since progressive scholars recognised the value in the child's educational experience. Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory is testimony to this as the principle of relational pedagogy is the social and cultural context in which it occurs. Relational pedagogy provides a different lens to view the space in which education and care take place within a childcare setting. It is a dialogical space that sits between the practitioner and child, one that is less frequently explored within local childcare settings.

1.4 To be in Dialogue

Relational pedagogy is reliant on dialogue which is understood as the communicative space between the practitioner and child. An ideal dialogical space reflects the individuality of the practitioner and child, whereby both parties reciprocate mutual respect and understanding of one another (Papatheodorou & Moyles, 2009, p. 11). However, drawing on the work of Buber and his anthropological view of dialogue provides a wider perspective of dialogue.

The Austrian-born Jewish philosopher Martin Buber (1878-1965) claimed that dialogue provides the ontological position of two distinct dimensions of humanity. His perspective is taken from his seminal book *I and Thou* (1923), where he believed that human existence is a simple social encounter that is based on a mutual relationship *between* human beings (Nuttal & McEvoy, 2020). Buber's ideas resonate with what Giroux and Penna (1979, p.43) described as "social relations marked by reciprocity and commonality". Buber proposed that the linguistic elements of dialogue did not fully encompass the true nature of dialogue, it was more about the way humans respond to one another in the presence of each other. This is what he refers to as a *shared sphere* of

existence (Nuttal & McEvoy, 2020). This is an important point to note within a childcare setting, especially for young pre-verbal children. As it implies practitioners who prescribe a relational pedagogy do not simply rely on the linguistic aspects of their dialogue with young children, it also considers the myriad of non-verbal aspects of communication to which Buber alludes.

In its simplest form, Buber proposed that when participating in dialogue, two distinct relations exist between both parties which he represents as word pairs; *I-It* and *I-Thou* (Karialainen et al., 2019, p. 132). The *I-It* is defined as a dialogue relation that prioritises the individuals' experience, whereby both parties remain somewhat distant from one another (Aspelin, 2010). Buber claimed that the *I-It* relation hampers the essence of being human in the presence of one another. The *I-It* refers “to one’s natural everyday attitude” (Karialainen et al., 2019, p. 132). In contrast, Buber proposed the preferred *I-Thou* relation as the optimal dialogical relation. This is characterised by living in the moment, being present within a mutual and reciprocal relationship with one another (Aspelin, 2010; Morgan & Guilherme, 2012). Buber’s contribution resonates with the underpinnings of a relational pedagogy, which implies that young children in ECEC do not simply evolve independently by their own doing, alternatively, children thrive through social encounters which are akin to Buber’s proposed *I-Thou* dialogue relation. Aspelin (2010) describes that Buber’s *I-Thou* dialogue occurs;

between teacher and a student, we note that social relationships are at work; relationships having an influence on individuals’ actions as well as their thoughts, feelings and initiations (p. 132)

Aspelin (2010) re-affirms that social relationships are embedded in the PCI,

therefore, it is expected that the PCI develops over time and is a practitioner-child relationship. If this is applied to an ECEC environment, practitioners may oscillate

between Buber's *I-It* and *I-Thou* dimensions as the relationship develops, however, the idea is that practitioner-child experiences the *I-Thou* relation in favour of holistic relationship development. This inevitably then leads to the practitioner and child developing a shared experience, a commonality of aligned reactions within a reciprocated interaction. This ideal dialogic relation is a close working relationship where;

teachers, peers and students are given the chance to understand that an analytical, codified body of experience is the central element in any pedagogy. This helps both students and teachers to recognise that behind any pedagogy are values, beliefs and assumptions informed by a particular world-view (Giroux & Penna, 1979, p.43)

Needless to say, each of these dialogical moments will vary between different practitioners and children. Therefore, it is expected that practitioners will reflect on having different interactions with different children, hence different dialogical relationships. Whilst in favour of Buber's ideas, Aspelin (2010) provides a critique, noting that all relationships vary, thus, variations of *I-Thou* are not a prescribed inter-human state. Therefore, the intention here is to recognise Buber's dialogical philosophy as part of the communicative space between practitioner and child and not necessarily a means to locate the ideal *I-Thou* meeting in this study.

Section II Reflecting on Professional Epistemology

The study required participants to engage in a level of professional reflection, defined as the act of critically reflecting *on* and *on* action (Bassot, 2016). Reflection is invaluable for practitioners to consider and evaluate the beliefs and values concerning the role they play within ECEC. Moreover, on a subconscious level requires practitioners to examine their epistemological stance. Epistemology is understood as the nature in which we acquire knowledge (Clough & Nutbrown, 2012; Creswell, 2007) (refer to Chapter VI, Section 2.2 for further discussion).

During the 1970s, William Perry (1913-1998) was known for his theory of “epistemology growth”. According to Berthelsen et al., (2002), epistemology growth is understood as the epistemological shift a student makes during their course of learning, which moves along a continuum from a dualistic perspective to a relativist view of knowing. Given Perry’s theory, the same can be said of practitioners who engage in professional reactive practice to reflect on their approach to quality interaction. As the researcher I was aware that practitioners would not directly refer to their “epistemology” during the study, however, it was still my responsibility to interpret how practitioners reflected *on* and made sense of their ECEC knowledge (Brownlee & Bethelsen, 2006, p.17). Combined with my epistemology (as discussed in Chapter VI, Section 2.2), our shared interpretations would form multiple realities of the PCI, therefore rooted in pragmatism and relativist epistemology (Charmaz, 2014; Thorneberg, 2012). Given this, as Charmaz (2014) discusses, perspectives are predominantly shaped by beliefs, values and the social-cultural context in which the individual is positioned. Meaning that the study had to consider practitioners’ social and professional histories and how they would influence their responses.

2.1 Influential histories

Reflecting on the notion that care is an active process, the influence of practitioners’ unique histories, attitudes and beliefs about childhood inevitably shape their perspective of ECEC. Mindful that previous lived experience would inevitably influence professional practice to some degree, I was curious to discover to what degree practitioners would reflect on this. In addition to my socio-history (further discussed in Chapter V), as the researcher I remained the interpreter, using my ability to interpret the participants as “cultural beings whose histories, values and experiences shape their undertaking of what

constitutes good or normative behaviour and how the sense of the world” (Brady et al., 2018, p. 11406). This supports Köglers' (1999) suggestion that socio-history potentially becomes a barrier to practitioners' remaining open to differences in socialisation, culture and understanding of care. Regarded as a threat, Kögler claims that practitioners' socio-history facilitates imposing individualised symbolic assumptions and social practices of power that have been formed through previous lived experience (such as the practitioners' childhood/schooling). In support, Aslanian (2015, p. 162) claims that “the socio-historic situation a teacher exists in, will exert influence over her perceptions”. Whilst it is important to account for this influence, there is a need to be cautious. This study is not proposing that this influence may have a negative or positive influence on the PCI, alternatively, it is worth noting that a socio-history exists for every individual practitioner and, therefore should be taken into consideration as an influencing feature of practitioners' perceptions of the PCI. Potentially the socio-history of the practitioner could shed light on how they reflect and interpret their pedagogy. Perhaps provides the context that underpins their attentiveness, intuition and emotional responses with children. Typically, it is these facets of pedagogy that are given less attention, compared to the intellectual teaching and learning decisions practitioners make (Aslanian, 2015, p. 162). This study argues that the socio-history of a practitioner is important and deserves attention, to address and support those practitioners who may need professional development. Furthermore, a practitioner being self-aware of their respective socio-history facilitates professional reflection as a means to improving process quality. This is part of the practitioners' identity that should be acknowledged and discussed. Given the PCI is a two-way reciprocal dialogue, where the socio-history of the child is acknowledged, why would we not apply the same approach to the adult with the PCI

relation? As previously stated, if the care relationship is to exist, then the agency of both the *carer* and the *cared-for* should be equal. When we consider our socio-history, typically we recall our upbringing, socialisation, and how our childhood has had a lasting effect on the way we either parent and/or professionally work with young children. As Siraj-Blatchford et al. (2002) state;

different early years parties are informed by different educational philosophies and values and by the different assumptions that are held about learning, child development, appropriate style of instruction and curricula (p. 28)

When asked to care for young infants, typically we rely on the lived experience of care, compassion and love within a family context. This highlights the importance of discussing and understanding how psychological constructs, such as love, compassion and trust exist within an ECEC context co-exist, yet, are rarely explored from the practitioner's perspective.

Section III Focus on Relation & Care

The first few sections of this chapter have thus far grappled with the evolving conceptualisation of pedagogy, moving from a conservative to a liberal perspective since the beginning of the 1900s. Because of the reciprocal nature of pedagogy, specifically the PCI, further inquiry exploring the practitioners' subjectivity of the PCI has been justified. Therefore, the purpose of the remaining part of this chapter is to focus on the existing understanding of the PCI across existing literature.

The first part of this section discusses the relationship that is established between practitioner and child within a childcare setting. Relationships are associated with the role of attachment, emotions, connotations of care, reciprocity and interaction (Degotardi & Pearson, 2009). At birth, young babies typically demonstrate an innate predisposition to

form an attachment and dependence on a significant caregiver. This is what Thompson (2006, p.43) claims is the “enduring affectional tie that unites one person to another over time and across space”. From a neurological perspective, an infant develops, adapts and categorises attachment behaviours cybernetically within the first year of life (Bowlby, 1998; Bretherton, 1992; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Therefore, the relationship between practitioner and child is central to adaptive child development and learning (Degotardi et al., 2017; Thompson, 2006). As Degotardi and Pearson (2009, p. 144) reiterate, a “relationship has both objective and subjective components”. The observable behaviour between practitioner and child would reflect cultural practices, whereas the subjective facets refer to the cognitive, psychological and emotional state of either the practitioner or child (Degotardi & Pearson, 2009). This is an interesting concept, as when applied to a childcare setting, typically the practitioner and child are initially introduced as strangers who are expected to work alongside one another to form a practitioner-child attachment bond. This practitioner-child bond is understood as a form of professional attachment that develops over a period, which is achieved by the practitioner prioritising forming a relationship with the child (as part of their professional role) and young babies (typically) being born with an innate propensity to form social bonds. It can therefore be assumed that if both practitioner and child work towards building a relationship through reciprocal interaction, then the relationship bond develops over time, creating a sense of security and trust for both parties. This is a complex process and does not always occur in a straightforward manner as the relationship bond requires consistency, time to develop and active participation from the practitioner and child. It is hoped that the relationship bond develops so that young children can settle into their new environment, however, there will be instances where both practitioner and child do not have a “goodness-of-fit”. A

goodness-of-fit between practitioner and child is understood as whether the practitioner and child's personality and temperament suit one another, or whether they conflict.

Hipson and Séguin (2015) state that both parties would feel a lack of understanding and (especially from the child's perspective) feelings of insecurity and uncertainty if there was not a goodness of fit.

As we have seen from existing consensus (throughout the previous chapters), the relationship between child and practitioner becomes integral to early years development and learning. It is expected that, when asked to reflect on their pre-recorded video PCIs, it is assumed that practitioners will comment on their respective relationships in some manner. The point of inquiry here is to reveal *how* practitioners articulate their approach to PCI and what areas of their pedagogy they articulate. Thus, the topic of relationships may be one of them. As this review of the literature demonstrates that pedagogy is complex, the existing literature has so far described it as an ensemble of key facets and includes *reciprocity, relationships, relational pedagogy, interaction* and *dialogue*. Each facet is a study within itself, however, it is worth focusing on the foundational work of American philosopher Nel Noddings (1929-2022) and her *Ethics of Care* as a conceptual lens to further review existing notions of the PCI.

3.1 Ethics of Care, Nel Noddings

3.1.1 The Act of Caring

Relational pedagogy has long been associated with the notion of *care* (Aspelin, 2010). Whilst the term *care* has typically been associated with the marginalisation of the 0-3-year ECEC practitioner role (Grouch & Powell, 2013), the intention is to re-frame the concept of care by summoning the value of professional care. Initially inspired by Goldstein's (1998, p. 245) statement that an “erroneous conception of early childhood

educators as somehow not as professional or not as intelligent as teachers of older children” supports the reason for highlighting the significance *care* plays when considering the practitioners’ emotional labour. It is argued that care and the act of *caring for* young children is emotionally intensive and by no means should be referred to lightly. A philosopher who dedicated her professional life to the morality of care within education philosophy is the American feminist Nel Noddings (1928-2022). Having spent the majority of her life teaching across various sectors, during the 1980s Noddings built on Gilligan’s (1982) previous notion of feminist ethics of care, by proposing the “act of caring” was an ethical responsibility (Aslanian, 2015; Brooker, 2010). From her seminal book *Caring: A Feminist Approach to Ethics and Education* (Noddings, 1984), Noddings presented that caring is the foundation of human morality and the ability to make decisions. Inspired by Dewey and similar progressive scholars, Noddings was the first to propose a *theory of care* (commonly referred to as *care ethics*) in educational philosophy (Noddings, 2013). Claiming that the caring relationship is a “connection or encounter between two human beings - a carer and a recipient of care, or cared-for” takes place (Noddings, 2005, p. 15).

Whilst Noddings figuratively theorises the act of caring, Cekaite and Bergnehr (2018) found ECEC practitioners describe the use of affectionately using a repertoire of touches (for example, strokes and embraces) as a means to harnessing caring relations with young children. As research advocates (Jones, 2016), intimacy plays a crucial role in forming adult-child relations, through touch children can be soothed and comforted which enables the child to develop a sense of security and trust. These actions are referred to as sensitive responses, which enable young children to develop social and emotional skills, namely self-regulation (Norris & Horn, 2015). Despite this, as Page (2017) discusses,

ECEC practitioners report feelings of paranoia and apprehension when asked to engage in sensitive responses. This has been largely contributed by the rare reporting of sexual abuse cases within ECEC settings. However, Page (2017) presents a worthy argument stating that practitioners should not be deterred from physically responding to the social and emotional needs of young children, as not to do so, arguably is neglecting the relational and caring needs of the child.

Noddings affirms that to conceptualise ethics of care, one's perspective has to be both relational and situated within context (Bergmark, 2020). This idea of interconnectivity resonated with the previous discussion of relational pedagogy, where Papatheodorou and Moyles (2009), stated relational pedagogy is dependent on the practitioner-child experience and is a relational discourse. This additionally resonates with Buber's description of the *I-Thou* relational dialogue. Therefore, this literature supports Noddings's notion that the actions of human beings (sensitive responses) come from the desire to meet the needs of others which is part of being responsible for those we care for, or are in relation with (Noddings, 2013a). Brooker (2010, p. 183) describes Noddings' care concept as "caring is a universal human concept because everyone has been cared for and wishes to be cared for". When this is applied to a childcare setting, then the adult would be the *one caring* and the child would be the one being *cared for*. To sustain this relationship, both parties (child and adult) are morally obliged to participate. Should either individual fail, then the dialogue of care ceases. For example, if in this scenario the practitioner (one-caring) does not respond to the needs of the child (cared-for), regardless of the existing relationship, the caring connection is lost (Noddings, 2005). The reverse is additionally true, if in this case, the child fails to recognise (and interpret) the sensitive care responses from the practitioner, no matter how hard the

practitioner tries, the child will assume the practitioner does not care. This implies that the assigned roles of being either the *cared-for* or *carer* are interchangeable. Dahlberg & Moss (2005) later claimed that these assigned roles should not automatically be assumed as the child's agency, their right to act independently and reciprocate care back to the adult is by far a more ethical view of the care-relation. This is an interesting point, as the role of the caring encounter is reliant equally on both practitioner and child. When applied to the context of this study, it will be interesting to see if the practitioners do reflect on their children's response to their care.

Noddings (2005) claimed the notion of attending to the needs of the cared-for, carer is characterised by *engrossment* which is understood as the full attention of the carer;

when I care, I really hear, see or feel what the other tries to convey...[this] may last only a few moments and it may or may not be repeated in future encounters, but it is full and essential in any caring encounter (p.16)

In her description, Noddings claims that the carer is fully engaged, present within the interaction and has a desire to meet the needs of the cared-for (Aslanian, 2015). Moreover, Noddings (2002, p. 289) further highlights that not all children are privileged to spend their childhoods within secure families with "adequate material resources and attentive love". This implies that there is no universal experience of care and, thus, will mean different things to different people. Noddings was originally criticised for her emphasis on the maternal perspective of care and in response, Noddings (2013a) subsequently addressed critics, with her emphasis on equality and in doing so replaced the predominant female role with the *relational* as a means to include male carers. Whilst this has been a welcomed response, Noddings' work remains a centre stage for policymakers and ECEC services to develop a conceptual framework of what reciprocal care is and how

it is implemented. Therefore, it is naive to believe an abstract psychological construct, such as reciprocal care, is universally understood.

3.1.2 Motivational Displacement

Throughout her work, Noddings discusses carers' motivational displacement, which is understood as the tendency to prioritise the needs of others before your own (Aslanian, 2015). Noddings describe motivational displacement as when a carer is initially conscious of his/her own goals and then shifts their "motive energy" to the child's "project" (Noddings, 2005, p.16). To consider motivational displacement, we can consider a typical scenario whereby a child is learning to remove his/her shoes. In this scenario, the carer would respond to the child's efforts by offering words of encouragement and modelling behaviours. This would occur before the carer meets his/her own needs, or goals. As Noddings (2005, p.16) describes, it is the act of receiving "what the other conveys, and... respond[ing] in a way that furthers the other's purpose or project" that is central to care ethics. Noddings shed light on the demanding role of care with her descriptions of engrossment and motivational displacement. This is not only time-consuming for the practitioner but additionally requires a great deal of involvement, attunement and patience on behalf of the practitioner. Therefore, it is suggested that caring for young children through a lens of ethical caregiving is demanding as the degree of engrossment and motivational displacement is not an instruction on *how to care*, they are key features of conscious caregiving.

3.1.3 Being Moral

Noddings wrote extensively from the 1980s, focusing on the maternal perspective of care, whilst referring to ethics as "something explicable a set of rules, an ideal, a constellation of expressions that guides and justifies our conduct" (Noddings, 2013a p.

107). In doing so, she provides a simple, intuitive explanation of what it means to be moral. This notion of being moral is, however, a taken-for-granted ECEC professional attribute and is something that is not thoroughly conceptualised in-depth across the childcare discourse. Alternatively, it is an assumed professional attribute, a “given”, that as adults we are expected to share the meaning of “doing the right thing” in ECEC practice. This is based on presuming that we all share the same meaning of what is morally right, which is certainly not the case given individualised interpretations of morality. Throughout her work, Noddings specifically refers to *ethics* and *being ethical* as moral conduct based on the premise that to behave ethically, is to be guided by a set of morals. It is therefore interesting to explore whether practitioners reflect on their guiding ethics of care and if they are consciously aware of their ethical and moral decisions.

3.1.4 Reciprocity, Feedback & Reliance

Central to *care ethics* are relationships. Noddings (2013a, p.84) argues ontologically the nature of humanity and identity is founded on the varying types of relationships we have with one another. Stating there is a sense of reciprocity and alignment necessary for a relationship of care to exist. Bertram and Pascal (2002, p.22) define reciprocity as “flexible, fluid, and a varied teaching and learning competency”. Having said this, as Nyland (2004) demonstrates, it is difficult to fully understand to what extent reciprocity exists within ECEC settings that are predominantly adult-centred with pre-verbal young children. Whilst the cared-for (the child) is reliant on the one-caring (the practitioner), Noddings (2013a) points out that the feedback the practitioner receives *back* from the child is equally important. There is a feedback loop, a reciprocity of care, otherwise, the child risks being pushed away if s/he does not respond to the needs of the practitioner (Noddings, 2013a). Noddings makes an interesting point, as the needs of the practitioner

are seldom taken into consideration or frequently addressed. From my professional experience, the occasions where practitioners are provided with space to reflect on practice, it is typically centred around the progress of children and the operations of day-to-day routines. The practitioners' needs and subjective reflections are rarely overtly prioritised. Therefore, if the ambition of ECEC service is to continue to improve process quality, then undoubtedly the needs and subjective experience of practitioners warrant consideration, to improve process elements of ECEC quality. Whilst a direct inquiry into the needs of the practitioner is not the central focus of this study, it remains interesting to see if the practitioners comment about the feedback they receive from their children as part of the reciprocal interaction.

Noddings claimed that there is a strong sense of reliance between individuals "Each of us is dependent upon the other in caring and moral relationship" (Noddings 2013a, p.58). Noddings implies that feedback, dependency and reliance are part of the practitioner-child interaction. It is therefore interesting to discover if practitioners are aware of these features of care presented by Noddings. To continue, Noddings adds, it is the "ethical ideas, that influence these ideals in the first place, surely then it is a reflection of what the practitioners believe him/herself" (Noddings, 2013a, p. 133).

From the drawing of Noddings's works, the PCI is reliant on the active participation of the child and practitioner. This is sustained and mediated through a feedback loop that is part of this dialogical space, which suggests that the practitioners' participation is therefore centred on what they believe in, their interpretation, and their philosophy of care.

Section IV The Professional Repertoire

This final section brings the chapter to a close by reviewing existing literature that discusses the physical communicative actions that occur between the child and practitioner during an interaction. In doing so, an existing understanding of the PCI is presented with a focus on conceptualising the practitioners' *behavioural repertoire* which is understood as the "behaviour or responses an individual is capable of performing" during an interaction with another (American Psychological Association [APA], 2020). The view of the PCI that is presented in this section is a result of reviewing the literature before conducting the study, therefore, this pre-existing view informed my understanding of the PCI as I recorded the PCI observations (as the first part of the data collection that is further discussed in Chapter VI) before discussing practitioners view of the PCI during the Video-Stimulated Discussions (VSDs) (as the second part of the data collection refer to Chapter VI).

4.1 Affective Dimensions of the Practitioner-Child Interaction (PCI)

The quality of child and practitioner interaction includes both verbal and non-verbal features of communication. The existing research refers to it as a *multimodal embodied interaction* (Mondada, 2019; White et al., 2015) which is understood as the multidimensional and simultaneous dialogical interplay of making meaning. This multimodal embodied interaction includes *modes* of communication and representation. For example, modes are considered to be an accumulation of spoken language and silent embodied features of interaction (Jewitt, Bezemer & O'Halloran, 2016; Mondada, 2019; Nevile, 2015) (as presented in Table 3). This existing understanding implies that the PCI would be observed as the reciprocal, social-communicative exchange that reaches far beyond analysing language, talk and dialect. Moreover, includes the silent features of communication of embodiment (Mondada, 2019). In agreement with Nevile (2015,

p.122), features of embodiment include a vast range of “body aspects” (as illustrated in Table 3). Before conducting the study, Mondada’s and Nevile’s ideas suggest that I would observe features of practitioners’ embodiment playing out during my initial PCI observations. However, the study was interested in how practitioners would reflect on their embodiment from re-watching themselves interact with children (refer to Chapter VI for further discussion of study methods).

Table 3
Features of Embodiment

Embodiment Category	Category Features
HAND GESTURES	Waving, pointing, clapping, singling
EYE COORDINATION	Eye contact, gaze direction, eye level, expression/emotional gaze
FACIAL EXPRESSION	Emotion, vacant, rising eyebrows, supposed, frowning, frightened, wrinkled nose, smiling, open/closed mouth
BODY EXPRESSION	Moving entire body, orientation, touch, object/person, placing/shifting body, walking, dancing, moving, physical manual acts, reaching, handling, operating equipment, reading, eating, playing music, position

Note Adapted from Nevile (2015)

Further research by Howes et al., (2008) stated that quality interactions are characterised by social and emotional harmony and are defined as synchronous communication, which is understood as happening at the same time (Recchia & Shin, 2012). From consolidating the research concerning the *process* elements of ECEC quality (namely the PCI), it is evident that features of the dynamic interaction between

practitioner and child are centred on what Pierrehumbert et al., (2002) identified as a difference between *parental* and *non-parental* care. The non-parental components of care are characterised as the practitioners' availability, attentiveness and patience as a response to the child's needs, even during busy times of the day. Competence and stability enable practitioners to remain determined in achieving set goals with children, whilst developing relationships through positive warm reciprocal responses (Pierrehumbert, et al., 2002, p. 388). Whilst this description resonates with existing research, specifically drawing on Nodding's theory of care, research suggests that the PCI encompasses many of the behavioural traits needed for responsive pedagogy. However, it only provides half the picture. At most, it describes (what I refer to throughout this study as) the practitioners' *behavioural repertoire*, defined as the;

potential behaviour or responses that a person is capable of performing...referring to the behaviour that has been learned and is generally quantified through the study of past behaviour (APA, 2020)

As stated by Stern (2004), young children are hardwired to respond to the caregivers' repertoire. Whilst the practitioners' behaviour (facial expressions, vocalisations, gaze, face presentation and head movements) remain important features of the PCI, these can be observed, measured and analysed from only one perspective, the observers'. Therefore, exploring the PCI becomes far more fruitful when individual perspectives are considered, particularly the practitioners' perspectives. This is because understanding the motives underpinning the practitioners' embodied interaction (such as their thoughts and beliefs) requires practitioners to engage in a level of self-awareness which in turn provides an opportunity for practitioners to reflect, learn and modify their repertoire, to, sustain quality interaction with their children. As this chapter has presented,

simply observing pedagogy and describing practitioners' responses to young children (from an outsider's perspective), does not provide a wider picture of process quality, specifically the PCI. It is only by considering the subjective perspectives of the practitioners, can a holistic view of quality PCI be taken.

There is minimal existing research that has attempted to explore perspectives of the adult-child ECEC relationship from practitioners and leaders within the ECEC field (Brebner et al., 2015). This research imposed pre-existing criteria to detect the degree of practitioners' *responsiveness* (regarded as practitioners' degree of sensitivity and warmth when attending to the child, attentiveness, in view of building trust), *involvement* (referring to the practitioners' availability in supporting the learning experience) and *autonomy* (practitioners ability to encourage self-regulatory skills, independence) as part of their study, which is a prescriptive approach to measuring the caregiving environment. When asked via interviews, practitioners admitted that they used their relationship with children as a tool to understand the child's needs, their behaviour and to be able to manage the child's behaviour. In doing so, in this study practitioners admitted that effective relationships were based on mutual respect and the acknowledgement that their relationship changes over time and varies from one child to the next (Brebner et al., 2015). The authors additionally found that *responsiveness*, *autonomy* and *involvement* were observed features of practitioner-child interactions using an existing measure. As part of this research, the authors reported that practitioners commented that quality ECEC is reliant on practitioners' ability to demonstrate consistent *love*, *warmth* and *support*. A genuine environment that fosters a secure and trustworthy community for young children is regarded as the essential element for supporting a child's SED. In a similar notion, Lim (2019) revealed practitioners' "affective" dimensions of communication to include

assurance, attunement and the need to establish a *secure attachment* with a child, so that the child can be independent, active and agentic. Therefore, whilst it is evident that affective dimensions of the PCI are universal and appear in varying ECEC contexts (Brooker, 2010; Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Taggart, 2015), existing research typically considers the observers and practitioners' perspective based on a pre-existing "affective dimensions criteria". This reveals a gap within the existing literature, especially within the local ECEC context, that considers practitioners' perspective of the PCI that is not influenced by pre-existing criteria. Therefore, I was interested in focusing on practitioners' perspective of quality PCI, one that was not predetermined by existing criteria before conducting the study.

A further review of the literature alluded to some of the motivations underpinning practitioners' pedagogy. It is evident that practitioners sustain ethics of care and relational pedagogy, through a commitment to young children and their families (Osgood, 2010; Taggart, 2015). This resonates with Nodding's sentiments of an "ethos of care" (previously discussed) which reaches beyond prescribing to a specific pedagogical approach. I believe that there is something far more integral to what motivates practitioners to sustain their repertoire with children in practice. As Van Laere and Vandebroek (2018) revealed, practitioners openly admitted to the emotional "stress and hindrances" of caring for young children. Whilst this demonstrates practitioners' honesty, Boyer et al., (2013) confirm that the connection between adult and child can be emotionally draining. Despite this, feelings of professional love (Page, 2013, 2017, 2018) and work satisfaction exist in ECEC. Van Laere and Vandebroek (2018) further found that practitioners' ability to care was dependent on their existing caring identity as a mother, as opposed to being a professional.

Chapter Summary

To conclude, this chapter has defined and discussed the position of practitioner-child interaction within an existing education and care dichotomy. It remains evident that a prevailing body of research is predominately anchored within a positivist perspective and continues to measure and observe the quality of practitioner-child interactions. Despite the attempts that have been made to triangulate observational data with the perceptions of those working within practice, notably, research lacks a wider understanding of how the practitioners' socio-history, social and cultural context, and lived experience shape practitioners' epistemological stance and view of the practitioner-child interaction. Research has predominantly focused on the affective dimensions of pedagogy that are prescriptive, however, very little has been gleaned from practitioners' freely discussing their perception of the PCI. Therefore, a niche within the literature exists. Practitioners' subjective and situated perspectives are under-researched areas within the local Maltese context.

Chapter V Positionality and Origins of the Research Inquiry

Chapter Introduction

The previous chapters have thus far provided a descriptive and critical account of the inter/national Early Childhood Education Care (ECEC) landscape by drawing attention to the ongoing debate concerning quality ECEC practice. Quality ECEC is a combination of structural and process domains of service, that are complex, multifaceted and interpreted differently depending on the individuals' perspective (Benoit, 2004; Campbell-Bar & Leeson, 2016; Dalli et al., 2011; European Commission, 2011; Melhuish, 2004) (as previously discussed Chapter III). Therefore, this study chose to focus on exploring the core facets of process quality, namely the Practitioner-Child Interaction (PCI) (as presented in Chapter IV) as a means to broaden our understanding of quality interaction within the local Maltese context.

As previous chapters have argued there is an underrepresented niche within the literature namely the practitioner's perspectives of quality interactions. This is largely due to existing literature remaining focused on measuring and quantifying quality within ECEC (as previously discussed in Chapter IV). For example, the Caregiver Interaction Profile (CIP) focuses on quantifying the caregiver interactive competence construct, which does not account for the practitioners' subjective view of social interaction. Given the variability and differences in interactions taking place between practitioners and children, practitioners must be allowed to reflect on practice by observing themselves and communicating alongside children under their care. This reflective process, therefore, provides opportunities to not only address cultural variations but also improve the process elements of ECEC quality. As the previous chapter demonstrates, across the ECEC

literature, very few studies propose or discuss the notion of exploring the practitioner-child interaction from the view of the practitioner, thus, revealing an inquiry niche. Given this, the ambition of this chapter is to account for the origins of this study. In doing so, this chapter presents how my positionality and researcher values frame the origins of this study, mould the research aim and form the research questions.

Chapter Organisation

This chapter precedes the methodological framework by demonstrating how the research inquiry originally emerged from my professional experience. Thus, it is divided into three sections; the first section presents my professional and academic positionality, before moving on to section two which introduces the phenomenon under investigation and lastly, the forming of the research questions. This chapter closes by clarifying the foundations of the study before the following Chapter VI; The Methodological Framework. The concluding section, therefore, presents a justification of *why* this explorative study was designed and *what* the influencing methodological concerns were during the research design phase.

Section I Professional & Academic Positionality

The positionality of a researcher is distinctive, however, remains politically and culturally defined. Referred to as the “standpoint of the researcher [that] is a fundamental platform on which enquiry is developed” (Clough & Nutbrown, 2012, p.10), positionality asks the researcher to reflect and understand who they are in the world and how their individuality shapes their interpretation of the world (Herr & Anderson, 2005). Clough and Nutbrown (2012) claim the researcher’s positionality includes their history, values, morals and the political and social context of the study. By articulating positionally, I remain aware of what shapes my interpretation of data. Therefore, the ambition of this

chapter is to provide an outline of my professional and personal context in the hope of facilitating a deep reflection on the relationship between my lived experience, my motives underpinning the research design and why I am curious to explore practitioners' perspectives of quality interaction.

1.1 My History and the Source of the Problem

From a young age, relational care and the propensity to interact with very young children have always felt very intuitive to me. Most likely this was due to the cultural context in which I grew up and the cultural expectations of being a girl within a matriarchal family during the 1980s living in Great Britain. My passion for child psychology began when my son entered the world diagnosed with a rare growth-developmental disorder in 2003. As a mature student, I returned to education in 2008 and embarked on my first undergraduate degree in Psychology with The University of Chester, graduating in 2011 with first-class honours. During this time, I gained a wealth of professional experience within a variety of healthcare settings, namely a local hospice day care unit and two local support centres that catered for parents and infants who had experienced premature/traumatic births as I had. Throughout this period of professional and personal growth, I became intrigued by the idea of providing *quality care*. Besides being a young lone parent fascinated by the parent-child bond, I continued my academic journey by specialising in Family and Child Psychology Masters at The University of Chester. At the same time, I had the privilege of working within a pre-primary early years' foundation provision within the North West of England. During my time in this setting, I recall grappling with the notion of quality practice. I distinctly remember witnessing practitioners discussing with peers their challenge of connecting and forming a relationship with certain young children. Having raised this observation with the

coordinator of the setting, the reply I received was “Some have the knack, some don’t... it’s just one of those things”. This has had a profound impact on my interpretation and expectations of early years pedagogy so early on in my career. In response, I felt compelled to understand the practitioner’s position. Why did they think it was difficult to connect with a certain child? In hindsight, I should have engaged further with the conversation by asking the coordinator to elaborate on what was implied by a *knack*. From my perspective, I felt there was a social injustice occurring here. In her defence, the practitioner was not allowed to express her view of what she regarded as challenges of forming connections and relations with children. From my perspective, this was the starting point and continues to be the reason why I believe it is important to provide a space for practitioners to be heard.

This incident occurred more than 17 years ago, yet has remained a prominent memory throughout my professional career. I do not know why this memory has remained at the forefront of my thinking, although I do recognise how it has influenced my view of assuming and judging others before listening to their perspective. As Corbin and Strauss (2008, p. 123) state, “professional experience frequently leads to the judgement that some features of the profession or its practice are less than effective, efficient, humane or equitable”. This is important as it is easy to leap to making judgements of others, assuming that certain practitioners have the *knack* for interacting with children compared to others. Without listening to the perspective of the practitioner, how can we possibly understand a communication style or interactive barriers the practitioner may be experiencing? To this day, I can see how this early memory became the linchpin underlining my motivation to explore the interactive space between practitioner and child. It is through this systematic qualitative approach and the motive to

listen to practitioners' narratives, that my ambition is to make an original contribution to ECEC practice by extending the existing understanding of practitioners' perspectives of quality interaction. I remain grounded by the point made by Corbin and Strauss (2008, p. 80) that "knowledge may not mirror the world but it does help us to understand it". Given this, practitioners' interpretations only convey their individualised interpretation of the event which only permits an understanding of their perspective.

As a family, we moved to Malta in 2013, during a time when the childcare sector was undergoing radical structural and political changes (MEDE, 2013; Sollars, 2017, 2018) (as presented in Chapter III). At that time, I had the privilege of launching and managing several ECEC daycare provisions within the private sector. This was my earliest experience of witnessing the huge variances among Maltese practitioners' training, theoretical knowledge of ECEC, learning and pedagogical approach. I can still remember feeling unsettled as a centre manager trying to find sufficient qualified and experienced practitioners, which was and still is today not an easy task across the Maltese childcare sector. I continued to witness changes to the Maltese ECEC landscape and the notion of providing *quality* of service continually re-surfaced. As a consequence, I questioned what constituted the quality of service within a Maltese context, however, reflecting on my experience it is clear that my understanding of quality was indistinct. Based on my professional and academic experience, I was aware that quality reached beyond the scope of providing a welcoming environment with brightly coloured interactive spaces for young children to enjoy. This was further amplified after witnessing practitioners in Maltese childcare settings express the challenges in establishing an interaction with children in practice. Therefore, I turned my attention to questioning the influence of interactions as a factor of quality. I would frequently ask myself what

facilitated quality interactions. Was it their professional experience, or was it something else? Probing questions such as these has become an integral part of my professional ECEC practice.

In agreement with Birks and Mills (2015), I was aware that this doctoral journey would demand flexibility and dictate how my history would indeed shape this inquiry. This was a particular turning point for me, as, until halfway through my candidature, I knew *what* I wanted to explore, yet remained perplexed over *how* I was going to explore it. It was during this stage of my candidature that I felt lost, as having previously conducted research for my master's in Family and Child Psychology, I had only experienced academia through a post-positivist lens. I had to change *my* way of approaching this study, *my* worldview, and more importantly, bring my values to the forefront of this study which resulted in a paradigm shift.

1.2 Paradigm Shift

A disparity between world views exists. As conceptualised by Birks (2014, p.18) philosophy is “a view of the world encompassing the questions and mechanism for finding an answer that informs that view”. Before conducting this study, my previous academic experience had generally been positioned within a positivist worldview, defined as a universal meaning of reality. My previous research experience was predominantly characterised by a cause-and-effect orientated approach in synthesising psychological theories and ideologies, which typically reflected English undergraduate and postgraduate Psychology degrees from 2008 to 2011. The first six years spent as a Psychology student reinforced my epistemological stance to one that was objective, where explaining human behaviour came from deductive reasoning and experimental and correlational inquiries. Through this positivist lens, I had grown accustomed to searching for generalisations and

predictions, despite living my professional life witnessing the social subjective and interpretive intricacies of early years practice. As Scotland (2012) highlights conducting educational research through a positivist lens would have been confusing, as the objective of controlling and manipulating variables within a social context would have incurred methodological issues. The attempt to control confounding variables such as culture and the influence of individualised lived experiences, would have been difficult to operationally define, control and measure, due to the subjective nature of the study. As this study aimed to explore the practitioners' perspectives of quality interaction, which meant shifting to an interpretivist paradigm; where the nature of reality is shaped by lived experience-subjectivity. Therefore, taking the stance of an inquiry permitted an exploration of the practitioners' narratives. The objective was to invite participants to come forward and "to share their stories [with me] and to have their silent voices heard by a concerned expert" (Tavellaei & Abu Talib, 2010. p.570). In this case, I positioned myself as the concerned facilitator, rather than an expert for two reasons. First, I was concerned because there was an injustice occurring within the sector which I regarded as the marginalisation of childcare practitioners' voices when compared to formal educational sectors. Secondly, I have always believed that I have a social responsibility to contribute to ECEC, both in a professional and academic capacity. From this mindset, I do not consider myself an expert, as perfecting a skill and learning new knowledge is a continuous journey with no end. Alternatively, I believe "a facilitator" to be more fitting, as I provide a space, an environment where knowledge can be shared and interpreted collaboratively with others. I prefer the neutrality of helping practitioners work together to achieve their objectives. Therefore, my goal as a professional and academic was to

invite participants into a non-judgemental space to share, reflect and provide insight into the communicative space they share with young children.

The attempt to design a study that reflected the subjective nature of exploring the practitioners' perspectives implied a re-examining of *how* I acquired knowledge and learning. I needed to declare my position and philosophical view before forming the research questions. Through interpreting the differences in existing philosophical thought, I shifted from having a dualistic epistemological stance, one that claims there is absolute truth, to believing that previously acquired knowledge is a result of reflecting *on* and *during* lived experiences (Brownlee, 2003). This meant that I had accepted that my acquisition of knowledge had been a result of applying meaning to lived experiences. This resonated with Crotty's (1998, p.54) claim of constructivism, from embracing this relativist epistemological belief. I agree with the notion that knowledge is acquired through constructing meaning making experiences and building on previously held knowledge. Brownlee (2003) elaborates further by saying;

constructivism refers to a particular set of beliefs about knowing and learning that understanding exists only for the individual who actively creates such beliefs. Therefore, individuals actively transfer the new information in some way so that it became linked to prior knowledge" (p. 2)

Brownlee (2003) elaborates on Crotty's (1998) view, however, through reflection, I remained mindful of the role of others during my lived experiences and how the social environment in which I had learnt influenced how I assigned meaning to knowledge. This would also apply to the children attending and the practitioners working alongside them in the setting. Because of this, Pritchard and Woollard (2010) highlight the necessity of incorporating a social constructivism perspective into the classroom.

Section II Issue Under Exploration

As previously discussed, quality early childhood education is a precursor to an adaptive adulthood trajectory (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2001; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Furthermore, the complexities surrounding the multifaceted nature of quality ECEC, support the argument that the most important component of quality is the ECEC workforce. Therefore, accounting for practitioners' perspectives of quality interaction provides a further understanding of existing process quality.

2.1 Developing the Research Questions

This study originally stemmed from the disparity between the ECEC policy discourse concerning the pedagogical characteristics of a “suitable” practitioner working within childcare settings (previously discussed Chapter III, Section 2). The purpose of developing the research questions was to establish the boundaries of the study; the *what* was going to be studied (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). My first step in constructing the research questions was to understand what it meant to explore a social phenomenon. In 1926, John Markey claimed, “social phenomena are considered as including all behaviour which influences or is influenced by organisms sufficiently alive to respond to one another [and] includes influence from past generations” (Markey, 1926, p. 733). Throughout Markey's work, he continues to draw attention to the conscious and subconscious synthesis of social behaviour. This resonated with how this study wanted to explore the practitioners' subjective views. Markey's (1926) claim that social phenomena included the influence of previous generations was an interesting point, as it prompted me to remain mindful of the potential influence of the participants' upbringing (socialisation) and how this may have influenced their professional practice.

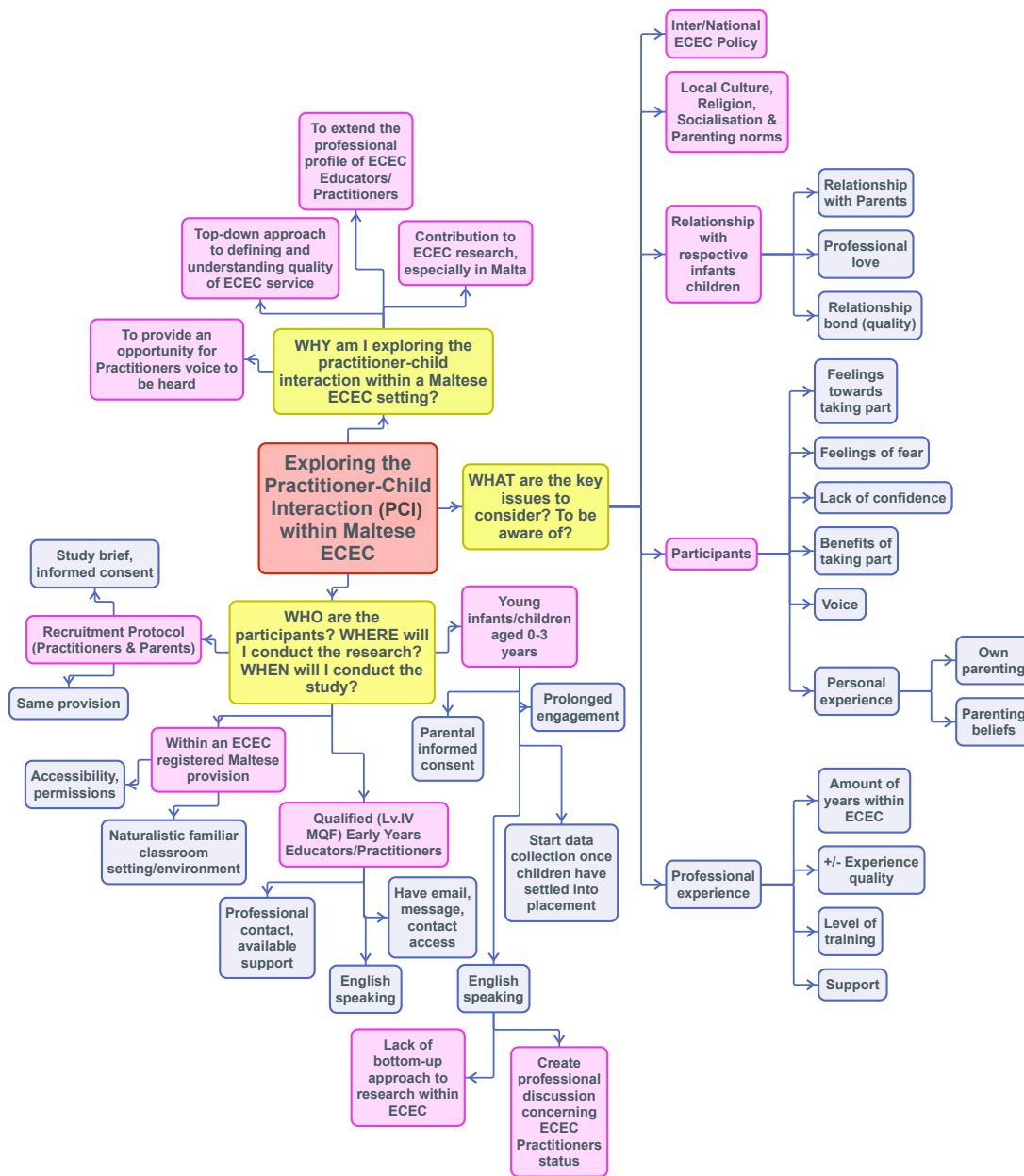
Upon reflection, designing the research questions took considerable time as they were repeatedly revisited, tweaked and adjusted as the research design progressed. This was not a straightforward process because interpreting practitioners' perspectives was inherently going to be a difficult task due to the subjective nature of their experience. Therefore, I had to ensure that the research aim was clear and concise. The research aim was to explore practitioners' perspectives and enactment of quality interactions, therefore, the following research questions 1) What are practitioners' perspectives of quality interactions, and 2) How do they enact quality interactions with young children in a Maltese ECEC setting? Once the research questions had been decided, I moved on to consider the research design.

Section III The Why? What? Who? Where? When? Research Design Questions

Once I had decided on the research aim, I considered a series of research design questions: Why did I want to explore the practitioners' perspective of quality interaction? What are the logistical issues? Who would the participants be? Where would the study take place? When would the data collection start? To answer these research design questions, I used a mind-mapping exercise to help visualise the study design (refer to Figure 2).

For the remaining part of this section, I discuss the why? and what? parts of this research design process, whilst referring to the mind map (Figure 2). I return to the remaining who? where? and when? design questions in the following chapter as these practical elements of the research design fall under the methodological framework that is presented in the following chapter.

Figure 2
Mind-mapping the research design



3.1 Why explore the practitioners' perspective?

3.1.1 As a matter of urgency and importance;

As previously discussed (in Chapter III), the Maltese childcare sector has an under-researched history. This is one of the main reasons why I chose to conduct this study, as I believe it is a matter of urgency given the sector has dramatically changed over a short period and that the demand for quality ECEC services is increasing. As the research focuses on an aspect of process quality, I believe it is timely to offer a study that accounts for the practitioner's voice, especially given the numerous challenges facing the sector, such as staff development and retention. Furthermore, practitioners in this sector share the right to be heard and allocate time to engage in professional reflective practice. The focus of this study also justifies why it is a matter of urgency, as the practitioner-child attachment bond and interaction are integral to the SED of young children (Dali 2014; Goouch & Powell, 2013; Melliush, 2004). This reciprocal relationship is considered to be a stepping-stone to extending an infant's primary attachment experience with another meaningful adult (Bowlby, 1988). Therefore, this implies that the practitioner takes on the role of being the child's meaningful adult whilst attending the setting. This warrants further exploration given the importance of the role of the key person as being integral to sensitive periods of maturation (Elfer et al., 2012; Trevarthen et al., 2003).

3.1.2 To understand practitioners' view of role expectations;

From grappling with the discourse presented in the national standards for ECEC settings (as discussed in Chapter III) and comparing the policy discourse to my professional experience of working within the sector, I have found that at times practitioners are unaware of the importance of the role they play during a practitioner-child interaction. According to the updated policy discourse (MEDE, 2021), the

practitioners' role carries a range of responsibilities that contribute to a quality centre, however, this is typically translated into the 'practical' aspects of their role and does not consider the social dynamics of working alongside young children. As this study intended to focus on one aspect of their role, I wanted to understand how practitioners viewed the quality of their PCI as the national standards have historically provided simple descriptions. As previously discussed, the *National Standards for Child Day Care Facilities* (MFSS, 2006) stated, that practitioners are required to "have a positive attitude towards children and interact with them in a warm, affectionate and firm manner".

Whereas the updated policy (MEDE, 2021) states that;

the childcare educator... recognises and responds to the different individual needs of every child... actively listens, talks and interacts meaningfully with all the children... interacts with, listens and talks to all children (p. 16)

This updated description of the PCI still lacks the essence of early years pedagogy and by doing so does not emphasise the importance of the practitioners' perspective of communicating with children. Policy assumes that practitioners have a shared understanding of interaction, which may not be the case. Therefore, this is another reason why the practitioners' perspective must be accounted for, as it is fruitful to understand how practitioners view aspects of their reciprocal interaction with their children and how can their views inform the expectations of policy discourse.

3.1.3 To refocus the practitioner status;

As previously discussed (Chapter III), there is an existing concern over professionalising the role of the early years practitioners and is referred to as the "moves taken towards creating a graduate early years workforce" (Lloyd & Hallet, 2010, p. 75). It began through the introduction of ECEC reform, policy and national standards. Although

these changes occurred at different rates across the globe, it is evident that internationally the ECEC sector has become (in varying degrees) a recognised professional sector (as previously discussed in Chapter III). In light of provisions providing a high-quality service, the profile of those working within the sector has come under scrutiny. In doing so, inter/national reviews have emerged, for example, the *Nutbrown Review in England* (Nutbrown, 2012) and nationally the *Malta ECEC Workforce Profile* (Sollars, 2017). Reviews such as these provide a sociological profile of a typical early years practitioners. Taking into consideration the demographics, years of experience and qualifications of those working alongside young children. As a result of evaluating the professional profile of any profession, typically involves improving the level of qualifications needed for that role, increasing regulations, regulatory inspections for quality assurance and stipulating occupational frameworks. These are all demonstrative methods of *professionalising* the sector (Neylon, 2015; Noordegraaf, 2007). Although steps taken towards professionalising the ECEC sector strive towards improving the safety and welfare of young children attending services, there is a danger of ECEC becoming rigid, bureaucratic and controlled by a top-down authority. This inevitably diminishes practitioners' agency, confidence and professional empowerment. This leaves in essence a sense of uncertainty within provisions considering they are the adults working alongside young children and families. This was an additional reason why this study chose to account for the subjective perspective of the practitioners, as it provided a rare opportunity to express potential issues related to agency and any frustrations participants may have due to the regulatory standards and/or their professional confidence.

Conceptualising the practitioner-child interaction undeniably contributes towards improving provision and practice. Fine-grained exploratory studies, such as this study,

provide an opportunity to listen to the practitioner's voice whilst teasing apart the complexities and intricacies of their approach to quality interaction. It is through an interpretivist research approach, can this social phenomenon be conceptualised. Taking into account the practitioners' perspective and constructing their approach to practitioner-child interaction will provide insight into how they see their role and professional position.

3.2 What are the logistical considerations?

3.2.1 Language Barrier

The first logistical consideration related to experiencing a language barrier. Since moving to Malta and having worked within the ECEC private sector, I approached the centre that was predominantly English-speaking. The other centres were mostly Maltese-speaking and given the sensitivity of the study focus a great deal of the description and contextual features within the data would have been lost due to the language barrier. Although English is spoken as a second language across Malta, in certain areas of the country, in some villages the Maltese language remains the language of choice. I was mindful of limiting the number of issues that could influence my interpretation of practitioners' responses and the relationship I wanted to establish with my participants. I already had a degree of familiarity with the centre and its members of staff due to my previous position as an employee. I had previously suspected that I would receive a low participant response rate, which was an additional reason why I primarily chose this provision. Throughout my prolonged engagement, the practitioners themselves would converse in Maltese, yet, within each group, the PCI was conducted in English. This reflected the existing bilingualism and multicultural characteristics of the setting.

Therefore, the recorded observations were all spoken in English and I incurred no issues whilst transcribing verbatim.

3.2.2 Researcher-Participants Relationship & Trust;

The second research consideration was the issue of building a relationship and trust with my participants. Scotland (2012) stated that interpretivist research may in some cases undermine and weaken participants' autonomy due to the close and personal nature of the interpretive methods used in exploratory research. From the onset, I was aware of the importance of building a rapport with the participants as a means of gaining their trust, participation and anecdotal experiences. Based on my professional experience in Malta, I encountered many practitioners who were often shy and somewhat anxious when observed in practice, frequently portraying traits of disempowerment when asked to reflect on their professional practice. I was therefore sensitive to the views and thoughts of the practitioners. Moreover, I was aware of how, as human beings, we change our behaviour depending on who is present and observing us. Therefore, I specifically asked to approach practitioners collectively as a group for a presentation of the study (Appendix III) as this provides a space to present the study, and for them to ask questions before volunteering to take part. The presentation took place in the absence of centre managers so that practitioners did not feel pressured to take part in the study (the process of recruiting participants is further discussed in the next Chapter VI).

Achieving transparency with the participants came from establishing trust which was attained through conducting a period of prolonged engagement and establishing a collaborative relationship with the participants. Developing a social rapport with participants is an important methodological factor for any qualitative inquiry. It is defined as the period of time in which the researcher spends within the field, before conducting

the study (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). Thus, is an important tool for developing credibility within the research process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Charmaz (2014) claims it is vital that prior thought is given to the practitioners, before entering the data collection phases and is particularly important when the focus of the investigation is often observing human behaviour and includes the analysis of participant narrative. Because of the subjective and interpretive nature of the study, the data was susceptible to observer effects (Blandford, 2013, p.34-35). Bogdan and Biklen (2007) discuss how all research is susceptible to observer effects, where the participant (or object) behaves differently once they are aware of being observed and/or studied. Research suggests that there are possible psychological explanations for this effect, such as social desirability, conformity, or perhaps non-compliance (McCambridge et al., 2013). In their research review, Chiesa and Hobbs (2006) clarify that the term has been used inconsistently during the past fifty years across research and is often contradicting when used as a label, post-hoc without further follow-up investigation. I was aware of the possibility of my participants behaving differently once they were aware that I was present observing them, hence the purpose of conducting a period of prolonged engagement before the observations took place. Based on the assumption that I would have been more likely to notice any differences in my participants' behaviour, once I had started documenting the observations.

I began the period of prolonged engagement which included spending time with each group during their everyday routine, whilst being within the same proximity as the other groups within the centre. It was during this time that I noticed that some practitioners grew accustomed to my presence, they began to include me in their conversations and would purposefully speak English so I could acknowledge and join in with their discussion. Albeit they were subtle social acceptance cues, such as eye contact

and open forms of body language, I could see how they were beginning to accept my presence as a researcher and this led me to assume my role was becoming less threatening over time. I found the process of prolonged engagement an integral part of forming trust between myself and my participants. Given that I was not fluent in Maltese, I felt I needed to become familiar with my participants and the centre on a deeper level through conducting prolonged engagement. This scaffolded the process of building trust with my participants and rendered the opportunity to co-construct deep meaningful conversations. I grew accustomed to the different dynamics within each group and how they were all unique in their way. Some practitioners would ask me to stay longer with them, whilst others preferred shorter time slots. Moreover, the time spent with each group was mediated by the size of the group. The larger the group, the more time I spent with them, as discussing and building rapport with the practitioner had additional challenges. This was particularly salient when groups had a practitioner-child ratio exceeding 1:6, as they needed more time.

Once ethical approval and permissions were approved by the University Research Ethics Committee [UREC] (Appendix I) and the private childcare setting owner/directors (Appendix II), the study was initially presented to a cohort of 15 early years practitioners within the same ECEC centre, through a power-point presentation (Appendix III). Although I was familiar with the centre and with members of staff, it was important to hold a private presentation with the practitioners in the absence of the setting owner/director. The main reason was to create a relaxed atmosphere, where the practitioners could feel confident in asking any questions. The practitioner presentation (Appendix III) consisted of; a brief self-introduction, the study aims/justification, my ethical considerations as a researcher, a step-by-step guide of the study, and the participant

requirements. My concluding remarks included a clear statement, stating that the practitioners did not have to decide to volunteer, there and then. Alternatively, they were given time to consolidate and consider my proposal. Within three days all practitioners were sent a follow-up email, requesting them to contact me directly, should they wish to take part in the study. I did not receive any responses via email. As the email was sent through the setting director, I can only assume that this deterred the practitioners from contacting me digitally. It is possible that practitioners felt uncomfortable with their director being aware that they were involved with the study. I chose to revisit the centre to see if the practitioners would approach me via face-to-face contact. On entering the centre, I was greeted in person by the first four practitioners wishing to volunteer. During the same week, I had the opportunity to introduce myself and the study to the respective parents, and again I felt the face-to-face contact was conducive to communicating with the parents. Following this face-to-face contact, I proceeded to send the parents a follow-up email with the Parent Consent Information Form (Appendix V) enabling them to grant their parental consent for their respective child to take part in the classroom observations (Phase One). Receiving consent from the respective parents, however, took slightly longer. I followed up my initial introductory email with a reminder email, whilst printing hard copies for the respective children to take home with them. The reason why I sent hard copies of the information/consent forms was to ensure that I reached all the parents, as the setting director later informed me that some parents may not have had access to online digital communication.

In establishing a trusting relationship with my participants, I was mindful of the ethical complexities involved in my research and my role as a Gatekeeper, responsible for safeguarding the confidentiality and anonymity of all participants. To clarify, the children

played an active role in the classroom, as their interactions with the practitioners were video recorded. These recordings were then used for practitioners to reflect on. The children's participation in these observations was essential, as their involvement provided the basis for the reflective process and deeper understanding of the practitioner-child dynamics.

3.2.3 Responsive to Participant Needs;

The third research logistic matter to consider was being responsive to the needs of my participants. I simultaneously spent time with groups through means of prolonged engagement, whilst beginning to conduct my observations (Phase One) with others, in addition to starting the practitioners' professional discussions (VSDs) (Phase Two) (further detail concerning the study phases is provided in the following methodological chapter). I purposefully chose not to have a strict study timeline plan, thus, timings were arranged and carried out in response to the needs and availability of each group practitioner. The reason why this flexible approach was adopted, was to put the practitioners at ease, as research suggests that across the field of education, especially within the childcare sector, practitioners feel less confident and less empowered when compared to qualified and experienced Teachers (Goouch & Powell, 2013). I can only assume that the existing disparity between sectors may have discouraged practitioners, as I do believe those practitioners who did volunteer, probably did so as I was previously known to them. This point now brings me to discussing my positionality as an insider/outsider researcher and how this influenced establishing a relationship with the participants.

3.2.4 Insider/Outsider Researcher Position

Atkins and Wallace (2012) discuss the position of a researcher placed on an insider/outsider researcher continuum, which is based on the premise that all researchers to some degree generate unwanted tensions and dilemmas. Whilst conducting the period of prolonged engagement and collating the data, I positioned myself in the middle of this continuum. Although I was not an insider, in the respect of having an existing professional status within the organisation, I would argue that I was an external researcher with a history of being a former employee, who had resigned and left the organisation in good faith with a professional rapport intact. This meant that I did have insight and familiarisation with the provision's ethos and its organisational procedures. Whilst I remained mindful that practitioners may have felt slightly obliged to take part in the study, I do believe that the transparent approach to recruiting participants (further details concerning the recruitment protocol are provided in the methodological chapter), facilitated consensual and authentic participation.

Given my role as the researcher was somewhat less of an outsider I was aware of the potential threat of an over-rapport risk, which may have led to an unrealistic favourable view of the data. As Wellington (2015) points out our interaction with participants as co-researchers is indeed subjective. In this case, I was aware that sitting halfway along the insider-outsider continuum, to a certain extent, I was impartial enough to be able to sit on the fence and to look at my data with some amount of unbiased interpretation. This confirmed my philosophical belief that my interpretation of the data was only one perspective, whilst keeping in mind making the familiar strange was an important analytical strategy. This was a consideration that Mercer (2007) confirmed by stating;

the researcher's relationship with the researched is not static, but fluctuates constantly, shifting back and forth along a continuum of possibility, from one moment to the next, from one location to the next, from one interaction to the next, and even from one discussion topic to the next (p.13)

In agreement with Shah (2004) who claims that there are equal advantages and disadvantages to being an insider or outsider, the most important ethical issue is to remain mindful of intrusiveness, familiarity and rapport. I did encounter intimate conversations with some practitioners, despite which, did not impede or influence the process of conducting the study. In many ways, the integrity of our relationship became the foundation of this study and permitted me to articulate the value-laden nature of the inquiry.

3.2.5 Researcher's Values & Rhetorical Voice

The sixth logistical consideration was demonstrating my rhetorical voice and bringing my values to the forefront of the study. My professional and personal assumptions originated from my axiological assumptions which inevitably influenced my insider/outsider researcher positionality. According to Creswell (2007), axiological assumptions refer to them;

assumption that all research is value-laden and includes the value systems of the inquirer, the theory, the paradigm used and the social and cultural norms for either the inquirer or the respondents... accordingly, the researcher admits and discusses these values in his or her research (p.247).

I return to discussing the interpretivist paradigm, ontology and epistemology in the next chapter, however, I have chosen to discuss my values as the researcher here in this section, demonstrating how these influenced my positionality and research design. In the above quote, Creswell (2007) prompts me to consider my value system, in the sense that I had to ask myself throughout the design process, *what do I value?* And more importantly,

what will I value? once I arrive at interpreting the research data. This prompted me to declare my values from the onset of designing the study, allowing me to position myself within the study. In terms of what I valued at the start of this academic journey, typically fell under three main areas; representing the practitioner's voice, accounting for the practitioner's emotionality and capturing the *special* moments where the practitioner and child shared a social connection. Each of these values is now tackled in turn, however, are intrinsically linked.

My initial value was the hope of representing the voice of my participants, namely the practitioners. I did consider including the voices of the children, however, it soon became apparent that both sets of voices would have been beyond the scope of this study as I wanted to conduct a fine-grained multimodal analysis of the practitioner-child interaction which could then be reflected on with the practitioner. I chose to primarily focus on the practitioner's voice as I felt, at the time, there was greater importance in supporting the existing national context of further understanding the reflections of practitioners. Linked to this, was the aspiration of uncovering the emotional complexity of the practitioner's role. This came from professionally regarding early years education as a vocation and having repeatedly witnessed (and personally experienced) the *emotionality* that accompanies the practitioner's day-to-day practice of socialising and educating very young children. I valued (and still do value) the *emotional luggage* that practitioners bring to their work every day. I use the term luggage here as opposed to *baggage*, as I feel baggage has a negative connotation and it is not my intention to portray negativity. I assume that if left, practitioners' emotionality manifests and can contribute to unnecessary work-based stress. I do feel that this sector is at times unsupported as there is a lack of compulsory CPD, staff training days, unlike formal educational sectors. In

conducting this study for the “social good” (Clough & Nutbrown, 2012) an additional value was my proclivity to capture the complexity of the practitioner-child interaction. Capturing a snapshot of the practitioner-child interaction would additionally support the provocation of professional discourse. Documenting these snapshots of incidents would focus on the important aspects of this vocation and draw attention to true events that significantly contribute towards forming the necessary attachment between practitioner and child. Moreover, to demonstrate (to practitioners) how important and valued the early years educator role is. Documenting these moments would also capture the essence of why early years educators *do what they do* with all their best intentions. Trying to capture the thoughts and feelings that exist within the early years classroom was indeed a value that encouraged me to persist with this journey. At this point, I admit arriving at a place where I could express my values was not an easy or immediate task and it did take some time to be conscious of my values. This was not a linear process and it was only through conducting the study, I could recognise *how* my research was value-laden. The process of clarifying my values was facilitated by finding my rhetorical voice. As Creswell (2007) states, qualitative research requires the use of rhetorical speech throughout the research. I found adapting to this engaging use of language slightly frightening at first, as it was alienating given my previous academic experience. Yet, once I became immersed, the use of my voice and the use of the first-person pronoun to *tell the story* stirred a sense of purpose. It was only when I came to discussing my researcher values, my previous apprehension subsided.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has demonstrated the origins of the study, by documenting the initial research design questions and motives underpinning the purpose of the research. Through

presenting the landscape of my professional and academic positionality, this chapter not only demonstrates researcher authenticity but also provides the study justification. Considering that I am viewed as a 'foreigner' living in Malta with a value-laden professional history, morals and assumptions, this chapter has additionally discussed the influencing factors/barriers that could have had a negative influence on the study process. Issues related to language/culture have been discussed and have confirmed why constructing a collaborative relationship and forming professional trust (before data collection) was of prime importance to be able to capture rich anecdotal data. This chapter, therefore, provides a bridge between the existing literature concerning the early years context, issues of quality and the focus of the practitioner-child interaction and the upcoming Chapter VI; The Methodological Framework. This chapter provides the study background and lays the foundations to discuss further the ontological and epistemological position of the study.

Chapter VI The Methodological Framework

Chapter Introduction

The previous chapters have thus far presented the arc of the research inquiry, positioning the exploration of the Practitioner-Child Interaction (PCI) within existing pedagogical research. From reviewing existing literature, an inquiry niche has emerged, namely, the practitioners' perspectives and enactment of their PCI. As previously discussed (in Chapters II, III and IV), existing literature and ECEC policy advocate the importance of a responsive practitioner-child relationship, whereby a warm, attentive nurturing dyad plays an integral part in the development of early learning experiences (Dalli, 2014; Margetts, 2005; Page et al., 2013; Trevarthan & Aitken, 2001; Trevarthen et al., 2003). However, understanding the practitioner's perspective is under-researched within the local context and therefore moves beyond simply observing the PCI in practice. After consolidating and planning the various ways of conducting the study, a Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) (Charmaz, 2014) methodology was chosen, based on the premise of moving beyond merely describing and observing the phenomena within an early years provision, to collaborate with practitioners by interpreting their approach to the PCI. The ambition of this chapter is therefore to present and justify the methodological decisions made throughout the study reflexively, highlighting when the methodological decisions were taken throughout the research inquiry.

Chapter Organisation

This chapter presents the current methodological framework and is divided into six sections. The first section presents the aim of the study and research questions which are positioned within an interpretivist paradigm. The second section discusses the theoretical

elements of the research and includes my ontological and epistemological position which informs the methodological position of the study. Section three presents a justification for the chosen methodology, namely a Constructivist Grounded Theory (GCT) (Charmaz, 2014) approach. The practical elements in the fourth and fifth sections account for the logistics that underpinned the research objectives. Furthermore, the chapter concludes by discussing different strategies the study deployed to demonstrate research quality and rigour.

Section I - The Research Inquiry Elements

1.1 Positioning the Research Questions

Throughout the different stages of planning and the ethical approval process, there were times when I felt somewhat overwhelmed by the different philosophical approaches and different methodologies. I found comfort in Clough and Nutbrown's (2012) statement that, at the core of sound research, lay carefully methodological choices that were mediated by *what* the researcher wanted to investigate. As previously discussed (in Chapter V) my previous research experience had ultimately been conducted from a positivist perspective, and that alone arguably made me an interpretivist novice. Therefore, as part of the study design process, I remained mindful of grasping an understanding of the varying methodological discourses across inductive methodology. This enabled me to keep what I wanted to explore at the forefront of designing the study, by shifting my research perspective to one that was exploratory and not explanatory (Ormston et al., 2014). Creswell (2007, p.11) claims a "qualitative inquiry represents a legitimate mode of social and human science exploration, without apology or comparisons to quantitative research". Strauss and Corbin (1998, p. 10-11) describe qualitative research as "any type of research that produces findings not arrived at by

statistical procedures or other means of quantification”. Creswell (2007) allowed me to accept the value and appropriateness of both empirical and analytical approaches, and in agreement, I, too, shared his sentiments of remaining mindful of the influence of my previous traditional approach to research. It would have been naive to have presumed that my previous positivist academic tools would not have had some influence just because this was an explorative inquiry.

A Semi-Structured Qualitative Study (SSQS) (Blandford, 2013) research design was chosen. In a similar fashion to how Blandford (2013, p. 2) conceptualises the purpose of SSQS; as a “systematic, iterative coding of verbal data, often supplemented by data in other modalities” the same approach was adopted. This was based on the aim of exploring the practitioners’ responses (professional reflections) through open-ended questions concerning their (pre-recorded) interactions, as opposed to imposing an existing theory of the PCI. Although the observations and interviews were semi-structured, they remained fluid and flexible in reaction to either observing the communicative dynamics between the PCI and interpreting practitioners’ responses, reflections and lived narratives. A SSQS approach facilitated a conceptual understanding of the PCI, whilst accounting for the subjective view of the practitioners. As Blandford (2013) describes, SSQS is an interactive research design requiring the researcher to be active and flexible within the research process and is often referred to as a “bricolage” approach (Blandford, 2013, sec. 1.2).

1.2 Study Aim & Research Questions

The research questions were open-ended and exploratory, supporting the characteristics of an interpretivist qualitative inquiry (Blandford, 2013; Creswell, 2007; Wellington, 2015). This study aimed to collaborate with practitioners and interpret their

perspectives of quality interactions with young children, by asking 1) What are practitioners' perspectives of quality interactions, and 2) How do they enact quality interactions with young children in a Maltese ECEC setting?

1.3 The Interpretivist Paradigm

As Denzin and Lincoln (2005) state, before the practical elements of the study are presented, the theoretical and philosophical foundations of the study must be declared. By presenting a continuous series of methodological decisions, the remaining parts of this chapter scaffold the boundaries of this study by clearly stating how this study was carried out.

The notion of human interpretation dates back to 1781 when Immanuel Kant was the first influential thinker to write about the role of human interpretation and how our ability to reflect and understand lived experience contributes to forming what we know about the world (Ormston et al., 2014, p.11). The idea of interpretivist thinking was further extended during the 1860s-70s by the work of Wilhelm Dilthey. Dilthey added the value of exploring human "lived experience" (such as narratives, and stories) by accounting for the social context in which that narrative is positioned (Ormston et al., 2014, p.11). Scotland (2012) defines the purpose of interpretivist research as the understanding of acquired knowledge and is different to the traditional positivist aim of generalising knowledge. Wellington (2015, p.26) adds that the aim of interpretivist research "is to explore perspectives and shared meanings and to develop insights into situations". Therefore, the aim was to interpret the phenomenon through multiple subjective realities, perspectives and truths, which included the participants' and mine (Yilmaz, 2013). The study embraced the complexity and subjectivity of participants' views, expressions which were socially and historically constructed within a specific

ECEC context. Furthermore, my professional and personal history shaped not only my position as the researcher (refer to Chapter V) but also how I interpret my lived experience with my participants, including the experiences of the participants themselves throughout the study.

Section II - Theoretical Elements

The foundations of philosophy derive from the ancient Greek, Socrates, who proposed obscure questions concerning the true nature of knowledge by probing *how* and *what* humans believed (Crotty, 1998; Scotland, 2012; Sobh & Perry, 2012). Grappling with the theory of knowledge permits research to incorporate a logical discourse to knowledge, where the term theory is used to describe an “explanation of a particular phenomenon that has been established through evidence from research or evidence-based study” (Chowdbury, 2019, p.101). For researchers and academics alike, this discourse allows us to ask and inquire about what we believe? And conversely, what do we doubt? To answer these questions, I knew I had to demonstrate how my chosen paradigm, ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions framed the study and interpretation of the data. As Creswell (2007) claims it is my reality and “also the individuals being studied and the readers of the qualitative study” (p.18) which make up the multiple realities and understanding of the phenomenon in question. Tracy (2010) concurs with Creswell (2007), by reaffirming that at the heart of any interpretive social inquiry lies the inclusion of multiple realities, truths, experiences and beliefs. From the onset, I was mindful that practitioners’ subjectivity implied that there was a universal approach to quality interaction. It would have been inappropriate to approach this study through the lens of an empirical researcher, seeking one, indisputable reality of quality interaction (Creswell, 2014; Sobh & Perry, 2012). The exploratory inquiry relied on the

collection and consideration of multiple truths, where the truth concerning the phenomenon (practitioners' perspectives) was created by a deeper sense of shared practice experience (Carmichael & Cunningham, 2017; Chramaz, 2014; Creswell, 2007; Tracy, 2010). As Mills et al., (2006) reaffirm, constructivism is a lens through which reality is viewed as a union of social constructions.

Throughout the design process, each stage of my planning informed the next stage, similar to a domino effect. This resonated with Crotty's (2010) proposed research framework, which claims my interpretive ontology and epistemology informed my chosen methodology, accompanying methods and related ethical responsibilities. As a means of simply conceptualising this process, I turn to Sobh and Perry (2006), who stated that "essentially, ontology is *reality*, epistemology is the relationship between that reality and the researcher and methodology in the technique used by the researcher to discover that reality" (p. 1195).

2.1 Ontological Position

Ontology refers to the nature and philosophy of social reality, permitting researchers to question *what is reality*. (Chowdbury, 2019; Cohen & Crabtree, 2006; Scotland, 2012; Yilmaz, 2013). It is described as "the starting point of all research" (Grix, 2004. p.177). Professor David James (2015) explains that ontological and epistemological beliefs exist within each paradigm and that humans have an innate awareness of being social beings, referred to as our "ontos" meaning "to be" Ontology is a theory of existence and reality (Creswell, 2007) and Cohen and Crabtree (2006) emphasises that reality is shaped by lived social experiences. Key elements of ontology include its focus on understanding whether reality is objective or subjective, as well as whether there are multiple realities or a single truth. From an interpretivist perspective, reality is understood

as subjective, constructed through individual experiences (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006; Creswell, 2007). However, critical scholars argue that ontological assumptions need careful scrutiny, as the claim of multiple realities can obscure power dynamics that shape social experience (Scotland, 2012; Yilmaz, 2013). For example, while interpretivism focuses on intersubjectivity, critics argue that it can overlook structural influences like inequality, which shape individual realities in less visible ways (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

From an interpretivist paradigm, my ontological stance was relativist, exploring participants' multiple realities through intersubjective meaning-making (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006; Creswell, 2007; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Mills et al., 2006; Scotland, 2012; Yilmaz, 2013). This design facilitated collaboration, capturing multiple perspectives on how PCI was enacted as a fluid process, with participant experience influencing the data collection process (Creswell, 2007). Nonetheless, the process of constructing meaning collaboratively must also account for potential bias and the researcher's influence on how reality is shaped within this interaction, a critical point often raised by ontological critics (Grix, 2004).

2.2 Epistemological Position

Epistemology refers to the nature of knowledge, and what is worth knowing and originated from the Greek "episteme" and is defined as how we know reality *and what it means to know* (Chowdbury, 2019; Creswell, 2007; James, 2015; Scotland, 2012). In an interpretivist epistemology, knowledge is understood as subjective, differing from one individual to another as humans navigate and strive to understand the world (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006; Creswell, 2007; James, 2015; Scotland, 2012). Cohen and Crabtree (2006) highlight that, in an interpretivist paradigm, knowledge is transactional and

subjective, with the understanding that humans cannot separate themselves from the process of knowing. Therefore, knowledge and reality are intertwined and inseparable.

My epistemological stance is one of subjectivism, where reality is interpreted, and knowledge is tied to individual perspectives (Crotty, 1998; Scotland, 2012). This stance emphasises the close relationship between the researcher and the participant, as Creswell (2007) and Mills et al. (2006) note, with subjectivity being central to the research process. Unlike positivist approaches, which focus on objectivity, interpretivist research embraces the social context and its influence on data (Guba & Lincoln, 1998; Yilmaz, 2013), often associated with social constructivism (Mertens, 2019; Charmaz, 2014).

Building rapport with participants and considering the contextual factors influencing the data were crucial design considerations, in line with the qualitative tradition of immersing oneself in the research field (Creswell, 2007; Guba & Lincoln, 1988). This involved prolonged engagement with participants before data collection, ensuring that the social context and researcher-participant relationships influenced the process. A critical reflection on this position reveals that while subjectivity and proximity enhance the depth of understanding, they may also introduce bias, as the researcher's involvement may shape the knowledge produced. This raises concerns about the balance between embracing subjectivity and maintaining rigour in qualitative research (Creswell, 2007; Guba & Lincoln, 1998).

2.3 Methodological Position

Methodology is the link between research questions and field questions which highlights the role in making claims of significance. As Birks & Mills (2015) describe it as a set of principles guiding the research design, while methods are the practical procedures for data collection and analysis. Yilmaz (2013) adds that methodology

addresses the research process. The choice of methodology is informed by the researcher's epistemological stance (O'Connor et al., 2018), influencing the rationale for selecting data collection methods (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006; Long, 2014).

In this study, the qualitative design assumed that participants' social realities would be different, shaped by their lived experiences. The aim was to explore and interpret practitioners' perceptions of PCI, focusing on participants' feelings, experiences, and thoughts (Crotty, 1998; Long, 2014; Pulla, 2016; Yilmaz, 2013) rather than making universal claims. The subjective nature of the research questions required careful, prolonged data gathering to ensure meaningful insights. As Tavallaei and Abu Talib (2010) note, qualitative research allows for the construction or modification of theories, aligning with the study's goals for conceptualising the phenomenon.

Section III - Methodological Elements

3.1 Selecting the Methodology

From the onset of designing and selecting an appropriate methodology that suited the needs of the research questions, it was important not to *shoe-horn* the research aim into a specific methodology. Therefore, finding the right approach was a two-fold process, as the choice had to be consistent with the research inquiry and aligned with the theoretical assumptions (Creswell, 2007). Consequently, having the research questions at the forefront of designing this study, facilitated the design choices and permitted frequent reflection on whether the research questions remained fit for purpose. Time was taken to determine how previous researchers had attempted to clarify respective discipline perspectives. In agreement with Creswell's (2007) claim that; "there is no lack of a classification system for types of qualitative research" (p.7), a pragmatic approach was taken whilst deciphering which methodology would best suit the research inquiry. This

highlighted the key features of the design process and I too became aware of the “baffling number of choices and approaches” (Creswell, 2007. p. 6). I was searching for an inductive approach, one that suited the lens of a social constructivist, as I was viewing my participants as “acting organisms who [were] construct[ing] social action” (Schwandt, 2007). Furthermore, Morse (2009, p. 13-14) claims these three principles; “documenting core processes, identifying changes in the phenomenon and synthesising data to develop a data-driven theory” suited the essence of Grounded Theory (GT).

I found the principles of GT fit the purpose of this study, as the principles took the descriptive aspects of the PCI (the classroom observations) onto the next stage of interpretation (the discussion with the practitioners), where collectively the themes and categories provided a conceptualisation of the phenomenon. I was conscious of knowing that the underpinnings of grounded theory research could “help diverse researchers to clarify and specify their ideas, although they may not aim to construct theory” (Thornberg et al., 2014. p.407).

3.2 Why Grounded Theory (GT)?

GT approach was chosen as it was a data-driven inquiry with an emergent design described as a; systematic process of gathering different sources of data and simultaneously analysing the data to discover the conceptual underpinnings of the phenomenon (Charmaz, 2013; Mills et al., 2006; Pulla, 2016). As Flick (2009) states, the aim of GT “is not to reduce complexity by breaking it down into variables but rather to increase complexity by including context” (p. 91). As previously stated, the study aimed to move beyond recording a thick description of *what* and *how* the phenomenon appeared in practice, to a place where the practitioners’ voice was accounted for through the method of professional reflection (Claman, 2014; Cho & Lee, 2014). The ambition of this

study was congruent with how Mills et al., (2006, p. 26-27) described the inductive nature of GT, as being a methodology where “the researcher has no preconceived ideas to prove or disprove, rather, issues of importance to participants emerge from the stories that they tell about an area of interest that they have in common with the researcher”. Similarly, to how Strauss and Corbin (1998, p.16) describes the capacity of building a theory as “the use of descriptive language can make ordinary events seem extraordinary”. By adopting a GT methodology, the findings led to a conceptualised understanding of the PCI. As Carmichael and Cunningham (2017) discuss, GT is an exploratory systematic approach to the development of theory, whereby data is taken through a series of inductive, cyclical, theory-building steps of assigning and testing data against initial conceptual categories (Blandford, 2013; Pulla, 2016) (refer to Chapter VII, for the CGT analytical steps taken). Carmichael and Cunningham (2017) highlighted that a theory should only account for a *viable* explanation of existing social phenomena and not necessarily, a *sole* explanation. This claim was additionally described by Ralph, Birks and Chapman (2015), as being a methodology with “methodological dynamism”.

3.3 The Evolution of GT

Since the late 1920s, research has gradually shifted from traditional scientific methods to a more detailed understanding of science (Flick, 2009). Quantitative research dominated until the late 1960s, when American and German sociology critiqued its limitations (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Cohen & Crabtree, 2006; Flick, 2009). At that time, qualitative approaches were criticised for lacking rigour (McCann & Clarke, 2003b). In response, sociologists Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss introduced Grounded Theory (GT), a systematic, inductive, and comparative method for sociological theory construction (Wertz et al., 2011). Their book, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967),

proposed generating theory from data rather than testing it. Glaser, influenced by positivism, emphasised empirical comparisons in theory development (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), while Strauss, influenced by interpretivism, focused on the researcher's role in observing naturalistic settings and human interactions (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Classic GT sought to create conceptual theories explaining patterns of behaviour relevant to participants (Chun Tie et al., 2019). Initially rooted in sociology, Glaser and Strauss were seen as critical realists (O'Connor et al., 2018). Though slow to gain recognition, GT eventually became influential, especially in applied health sciences (Birks & Mills, 2015; Charmaz, 2014; Thornberg, 2011; Pulla, 2016).

3.4 Classic Versus Constructivist GT

Across existing research, there are many influential debates concerning all iterations of classic GT. At times, I felt swayed equally between the opposing provocative arguments. I soon became aware that Classic GT only approached research with broad research questions, not one that was narrow and precise. Whereas, Constructivist GT encourages early development and the ongoing adaptation of the research questions throughout the study (Charmaz, 2014). After consolidating several different and conflicting views concerning both Classical and Constructivist GT versions, the process began to make sense as I unpacked my way through the similarities and differences, both in their framing and application. While reviewing the research I soon became aware of the conflicting debates concerning GT, even so, one issue remained clear and that was my role as the researcher. I had to demonstrate transparency and clarity from the onset of the investigation. Having read the reflective article by O'Connor et al., (2018), their evaluative comparison allowed me to clarify what was meant within the claims and counterclaims concerning each version of GT. I was aware of my preconceptions; what I

thought I was looking for, compared to what I *was finding* as I walked through the research process and how my previously conceived assumptions (my values), concerning the phenomena, were presented in front of me). As O'Connor et al., (2018) highlighted, remaining mindful of my axiological assumptions would impact my interpretation and would have to be controlled, depending on where I positioned myself as the researcher. How I managed my role as the researcher, would indeed stem from which version of GT I would use. If I had chosen Classic GT, my role would have been minimal, and distant, whereby the boundaries of proximity would have rendered objectivity, resulting in a theory that could have made broader theoretical explanations (Glaser, 2008). Whereas, Constructivist GT posits the researchers' role is active, co-constructing knowledge and developing the theoretical understanding through participant collaboration. In doing so, acknowledging how lived history and present shared experiences shape social interactions and shared practice (Charmaz, 2014; Gibbs, 2010; O'Connor et al., 2018). Although both versions are rooted within both distinctive world views that are positioned on both ends of the same research continuum, O'Connor et al., (2018) summarise that at the objectivist end of research sits Classic GT, whilst at the interpretivist end the Constructivist GT is positioned. Despite this, Glaser continues to argue that all versions of GT can travel in both opposing research directions. Similarly, Charmaz (2014) affirms that Classical GT assumes that the researcher remains passive, based on the premise there is only one universal, objective truth (O'Connor et al., 2018). Drawing on the different existing debates presented here justifies my reason for selecting Constructivist GT as the methodology for this study.

3.5 Constructivist Grounded Theory - (Kathy Charmaz)

As a former sociology student of Glaser and Strauss, Kathy Charmaz became widely known for her distinct version of Constructivist GT (Thornberg, 2012). With a career of nearly forty years, Charmaz is recognised as being the third generation of GT scholars (Chun Tie et al., 2019; Birks & Mills, 2015; Charmaz, 2014; Thornberg, 2012). From the turn of the 21st century, Charmaz has extended the remit of traditional versions of GT, by positioning and extending her rendition within a constructivist framework. In doing so, Charmaz defines Constructivist GT as a process of collecting and analysing data, derived from a relativist ontology and subjective epistemological stance, where the researcher and the researched share a common and multiple viewpoints and reflexive stance (Charmaz, 2014, 2017; Gibbs, 2010; Mills et al., 2006). Chun Tie et al., (2019, p. 2) state Constructivist GT is predominately centred on the co-construction of shared experience and meaning. Given this, Charmaz (2014) stresses the importance of the researcher “the author” skilfully crafting his/her ability to write as a tool throughout the data collection and analysis process. Whereby, the mere act of writing memos throughout the research process, enables the researcher to interpret his/her data with fluidity, through scaffolding the re-construction of the contextual features interacting and influencing the data (I return to describing the key analytical steps of CGT in the following Chapter VII). Therefore, the researcher is an active agent and integral to the construction of knowledge (Charmaz, 2008; O’Connor et al., 2019; Mills et al., 2006). It is the very construction and execution of the research process that shapes how researchers go about the data collection and analysis process. The inductive approach suited the needs of my research, I was looking to conceptualise a complex social phenomenon, as Bogdan & Biklen (2007, p.6) said, “You are not putting together a puzzle whose picture you already know. You are

constructing a picture that takes shape as you collect and examine the parts”. To this end, the space and place in which I positioned myself as the researcher had a great influence over the very nature and composition of the data generated from this study. Based on the above reasons, I concluded that Charmaz’s version suited the needs of the study. I found her pragmatism, where the principal assumption was “that neither data nor theories are discovered, but constructed by the researcher as a result of their interactions with the field and its participants” (Thornberg et al., 2014. p.407) echoed how this study was formed. The emphasis was to bring light to the importance of the *quality* and the *context* of my interaction with my participants. Moreover, how the interaction developed during the time I spent in practice. The notion of co-constructing data with my participants, and interpreting the data would “always [be] coloured by the researchers’ perspectives” (Thornberg et al., 2014. p.407) was fundamentally part of the study.

3.5.1 Critique of CGT

One of the main critiques of Classical GT lies within the role and timing of the literature review (Gibbs, 2010). Glasser and Strauss (1967) stated that from the onset, the researcher minimises any preconceived ideas concerning the research inquiry, before the data collection process. The notion of theoretical agnosticism (Henwood & Pidgeon, 2003) claims that all prior knowledge, including initially reviewing the literature is placed to one side until the study is conducted, data has been gathered and analysed. In her seminal article, Pulla (2016) explains one possible reason for this stems from the influential role that existing literature has over the researchers’ assumptions and interpretations of the data. In contrast, Charmaz (2015) explains how Constructivist GT embraces prior preconceived ideas and influencing literature, whilst claiming that it would almost be impossible and naive for any researcher to leave their theoretical ideas

aside before conducting a Constructivist GT study. Blandford (2013) additionally supports Charmaz, quoting that “no researcher is a tabula rasa; each comes to a study with a pre-existing understanding, experience, interests” (sec. 9.1). This implied that grappling with theoretical views, positions and starting points to any inquiry is indeed an integral part of the research process. I was mindful that up to the point of selecting my methodology, I had already written several literature review drafts, hence, the literature had already influenced me. Moreover, I did have preconceived ideas about early years pedagogy, especially coming from a psychology background where I had researched and professionally experienced issues concerning the *quality* of early years relationships. Having said this, Charmaz (2014) does highlight existing literature should not “consummate” the researcher’s perspective and openness towards the data (Pulla, 2016). Charmaz (2015) also points out that any form of prior literature review does not provide the researcher with rudimentary themes or categories that can be assigned to data. This is true of the literature reviews I had written before the completion of this study, as they were very different from the one that is incorporated within this final thesis. Thus, it was important to have some prior ideas about *how* I would carry out the study, yet, still having movement and openness in which Constructivist GT facilitated the process. This allowed me to take a complex social phenomenon (the PCI) and to collaborate with my participants in an exploratory way of gathering examples of the interactions, to discuss them to construct an understanding of their perspective.

Section IV - Practical Elements

4.1 Purposeful Sampling Technique

Purposeful sampling was used in this study. Practitioners and children were approached to participate in the study following the above participant criteria. This

method of sampling is different from the theoretical sampling that is deployed in GT research. As Charmaz (2014) highlights, initial sampling methods, such as purposeful sampling, act as a ‘launching pad’ to begin the research process. Alternatively, *theoretical sampling* is used to guide the research process, until the study has reached theoretical saturation (I return to discussing theoretical sampling in the following chapter).

Purposeful sampling is characterised by its information-rich contextual features (Cho & Lee, 2014). Although Yilmaz (2013) claims that this method of sampling restricts the replicability of the findings, I believe that this was not a concern. Before conducting the study, I had previously spoken with the respective setting owner/director, via face-to-face and written permission (Appendix II) and several short verbal meetings confirming the study intentions and details.

4.2 Participant Criteria, Demographics & Autonomy

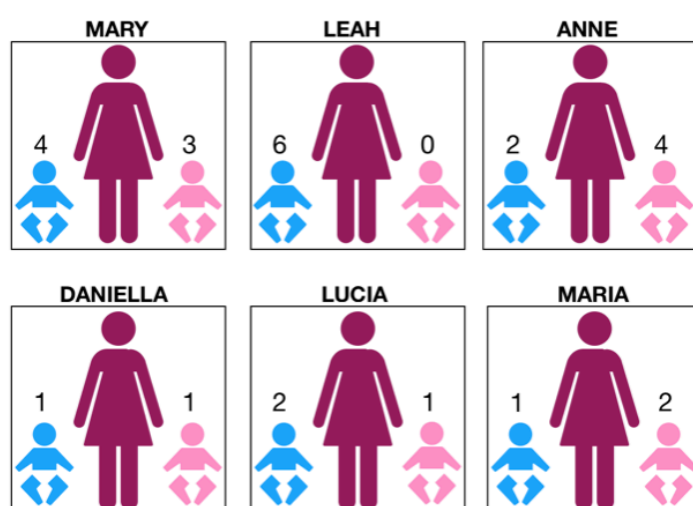
Based on the premise of exploring the interaction between practitioners and young children, the study purposefully aimed to recruit both practitioners (the adult) and the children who attend a private childcare setting (for 2 - 4 y/o). In this study, the children were only recruited to observe them during phase one of the study. All participants met one of the following participant criteria;

- Adult participants: (+18 years of age, female or male) working as early years professionals, specifically within a registered childcare English-speaking provision. Practitioners had to be qualified with a minimum Maltese MQF Level IV in Early Years Development and Childcare. Practitioners had to be proficient in spoken and written English, with a pass at O’level Secondary School Leaving Certification (SSC) level (GCSE) equivalent).
- The infants/children participants are aged between 12 months and 4 years, registered and attending the provision as their respective early years’ practitioners.

The Maltese ECEC context is a small close community therefore preserving participants' anonymity was a challenge and it was agreed that the name and details of the setting and participants would remain anonymous during and after the study. In view of protecting the anonymity of the participants, it was my ethical duty not to divulge any identifiable information concerning the ECEC setting or any detailed description of the participants who took part. Therefore, the only information I disclose is the number of participants who took part, their age and gender. The practitioners' professional experience, qualifications and any other identifying information have therefore been omitted. The only permissions needed to conduct the study were that of the childcare setting owner/director (refer to Appendix II) as the ECEC childcare setting was a privately owned provision. Figure 3 presents the six groups of practitioners and their respective children who participated in the classroom observations.

Figure 3

Participant and group demographics



Note: Names of practitioners are pseudonyms

In total, there were six (early years professionals) participants, each representing six individual groups. In Figure 3, the adult practitioner is represented by the larger red adult-female² icon. 16 male children aged 2-4 years and 11 female children aged 2-4 years took part in the observation (Phase One) of the study, these are represented by the smaller pink and blue child icons, respectively.

4.3 Study Recruitment Process

Once ethical approval and permissions were approved by UREC and the private childcare setting owner/director (Appendix I and II), the study was initially presented to a cohort of 15 practitioners within the same childcare centre. Although I was familiar with the centre and with members of staff, it was important to hold a private presentation with the practitioners in the absence of the manager and owner (as previously discussed in Chapter V). The practitioner presentation (Appendix III) consisted of; a brief self-introduction, the study aims/justification, my ethical considerations as a researcher, a step-by-step guide of the study, and the participant requirements. My concluding remarks included a clear statement, stating that the practitioners did not have to decide to volunteer, there and then. Alternatively, they were given time to consolidate and consider my proposal. Within three days all practitioners were sent a follow-up email, requesting them to contact me directly, should they wish to participate in the study. I did not receive any responses via email. As the email was sent through the centre manager, I can only assume that this deterred the practitioners from contacting me digitally. I revisited the centre to see if the practitioners would approach me via face-to-face contact. By the end of my visit, practitioners came forward to participate in the study by completing the

² According to Sollars (2016, 2018, 2019c) female educators/practitioners predominantly occupy most of ECEC roles within the Maltese system. A trend that dates back to 1845, when the Sisters of St Joseph of the Apparition began the first ECEC services. Moreover, this gender imbalance is an international trend within ECEC (OECD, 2014; Peeters et al., 2015)

Practitioner Participant Consent Information Form (Appendix IV), which led me to begin the period of prolonged engagement. It was during the same time that I had the opportunity of meeting the respective parents, and again I felt the face-to-face contact was conducive to communicating with the parents. Following this face-to-face contact, I proceeded to send the parents a follow-up email with the Parent Consent Information Form (Appendix V) enabling them to grant their parental consent for their respective child to take part in the classroom observations (Phase One). The process of receiving parental consent resulted in a lengthy process, which meant that I followed up my initial introductory email with a reminder email, whilst printing hard copies for the respective children to take home with them. I ensured that hard copies of the information/consent forms reached all the respective parents, as the manager later informed me that some parents may not have had access to online digital communication.

Section V - Exploratory Study Phases

5.1 The Study Process

This study was divided into two key phases; the first phase involved taking video-recorded classroom observations of the practitioner-child interaction (refer to section 5.2 of this chapter), whilst the second phase was an audio-recorded Visual Stimulated Discussion (VSD) (refer to section 5.6 of this chapter) between myself and each practitioner. Before conducting the study, a period of prolonged engagement was conducted to ensure a rapport was established between myself and my participants (as previously discussed in Chapter V). Before I discuss each phase of the study in detail, it is important to highlight how Constructivist GT informed my choice of methods.

Data was collected from both study phases and were analysed for rigour using a Constructivist GT methodology (Charmaz, 2014; Creswell, 2007). The study had two

methods of data collection, a combination of observations and reflective discussions (interviews), each focusing on the overall aim of conceptualising the phenomena. As Cohen and Crabtree (2006) claim, naturalistic methods such as observations and interviews enable researchers to construct a meaningful reality in collaboration between all involved. Thornberg et al., (2014) claim that GT does not prescribe specific methods but rather “uses data collection methods that best fit the actual research problem and the ongoing analysis of the data” (p.407). In doing so, it strategically selects data analysis techniques that allow for fluid and simultaneous analysis of the collated data. In this study, both observations and discussions were used to elicit the participants’ subjective experience until theoretical saturation had been reached (refer to the following Chapter VII for further discussion).

5.2 Study Phase 1 - Observations in Practice

To describe how the practitioners and children enacted their interactions, I chose to observe them in practice. The chosen method of video recording classroom observation was fruitful in unveiling; the specific two-way characteristics of the embodied practitioner-child interaction (verbal and non-verbal cues, as informed by Nevile, 2015), how these were related to scaffolding the PCI and whether any aspects within the environment influenced the communicative exchange. I used my video recording equipment as a tool to capture the multimodal features of social interaction, language and the embodied features of practitioner-child interaction (as illustrated in the example multimodal transcript extract that is presented in the following chapter).

Mondada (2019, para.5) claims that technology has advanced how we can now capture the “silent embodied features and actions” of social interaction, which are no longer bound to spoken language. I focused on the language exchanged between the

practitioner and the child, equal to the exchange of physical actions, gestures, eye contact, gaze, facial expressions and silence (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Mondada, 2019). I had planned to record ten observations per practitioner, however, it soon became apparent during the period of prolonged engagement that I had to gauge the timing and quantity of the recordings, as it was not always convenient to start the recordings. I was sensitive to the needs of the practitioner and her group of children, in ensuring that all participants were happy to begin the recordings and that I maintained my ethical integrity by ensuring I had ongoing consent and assent from all who were involved. As the researcher, I was solely responsible for recording the observations and for keeping a detailed narrative account of what I observed, heard and felt via reflective field notes which I felt were important at the time to help me interpret the practitioner-child interaction context (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Tessier, 2012).

5.2.1 Form of Observation

Flick (2009, p. 222) discusses how different forms of observations exist and are mediated by five dimensions; 1) participants' awareness of being observed, 2) the degree to which the researchers become involved in the observation, 3) the degree to which the observation is structured 4) the degree to which the environment is realistic and 5) the degree in which the researchers emphasises his/her reflexive self-observation. I now demonstrate how each of these five dimensions shaped the design of my observations during the first phase of the study in the following table (Table 4).

Table 4
Phase One Recorded Observations Description

Dimension	Observation Characteristic	Observations - Phase One
1	Overt / Covert	Throughout the study I remained overt and transparent in my aims and objectives with all participants (refer to Section 6.4.1). The period of prolonged engagement allowed me to initially build a rapport with the participants, enabling me to become sensitive to my participants ongoing feelings about conducting the recordings (refer to Section 6.3). Regarding the practitioners, I discussed the prospect of conducting the observations with them, prior to the event, in addition, I applied the same strategy with the children (as discussed in Section 6.4.1 Ethical Considerations). Once I had edited the examples (recordings) that I felt reflected the reciprocal interaction between practitioner and child, I compiled a sequential video stream in readiness to watch again with each separate practitioner during their Visual Stimulated Discussion (VSD) (Phase Two). Practitioners were informed that their respective edited video observations would be the only visual incidents included in the study analysis (refer to Table 2).
2	Non participant / Participant	As part of the prolonged engagement period, I became involved and participated in the daily group activities within the centre. However, it was important that I did not infringe on the pre-existing practitioner-child relationship. Once the opportunity arose to begin recording the practitioner-child interaction, I refrained from being actively involved in their interaction or activity. Meaning that I did not feature in the practitioner-child interaction. My objective was to capture the occurring event, the here and now situation, as opposed to being part of it. The observations were opportunistic and flexible.

- | | | |
|---|---|--|
| 3 | Systematic /
Unsystematic | <p>I chose a semi-structured approach; focusing on the thematic features of the interaction, as a structured observation may have overlooked the contextual features of the practitioner-child interaction (Rozsahegyi, 2019, p. 26).</p> <p>The objective was to record episodes (examples) of the practitioner and child engaged in a reciprocal and responsive interaction. The aim was to capture the moments of communicative exchange, regardless of what they were discussing or physically doing. Therefore, the context in which these observations took place, were different and unique across the six groups of participants, regarding the group activity or choice of discussion.</p> <p>Once I recognised the practitioner and child having a reciprocal communicative exchange (by using Nevile (2015) and Mondada's (2019) description of embodied interaction), I began the video recording. Considering many of the children were young infants and lacked the skills to orally converse, they were reliant on their non-verbal communicative skills. I felt that having a semi-structured observation strategy allowed me to record and describe events as they unfolded between the practitioner and child.</p> |
| 4 | Natural /
Artificial
Environment | <p>The observations were conducted within the field and were not artificial environments, which facilitated the naturally occurring reciprocal interaction between the practitioner and child. As the observer, I tried to remain at a distance when recording the observations in order to refrain from having an influence over their reciprocal communicative exchange.</p> |
| 5 | Self-
observation /
Observing
Others | <p>As previously stated, I did not form part of the recorded video observations and therefore I did not observe or analyse myself within the video data. However, I was conscious of making time to self-reflect on my own contribution to the group dynamics as I spent time with the participants. In this respect, I was aware of my own role developing as time passed. I was aware that my presence within the centre became more relaxed and the children would anticipate my arrival and at times were excited to see and share their stories with me.</p> |

Upon reflection, it was the prolonged engagement which made me aware that having a 'rigid' predetermined criterion may have clouded my interpretations and made the process of building a concept of the communicative exchange difficult. The video recordings were conducted, edited and transcribed using a multimodal approach (as defined above) initially coded and analysed simultaneously across each group. Not all of the recorded observations were used, as some included interactions with children in the group who had not chosen to take part in the study, those which were not used were safely destroyed. The videos represented short snap-shots; where each practitioner was interacting with their respective children, either individually or as a group.

The videos were edited and combined as one film, per practitioner using secure videography software tools (Table 5 provides brief details of the recorded observations per practitioner/group, however, does not extend to any identifiable details to ensure the centre/participants remain anonymous). Some practitioners had more recorded observations than others, mainly due to the time constraints and changes to circumstances that occurred during my time at the centre. This unbalanced amount of collated data inevitably triggered my research curiosity, pressing me to ponder; why some practitioners wanted more video taken than others? And why did some request that I spend more time with their group than others? From having built a rapport with them during the prolonged engagement and from having conversations concerning their role within the provision, I assumed that taking part in the study and having their voices heard was indeed a novel experience for them. A couple of practitioners had earlier expressed grievances concerning the hierarchy of the organisation, where they had felt that their opinion had in the past been marginalised. It was through participating in this study they felt that their

voice could be heard and they could share their professional wisdom with those practitioners entering and/or working within the field.

5.4 Duration of Observations

Table 5

Phase One Observations Duration

Group	Duration (minutes)	No Participants Adult:Child	Description of Observation Areas
Mary	19.00	1:7	<p>Outside Garden 1(a large garden area, with a mud-kitchen sensory corner, facilitated free-play, gardening, role-play activities).</p> <p>Classroom 1(enclosed medium-sized classroom, brightly decorated with groups artwork, reading corner and large floor cushions, large circular group table conducive for table-top activities).</p>
Leah	10.56	1:6	<p>Classroom 2(enclosed large-sized classroom, predominately used between different groups, sometimes four groups can be using at one time. Busy room, brightly decorated with art work, functional areas, eating areas/nappy changing, bag/coats. Back exit door to outdoor play area. Three main table areas, used for eating and table-top activities)</p> <p>Eating Area 1 (enclosed kitchen/eating area, children can sit eat and watch food being prepared. Only two groups at any one time use this room, with large/low level bench/table settings, minimal toys/decorations).</p>
Anne	14.02	1:6	<p>Indoor/Outdoor Play Area 2 (enclosed outdoor area situated in the middle of corridors/adjacent classrooms. Soft-floor, ideal for floor play, outdoor games, only for one group at any time. Area includes small ride-alongs, Wendy-house, outside play kitchen. Area is used for free-play, outdoor play.</p>
Daniella	30.02	1:2	<p>Indoor Sensory Area 1 (large enclosed room, divided into four open plan areas; multi-sensory messy-play tables, interactive whiteboard area, reading/table activity area; large indoor gym area. A large busy room, often catering for 4-5 groups. Areas are sectioned by low gates/ benches.</p> <p>Eating Area 1 (as above)</p>
Lucia	20.20	1:3	<p>Indoor Sensory Area 1 (as above)</p>
Maria	15.35	1:3	<p>Classroom 2 (as above)</p>

5.2.2 Ethical Considerations for Phase One

All participants had the right to choose to participate in the current study based on informed consent/assent, however, there was a difference between gaining the consent from the adult participants, compared to gaining the assent from the younger participants. These two issues are now discussed.

5.2.2.1 Consent from Adult Participants

The aim was to ensure that I recruited my participants based on complete transparency and shared understanding, given Bogdan and Biklen (2007, p. 93) had previously drawn my attention to the issue of “border crossing” in a culture that was different from my own. Meaning that it was my ethical duty to ensure that any potential participant wishing to take part, understood the terminology deployed within the participant recruitment process. For example, I needed to discuss what I meant by *informed consent* and I had to be reassured by them that we had reached a shared mutual understanding. Consequently, I chose to approach the study recruitment process both face-to-face and via email communication.

As part of the study recruitment process, all practitioners working within the same organisation and respective parents were given a face-to-face explanation of the study as part of the informed consent protocol. During this initial meeting, I summarised the study; aims, objectives, participant and infant/child involvement and potential risks, in addition to clarifying what was meant by some of the used terminology, which ended with a brief Q&A. At the end of the meeting, all potential participants were given either the Practitioner Participant Information and Consent Sheet (Appendix IV) or a Child Participant Information and Consent Sheet (Appendix V) respectively. Both sheets explained the study background, aims, objectives, participants’ rights to withdraw,

potential study risks and hoped-for benefits of the study. Part of the consent section for the practitioners included basic anonymous demographics, including participants' age, gender, level of education and duration of employment within the ECEC sector. Part of the consent section for the parents included basic anonymous demographics including their respective child's age, gender and duration of attending the provision. On the consent sheet, all participants were informed of their rights to withdraw during the study period (October 2018 to May 2019) and were given an identification number as a means of identifying their video/audio recording in the event of anyone wishing to withdraw from the study. All participants (practitioners/children/parents) were informed not to feel obliged to participate in the study and that their relationship with other stakeholders would not be affected in either a professional or personal capacity. Based on the ethical considerations, I needed to allow participants to contact me directly as I wanted to avoid any sense of coercion.

5..2.2.2 Assent from Younger Participants

Since the enactment of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (United Nations, 1989) research concerning the involvement of children has radically transformed how their contribution to society is viewed (Nutbrown, 2010). Children are regarded as active agents within their life trajectories (Minkkinen 2013, p. 547). Their views, perspectives, engagement and participation are now widely recognised as being an important and valid contribution to empirical research (Christensen & Prout, 2002; Dockett et al., 2012; Palaiologou, 2013). Ethical responsibility and the commitment to protect participants, namely minors within research rests on the shoulders of the researcher. Carefully recognising and navigating ethical challenges leads us to conduct research with a caring ethic. As previously discussed, Nodding's (1986) ethic of care,

prompts us to consider what is, and what is not in the interest of the participant. Doing so, ensures researchers question *how* to conduct, interpret and present findings. My ethical duty was, therefore, to ensure the children who had parental consent to take part in Phase One of the study (classroom observations) did indeed wish to take part, regardless of their respective parental consent. Given the young participants in this study were aged 2 to 4 years and had a limited understanding of assent and verbal skills, their non-verbal cues were equally important to consider by their stage of maturation. Dockett et al., (2012) claim that the notion of a child's right to *dissent*, that being their prerogative to non-agreement participation must be interpreted correctly, prior and ongoing throughout the research process. This meant that I had to initially build a relationship with the children to understand their social personalities, their level of understanding and their social reactions. To facilitate this process, I additionally called upon the interpretations of their respective group practitioner, given she had an established rapport with her children. We needed to be able to interpret the child's decision signals, either through their language, expressions and/or emotions (Dockett et al., 2012). This was ongoing throughout the recordings of the videos, as some groups had recordings conducted at numerous intervals.

In his research, Richardson (2018) makes an important ethical consideration when conducting research within the field, and that is, it is equally important that ethical protection also extends to those who are working within proximity to the study participants. Before switching on the camera, I ensured that everyone within the room was fully aware of what I was doing and I also physically positioned myself, to only capture my participants. I would orally ask the children if they wanted to be recorded, reiterating each time that I and their practitioner would be the only people watching the

video. Once the recordings had been taken, I would then play the video back for the children to watch and at the end, I asked again if they were happy that I kept the video footage. Creating the space for the child to reassess their participation regularly was a key ethical strategy, considering the data collection process was conducted over four months (Dockett et al., 2012). During this time, I only encountered one child, who clearly said: “*put it in the bin*” after watching their video, to which I did not ask for any justification and I simply complied by pressing the delete button on the recording and showing the child that the film had been removed. This child had initially expressed an interest to be involved and had changed their mind. Whilst this impacted the process of collecting my data for that particular child, my ethical duty primarily remained bound to respect the child's choice of non-participation.

By conducting a period of prolonged engagement, I was fortunate enough to build a rapport with the children and to become familiar with their social behaviours (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). During this time, I engaged with each group and showed the children the recording equipment at regular intervals. The observations and recording of the infant-practitioner interaction did not at any time impede upon or threaten the infant-practitioner relationship or the individual. I believe this initial preparation facilitated an alliance with the group, helping to demystify potential communication barriers whilst allowing the children and practitioners to feel more comfortable.

5.3 Study Phase 2 - Video-Stimulated Discussion (VSD)(Interviews)

After conducting the classroom observations in phase one, I was aware that this first stage of the study only provided a descriptive and relied on my interpretive account of the practitioner-child interaction. This alone did not provide further insight into the conceptual underpinnings of the practitioner-child interaction. In reality, there were few

reciprocal moments captured within each group (refer to Table 7 for observation duration), therefore, I chose to integrate the practitioner's perspective.

As Flick (2009) states, combining participant interviews with observational data “allows the reconstruction of biographical processes or stocks of knowledge that are the background of observable practices” (p. 232). This was important, as my interpretation alone, as the observer was insufficient to claim a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena. I chose to use the individualised video footage from phase one to prompt a rich and insightful pedagogical discussion. To facilitate the VSDs, I incorporated semi-structured field questions that were centred around the practitioner-child relationships and factors that may or/not influence the practitioner-child interaction (as illustrated in Table 6). These questions were purposely not centred on the practitioner defining the phenomena, alternatively, the questions aimed to facilitate a discussion concerning the practitioner-child observation. As Blandford (2013, p.36) states, the nature of a semi-structured dialogue “inevitably brings in the interest of the researcher, as well as the participant. To pretend that they are objective is to downplay the individuality of each researcher and of the relationship between researcher and participant” Thus, this resonated with my aim of constructing an interpretation of practitioners' responses.

Table 6
Participant VSD Questions

Question Number	Field Question to Participants
1	• Tell me a little bit more of your experience here, can you describe what you were thinking at the time? (referring to the video observation).
2	• How would you describe your interaction here with the children? (referring to the video observation).
3	• What aspects of your knowledge/experience are you relying on when communicating with the children? (referring to the video observation).
4	• In your opinion, did you feel there was anything in your environment stopping you communicating with the children?
5	• In your opinion, did you feel that there were positive aspects in your environment that we're making communicating with the children easier?
6	• What advice would you give to someone new in ECEC about how to communicate with young children?
7	• If you could wave a magic wand, what would you like to see change throughout the Maltese ECEC sector?

The use of videography as a feedback reflexive pedagogical tool is well documented throughout the literature (Cherrington & Loveridge, 2014; Degotardi 2010; Endacott, 2016; Geiger et al., 2016; Moyles et al., 2002b; Wass & Moskal, 2017). However, this tool, to the best of my knowledge, has not been used in a Maltese childcare setting. The video tool has often acted as a vehicle to elicit subjective perspectives, by providing a space for practitioners to reflect retrospectively on their practice decisions (Cherrington & Loveridge, 2014; Degotardi 2010; Fisher & Wood, 2012; Moyles et al., 2002b). Across the literature, this method has been called by different terms, however, all

share the commonality of helping educators analyse their own pedagogy and teaching practice. It is often referred to (and not limited to) as either; Video-Stimulated Account (VSA)(Geiger et al., 2016), Interpersonal Process Recall (IPR)(Wass & Moskal, 2017), Video-Stimulated Recall (VSR) (Cherrington & Loveridge, 2014; Endacott, 2016; Fisher & Wood, 2012), Visual Teacher Learning (VTL) (Brouwer et al., 2017), Reflective Dialogues (RD) (Degotardi 2010; Moyles et al., 2002b) or Video-Based Teacher Professional Learning (VBTPL) (Seidel et al. 2011). The study chose its variation and refers to the method as Video Stimulated Discussion (VSD), as it describes the utility in which it was deployed within the context of this study. The term VSD is defined as a method in which a participant engages and reflects on their professional practice, through means of watching themselves on pre-recorded observations, whilst discussing the social factors they believe/perceived influenced their pedagogical decisions.

Pedagogy was historically assessed and observed through means of secondary reporting classroom observations, which were often laden with subjectivity and bias. Through the advancements and use of digital media, the use of videography has transformed pedagogical evaluation. In their research, Geiger et al., (2016) highlight the benefits of using VSA in teacher's pedagogy learning cycles, as this mode of capturing practice is a conducive and visionary method of reflecting on teaching practice. Brouwer et al., (2017) additionally found experimental evidence to suggest in-service teachers made significant pedagogical and teaching progress compared to their study control groups. In their early years' research, Cherrington and Loveridge (2014) used stimulated recall methodologies to gain further insights into practitioners' professional reflective thinking, both individually and within a focus group. Their findings suggested that using stimulated recall contributed to an effective professional collective dialogue that was

typically lacking from their everyday practice, providing practitioners with an enriched reflexive professional developmental experience.

Using video recordings as a tool to scaffold and facilitate a conversation with the practitioners stimulated a powerful, insightful and at times provocative discussion. As the researcher, this experience provided much more than concepts relating to the practitioner-child interaction, it was the opportunity to understand the lived experience of practitioners who in some cases had spent their entire working career, caring and educating hundreds of young children. Not only had these practitioners endured and seen huge changes within the ECEC field, but their stories were laced in wisdom, honesty and care. It was a privilege to not only share this experience but also an honour to have their voices heard through this study. In this study, the VSD became a vehicle to evoke the practitioner's perspective, which was invisible within the stand-alone observation data derived from phase one. I had considered having a collective focus group similar to Cherrington's and Loveridge's (2014) study, however, I felt given the difference in contextual and cultural circumstances, I assumed the practitioners within my cohort may have found this off-putting. I based this assumption initially on my own professional experience here in Malta. Many of the practitioners I had previously been involved with lacked a sense of self-confidence, in the respect of being asked questions concerning ECEC. I was also aware that some of the practitioners taking part in this study were long-term staff members and felt more confident in speaking within a group dynamic, whereas others were less confident. Therefore, I chose to conduct both study phases on an individual basis. During the participant's study feedback session, some of the practitioners remarked on how they liked the way the study had a "personal touch" and if it had been based on a group discussion, it would not have had the same meaning to them as practitioners.

Individual practitioners conducted their VSD at different times. The aim was to scaffold and facilitate a professional open discussion between myself and the practitioner, whilst collectively interpreting and sharing perspectives of the recorded practitioner-child interaction. This was reliant on our shared ability to be reflexive, honest and transparent throughout the discussion. These discussions were audio recorded and were equally about the interaction between myself and the practitioner, as well as the context of the discussion. Together, through dialogue, we were interpreting our own perspectives and those of the children whilst constructing knowledge concerning early years pedagogy. Sometimes our views differed with respect to the pragmatic and moral aspects of the phenomena, however, I felt this was not a concern, as “truth is negotiated through dialogue, where findings emerge through conflicting interpretations” (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). Geiger et al., (2016) claim, that reflecting upon “in the moment” recorded snapshots, allows practitioners to perceive their own subconscious and conscious professional decisions within practice. It provides a window through which practitioners can see a holistic view of what is happening within the context of their classroom environment. Incorporating the VSD, gave means to my capacity as the researcher to exchange knowledge with my participants, by preparing me to translate the underlying concepts of the phenomenon. Recognising the emerging features of building theory, the data derived from this second phase of the study permitted a synthesis between the observation findings with the knowledge from the practitioners during the VSD.

5.3.1 Duration of VSD

Table 7
Phase Two Individual VSD Duration (minutes)

Group/ Practitioner	Duration of VSD (minutes)
Mary	38.12
Leah	52.08
Anne	42.11
Daniella	35.59
Lucia	50.10
Maria	45.39

5.3.2 Ethical Consideration for Phase Two

Although discussion concerning practitioners' informed consent and rights to withdraw has been previously stated (section 5.5), the issues related to practitioners' psychological risk were pertinent to the second phase of the study based on the intimate nature of the VSD. Estimating the potential risks of this study was challenging given its subjective and intimate nature. Alderson & Morrow (2004) claim the ability to balance the risks and benefits of any research is achieved through ethical reflection. In my opinion, the short-term and long-term risks for all participants taking part in this study were minimal. Nevertheless, considering the aim of the VSD was to discuss and reflect on PCI, I assumed my participants would naturally progress into discussing issues relating to child socialisation and child-rearing practices. In view of this, I was aware of the potential risk of practitioners recalling their own parenting and childhood experiences. Suggesting that some practitioners may have encountered some degree of psychological distress both short and long-term. Prior to starting the audio recordings, I ensured that I reiterated

orally the participants' rights to stop and withdraw from the VSD at any time, by means of raising their arm during the recording. I clearly stated that I was not looking for a correct answer or a justification for their actions concerning the video observations. Once each VSD came to an end I took time to debrief and signpost my participants to local support services. Moreover, I reminded each of the practitioners that they had all the necessary contact information on their original Practitioner Participant Consent Form (Appendix IV). The practitioners were informed that once the study had been concluded, they would individually receive study feedback, in the form of a written summary of the interpreted findings and how the study had made an original contribution to existing knowledge concerning early years pedagogy.

Scotland (2012) raises an important ethical dilemma to consider whilst conducting research from an interpretivist paradigm. As this study used open-ended individualised discussions, there was a possibility that the participants' privacy could have been compromised by the unintended discovery of oppressive relationships. I was ethically responsible for intervening should this have occurred, by means of toning down the contextualisation of the recorded dialogue (Scotland, 2012). In response to this, before conducting the audio recording, I informed the participants about this risk and asked them kindly to refrain from divulging personal information, as the focus of the study concerned their pedagogy. All participants were informed that the interpretations and the findings would remain anonymous, however, the final direction in which the study took would be disseminated publicly.

5.3.3 Additional Ethical Considerations & Data Management

Throughout the study, all recordings and corresponding data files were at all times stored safely on my personal password-protected computer, using the University of

Sheffield Google Drive platform. As I was conducting a grounded theory approach, I was simultaneously gathering and analysing data, which meant that I made numerous changes to the data during the analysis process. Each time I made a change, the raw data files were watermarked to ensure that all changes were tracked to ensure authorship was maintained. I regularly updated my software with anti-virus protection and kept updated with current versions of software and storage devices, including the data management online support courses from the University of Sheffield. As part of the participant consent procedure, all participants were provided with the contact details of the University's Data Protection Officer and the Information Commissioner's Office, should they wish to seek advice or make a complaint regarding my data management skills.

Section VI - Quality Assurance

6.1 Demonstrating Rigour & Addressing "Generalisability"

Demonstrating quality and rigour throughout the research process is pivotal to validating an original contribution to knowledge (Cohen & Crabtree, 2008). Tracy (2010) remarks that best research practices and guidelines "serve as helpful pedagogical launching pads across a variety of interpretive arts" (p.838). However, the language deployed between positivist and interpretivist paradigms has contributed to debates and a delay in creating a "criterion" for qualitative research (Cohen & Crabtree, 2008; Rolfe, 2004; Shenton, 2004). Scotland (2012) additionally demonstrates how it is unproductive to compare or contrast research paradigms and is, therefore, futile trying to apply an *objective* framework to an interpretivist research position. Demonstrating rigour is a two-fold process, where the prerequisite of designing and implementing the investigation with integrity becomes the holy grail. Whilst defining quality within interpretive research has caused many debates with existing literature (Cohen & Crabtree, 2008; Creswell, 2007;

Gibbs, 2007; Patton, 2002; Rolfe, 2004; Yilmaz, 2013), certain issues need addressing in favour of validating the position of this study within the existing body of knowledge.

This study aimed to explore multiple realities of early years practitioners, where the aim was not to reach a single conceptual understanding of the PCI, per se, alternatively, the findings would be a composition of multiple subjective descriptions and interpretations. Consequently, it was important to consider how the notion of *generalisability* would apply to the qualitative nature of this study. In 2000, Angen (2000) claimed issues related to *trustworthiness* in qualitative research can only be explained within the boundaries and context of the study, implying that the findings of this study would be context-bound and therefore could not be generalised. Moreover, Scotland (2012) posits issues related to *transferability* within the interpretive methodology, and claims that findings are limited compared to a positivist approach. Here, Angen (2000) and Scotland (2012) both imply that the extendibility of the findings would thus be somewhat disjointed as they reflected a composite of multiple truths. In defence, the recent article by Smith (2018, p.138) argues that qualitative research typically avoids and/or is reluctant to address issues related to generalisability, which Smith (2018) claims is frequently referred to as a methodological limitation. Within his discussion, Smith (2018) discusses that the term generalisability is only applicable to statistical probability generalisations that characterise quantitative research. Alternatively, Smith (2018) states, that instead of applying the notion of generalisability to the context-bound variables (for example the practitioners' demographics and the Maltese cultural context), qualitative research can consider the term *analytical generalisation*. By this Smith meant that the findings from this study can demonstrate how the "construct" is related to the pre-existing literature. It is also possible that the findings of the study may conceivably produce new

insights, in which Smith (2018) claims, it is the concept that generates analytical generalisation (and is therefore not context-bound based on the participant demographics and contextual variables). Considering Smith's (2018) argument, the importance of addressing analytical generalisability in terms of highlighting *how* the findings of this study will contribute to ECEC pedagogy and existing practice (refer to Chapter X for final discussion of findings).

Lincoln and Guba (1985) used different terminology to address issues related to *trustworthiness*. Defined as the *value* of the research inquiry, they claim to have four main features; credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. These methodological constructs have been accepted by many to create distance between positivist and interpretivist paradigms (Shenton, 2004; Yilmaz, 2013). In this study, each facet of trustworthiness was considered and provisions were made to support the methodological framing of the study. For the remaining part of the chapter, the research strategies concerning rigour which were deployed in the study are now discussed.

6.2 Credibility

Credibility within research seeks to find the balance between reality and the findings of the study (Shenton, 2004). Lincoln and Guba (1985) posit credibility as the degree to which there is "truth" (objective truth) within the findings. This study implemented a number of strategies in favour of demonstrating credibility. These included a period of prolonged engagement (as discussed in the previous chapter) where persistent observations took place, providing scope and depth of data within the study.

The study recruitment process and period of prolonged engagement were conducted with transparency and were beneficial to establishing a trusting rapport within the three-way co-researcher relationship (refer to the previous chapter). Adopting two study phases

with two data methods, facilitated *triangulation* across the data sample, where two forms of data (observations and interviews) were combined. Multiple data sources provided several modes of data interpretation (Cohen & Crabtree, 2008; Shenton, 2004). Shenton (2004) claims that establishing levels of trust ensures participants are genuinely engaged with the inquiry and contributes to achieving credibility. Moreover, Shenton (2004) describes *peer scrutiny* as a mode of demonstrating credibility. As part of my candidature, a number of opportunities arose where I presented and engaged with my peers and academic staff from the university. This invaluable experience provided fresh perspectives that were not only critically challenging but allowed me to view my methodology with a sense of detachment (Shenton, 2004).

Lincoln & Guba (1985) stated *member checks* as the predominant credibility tactic. Part of the VSD (Phase Two) provided a direct opportunity to check my interpretations (derived from Phase One) with the practitioner. This reflexive discourse became part of the second phase data set and verified the emerging themes from the recorded observations. Considering the nature of the VSD, I believe it would have been confusing for the practitioners if I had asked them to check the accuracy of the VSD transcriptions. As the VSDs were a semi-structured discussion and involved watching the video observations (taken in Phase One). As Cohen and Crabtree (2008) contest, reading transcripts can be confusing when the discussion is co-created, a subjective experience between myself and the practitioner.

6.3 Transferability

Lincoln and Guba (1985) claim transferability as the degree to which findings can be applied (transferred) to other contexts. However, similarly to most interpretive inquiries, demonstrating conventional generalisability is not a research objective as

previously stated. Nevertheless, Shenton (2004) and Yilmaz (2013) both describe the use of *thick descriptive* accounts, which explicitly portray the socio-cultural context of the study that can render the transferability to other social environments. Through addressing the *Who? Where? When?* questions within this chapter and the previous chapter, I have provided a thick descriptive account of the boundaries in which this study took place.

6.4 Dependability

Lincoln & Guba (1985) discuss how dependability is closely linked with credibility, claiming research that demonstrates credibility automatically establishes a level of dependability. Thus, dependability refers to the level of consistency and repeatability across the research (Cohen & Crabtree, 2008). To repeat this study, Shenton (2004) emphasises that all methodological decisions must be clearly described, and justified and the implementation of the study is strategically presented. However, Mercer (2007), argues that establishing repeatability is impossible, due to the subjective interpretive nature of the study. In agreement with Mercer (2007), I found my interpretation of the observations from phase one had fewer differences compared to interpreting the VSDs in phase two. This means that (apart from individual differences) across the six groups the classroom observation recordings were very similar, however, the context of the six VSDs was very different, and subjective experiences would not be identical if the study were repeated in an alternative centre. The aim was to form an analytical generalisation, rather than the traditional statistical generalisation as previously proposed by Smith (2018).

6.5 Confirmability

Lincoln and Guba (1985) define confirmability as the degree to which researchers' bias influences the research. Shenton (2004) explains how in essence confirmability concerns the notion of objectivity, whereby interpretive researchers must demonstrate

their findings to be a true representation of the participants' view, experience or ideas, as opposed to that of the researcher. Given that the concern of reducing bias within interpretivist research is a challenge due to its subjective and interpretive nature, recognising areas of bias was an ongoing process. Incorporating the practitioners' voices and subjective experiences into the previously recorded observations, contributed towards minimising the impact of my own researcher bias (Yilmaz, 2013). Moreover, I found the use of reflexive memos and an early declaration of my positionality (Chapter V) forewarned my position as the researcher, in addition to bringing the influence of biases to the forefront of analysing and interpreting the data (Yilmaz, 2013).

Chapter Summary

This methodological chapter aimed to present and describe in detail the philosophical positioning of the research inquiry by providing the methodological boundaries in which the study was conducted. The study chose Charmaz's (2014) Constructivist GT methodology to interpret practitioners' perspective of quality interaction. This chapter demonstrates and discusses the strategies that were adopted to ensure that this study was designed with transparency. A collaborative relationship formed the bedrock of this exploratory investigation and proved to be an integral feature in demonstrating the rigour and quality of the research process. The Constructivist GT methodology provided the flexibility of moving within the data as it occurred within the chosen early years provision, which was sensitive to the needs of the centre, the young children and practitioners taking part in the study.

Chapter VII The CGT Analysis

Chapter Introduction

As an extension to the previous Chapter VI, this chapter provides an interpretation of the analytical principles of Charmaz's (2014) version of Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT). Analysing data using a CGT approach is a powerful way to conceptualise what is happening within data, as the coding process bridges the gap between collecting data and unveiling an emergent theory (Charmaz, 2014). As Glaser (1978, p. 58) claims "coding is constantly stimulating of ideas". This chapter presents a step-by-step analytical guide on how participants' responses were analysed in line with CGT methodology. In doing so, this chapter guides the reader through the notable hallmarks of CGT analysis, prior to presenting a set-by-step audit of how transcripts were resolved in this study. Consequently, the purpose of this chapter is to bring clarity to what can seem a complex approach to qualitative analysis.

Chapter Organisation

This descriptive chapter begins with a summary of the research aim and a brief overview of the procedural part of collecting the data. The second section presents an interpretation of Charmaz's (2014) CGT analysis before the third section elaborates further on the application of the CGT analytical steps taken in this study. The last section includes illustrative extracts of the coding process, exemplifying the cyclical nature of analysing the data presented in Figure 5.

Section I The Hallmarks of Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT)

As previously presented in the Methodological Framework (Chapter VI), Classical Grounded Theory (GT) is recognised as a dominant research approach across varying

disciplines (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007) and is frequently referred to as a *methodology*, a *method*, a *technique* and a *paradigm* interchangeably (Walsh et al., 2015). Despite this, all three generations of GT (as discussed in Chapter VI) claim from the onset that GT follows an “integrated research strategy” approach to analysing the data (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Weed, 2009). Therefore, GT is recognised as a distinct categorical methodology (Birks & Mills, 2014; Pulla, 2016), which is known for its cyclical and non-linear processes consisting of a series of analytical steps to arrive at a theory (Birks & Mills, 2014; Wellington, 2015).

The Constructivist GT (CGT) analysis presented here aims to demonstrate how I explored, managed and interrogated my data segments. In doing so, breaking the data down into sections and assigning a series of codes that “explain how people enact or respond to events, what meanings they hold, and how and why these actions and meanings evolved” (Charmaz, 2014. p. 113). The illustration below (Figure 4) demonstrates how the data collection was conducted, whilst adopting the same cyclical nature that characterises GT research. As Glaser (in Walsh et al., 2015, p.594) clearly states “GT is just a set of steps that take you from walking in the data knowing nothing to emerge with a conceptual theory of knowing how the core variable is constantly resolved”. With this in mind, this chapter provides a clear account of how the data was managed and analysed following CGT principles.

1.1 An Inductive Process

Bogdam & Biklen (2007) affirms that the GT inductive process does not set out to find *evidence* in the traditional sense, alternatively, endeavours to capture emerging *data abstractions* conducive to forming layers of interconnected data. Thus, the idea of this study was not to try to “put together a puzzle who’s picture I already [knew],

[alternatively, I was] constructing a picture that takes shape as I collect[ed] and examined the parts" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007. p. 8). In this statement, Bogdan and Biklen (2007) served as a reminder that the study was not re-constructing what I previously knew about the PCI, alternatively, through a CGT approach, individual segments of data were collated, compared with one another to co-construct an interpretation of practitioners' responses.

In agreement with Glaser's (1978, p. 7) statement that "grounded theory is *ideational*; it is a sophisticated, careful method of idea manufacturing" captured the essence of my data analysis experience. As Walsh et al., (2015, p. 582) discuss, despite the misconceptions across the literature of what grounded theory entails, it should always be a process of "identifying a core category that also emerges from the researcher's data" intending to answer the research inquiry. This means that the study remained fixed on understanding the practitioners' perspective of the PCI.

As suggested by Erickson (1986, p.124), this interpretive exploration was governed by two key methodological questions; "what is happening here [in the research field], specifically [and] what do these happenings mean to people engaged in them?". Erickson provided the methodological focus of the study, which was to account for the specific action and meaning-perspective of the practitioners involved within the PCI. Therefore, as explained in the previous (Chapter VI), Charmaz's (2014) CGT approach was the methodology of choice. It was felt that eliciting understanding of the PCI through observation alone, would have provided an insufficient picture and therefore justified one of the reasons for listening to the voice of the practitioner.

Vollstedt and Rezat (2019, p.83) claim, grounded theory methodology is predominately selected when the research phenomena (in this case the practitioners'

perspectives of the PCI); lacks conceptual clarity, or unidentifiable relationships between concepts, where “the relevance of the concepts and their relationships has not been corroborated for the population or the context under study”. As the researcher, I followed the lead of the practitioners, whilst collectively sharing interpretations of what we viewed together.

1.2 Theoretical Sensitivity & Theoretical Sampling

From the onset, as the researcher, I possessed a level of *theoretical sensitivity*, defined as a set of ideas that guided the initial planning stages of the study (Weed, 2009) (as presented in Chapter V). In view of the lack of existing literature accounting for the practitioners’ perspective of the PCI, it is my perspective that accounting for practitioners’ perspective has frequently been a taken-for-granted area of pedagogy that is difficult to define and comprehend. Therefore, the aim of the study was to construct an interpretation of practitioners’ perspectives of quality interaction. As Charmaz (2014) clarifies, identifying my ideas early within the research process made way for covert meanings to emerge from the data. This implies that using CGT was a way to openly acknowledge parts of the PCI. Developing a multivariate approach to my thinking, and picking up on abstract ideas, phrases, words, and features of the non-verbal practitioner-interactive cues, facilitated my degree of open-mindedness throughout this research process. Having said this, as Glaser (1978, p. 3) highlights, the scope of my theoretical sensitivity was “limited only by the social-psychological limits of [my] capacity and resources”. This is where I found my previous foundation in psychology garnered a degree of analytical flexibility. I had an idea of *what I wanted to explore*, yet, I tried not to overlay my previously held assumptions of *what I wanted to see*. This is where I found parking my literature review to one side useful until I had completed the first few stages of analysis. The notion of

revisiting, questioning and comparing existing concepts with my data extended throughout the analytical stages of analysis. Having a degree of theoretical sensitivity at the start of the study, informed my decision to recruit a purposeful homogenous group of early years practitioners at different intervals. A decision that was guided by my previous understanding and experience of ECEC.

1.3 Constant Comparison & Memos

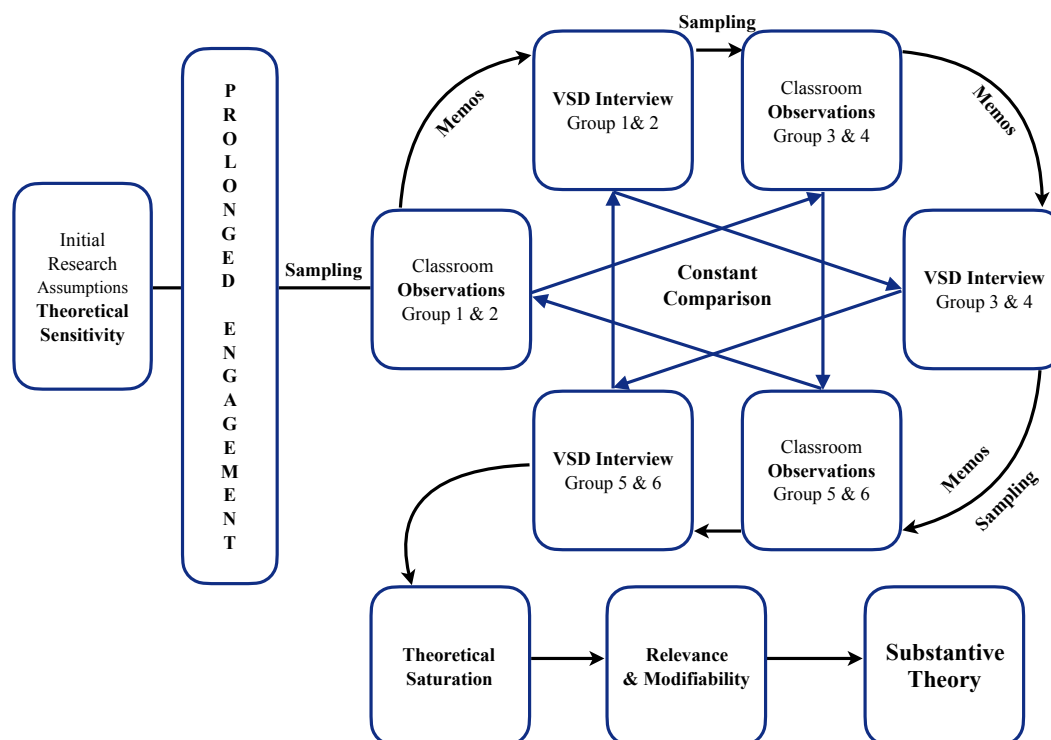
Constant comparison methods are described as the process of comparing data with data which progresses into comparing codes and categorical data segments with one another, prior to comparing concepts with existing literature (Cohen & Crabtree, 2008; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Mills et al., 2006; Weed, 2009). Charmaz (2014) prompts researchers to compare data throughout all three stages of the coding analysis, as it is beneficial to discover the analytic differences and similarities between data. Glaser (1978, p. 57) adds by stating “constant comparisons literally force generation of codes”. Therefore without repeating the comparison of data with data, a theory cannot be generated. As illustrated in Figure 5, the notion of moving, shifting forwards and backwards throughout the analysis process is one of the main features of all versions of grounded theory. A gateway to continuously checking for emerging ideas and concepts that may have been missed through different iterations of analysis (Charmaz, 2014; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). As Weed (2009, p. 506) claims “it is the constant comparative method that ensures grounded theory remains grounded”. Keeping track of the emerging analytical descriptions and ideas throughout the comparison process was supported through the use of *memo writing* (Weed, 2009). During the initial stages of analysing the video-recorded observations, I discovered memo writing was predominately descriptive. It did take some time to adjust to writing down the patterns that emerged, however, it

soon became a fluid exercise that aided in keeping track of the analytical developments that later informed my conversations with the respective practitioner during their respective VSD. I return to discussing the use of memos when presenting the stages of coding the data towards the end of this chapter.

1.4 Circular Notion of Gathering Data

In the attempt to build an interpretation of practitioners' responses, implied discovering relationships between the assigned constructs found within the data. Figure 4, illustrates the iterative, back-and-forth circular data collection process, where initial codes were assigned to raw data as a continuous circular process. In the course of recording and transcribing the data, memos supported each step of the CGT analysis and provided small prompts to clarify during the respective VSDs, thus, arguably becoming a method of members checking my interpretations of the video-recorded observations. Once each data component was transcribed, initial codes were assigned and analytical memos were created in response to continuously questioning the data segments.

Figure 4
Cyclical Data Collection



Note: An Illustrative view of the study process and the stages of data analysis.

1.5 Close Collaboration & Movement

One of the main features of CGT is the requirement to work closely with participants, in favour of collaboration with the data demanded forethought to be given to the development of the methods (Charmaz, 2014, 2015). As previously discussed (Chapter V), it was through proximity and sharing the environment with my participants, I fully appreciated the cyclical nature of this study. CGT research focuses on analysing spoken and written discourse, derived from a range of sources, such as written historical artefacts, interviews, focus group discussions, observations and/or audio recordings (Charmaz, 2014). With an analytical focus on all forms of language and communication,

Charmaz (2016) claims that it is through the use of methods, such as interviews, that data is generated in response to the researcher probing for responses. Once generated, data is carefully managed and guided through a series of analytical processes, thus, the act of assigning qualitative codes to participant narratives is a way of inductively categorising participants' language. Charmaz (2014) refers to this act as assigning “active gerunds” (as presented in Figures 5 and 6) through which abstract meaning and connotations are seen to be an active part of analysing the data. During the initial stages of coding the data in Phase One of the study (see Figure 5), I found this coding process was creative as Charmaz (2014, 2016) refers to the movement and shifting between the data as “analytic momentum” which in my case I found particularly freeing. Although I was not obliged to do so within CGT methodology, I decided to park my existing literature review to one side, until I had reached theoretical saturation. Charmaz (2014) argues, that being familiar with existing literature is a precursor to being theoretically sensitive. Using memos to record thoughts, issues, events and assumptions throughout the process permitted me to expedite and manage the theoretical development (Charmaz, 2014). I now turn to the series of analytical steps I took in analysing the data.

Section II The Analytical Audit

2.1 Managing the Video-recordings of the PCI

As Charmaz (2014, p.127) claims, the initial stages of questioning the data (in this case the PCI observations) and identifying significant processes, permit the “distill[ation] of data and directs further inquiry early on in the data collection”. Considering the research aim was to identify and explore the PCI from the practitioner’s perspective, I considered having a descriptive insight into the real-life picture of the PCI important and significant to stimulating the VSD interviews. The iterative process of carefully watching,

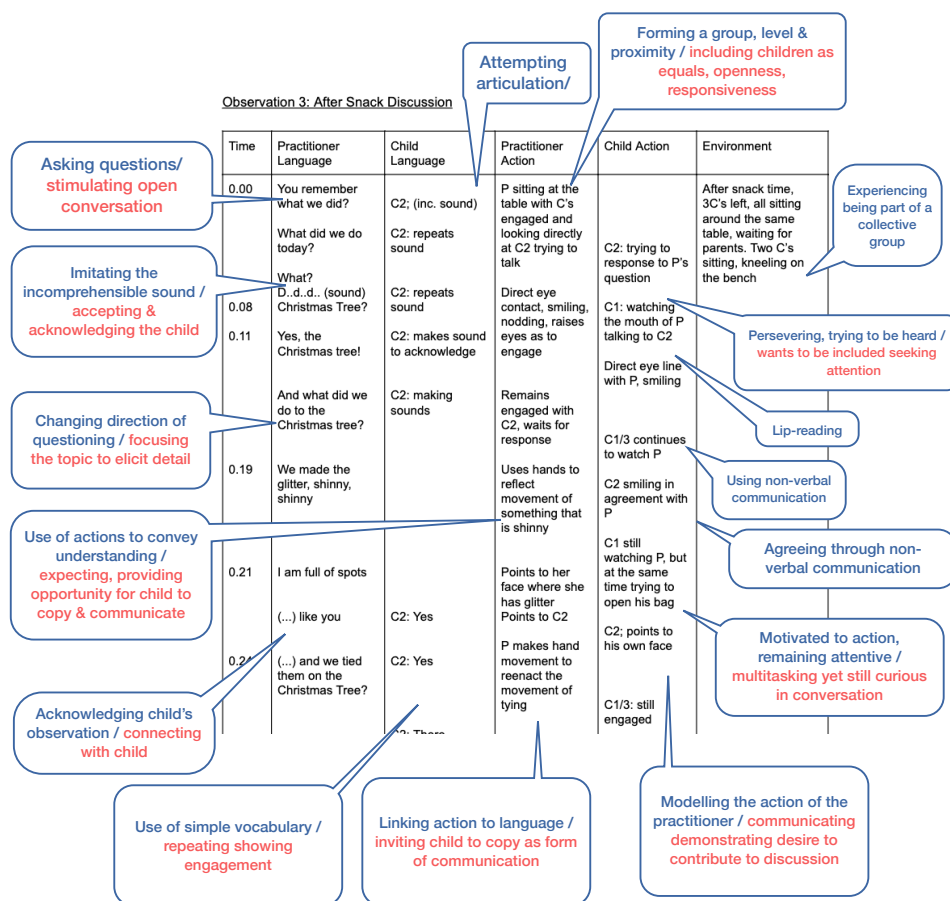
re-watching, transcribing, reading, re-visiting and analysing each recorded observation in a sense, provided a tangible image of the PCI to later discuss with the respective practitioner. Moreover, having an early interpretation of the PCI facilitated a comprehensive account of the observations. Conducting this timely pre-analysis of the PCI, indirectly yielded rich anecdotal data derived from the VSD interviews.

Once the first set of PCI was recorded for groups one and two, the videos were viewed several times prior to transcription, in order to become familiar with the contextual and embodied features of communication. The videos were edited until snippets of the PCI formed a continuous stream of PCI moments. At this primitive stage of the analysis, the aim was not to seek a specific *type* of interaction, alternatively, the goal was to capture short bursts of what appeared to be one-to-one and/or group communicative instances. For each practitioner/group, several short clips were recorded, alongside accompanying field memos in the form of a reflective journal after each recording. This process facilitated reflection concerning the situation at the time of the recording and furthermore formed tentative questions concerning the PCI which could be verified as part of the follow-up VSD. In view of CGT's aim of “generating new theory from data as opposed to testing existing theory” (Birks & Mills, 2015, p. 2), this first stage of the study became the spring-board to the second stage of the study, therefore, the recorded content was not used to verify any preconceived ideas concerning the PCI. The multimodal transcripts were subjected to an initial coding process as described by Charmaz (2014) where initial codes were assigned to the recording based on accounting for the “event by event” (as illustrated in Figure 5). The PCI multimodal transcripts formed part of the VSD discussion, resulting in the collection of vignettes presented in the next chapter.

Throughout the first phase of transcribing and carrying out plenary analysis on the observations for each practitioner (as demonstrated in Figure 5), the practitioners' viewpoints were not accounted for at this stage of the analysis. In effect, this preliminary stage of initial coding the PCI provided the foundations to construct each individualised VSD discussion.

The extract (Figure 5) demonstrates the active process of assigning initial codes to the observational recordings. As illustrated, the blue codes summarise descriptions of what was going on, which then progressed to assigning the red codes; characteristically theoretical and analytical in nature. According to Urquhart (2013), the action of moving from descriptive to analytic codes demonstrates the iterative and reflective process of GT analysis (Charmaz, 2017). A point worthy of note is that the initial coding process hinged on my interpretations, use of language, terminology and meaning. In the time of assigning initial codes for each of the classroom observations and following the guidance from Charmaz (2014) pertinent questions concerning the data were asked; *what is happening here? What theoretical category does this specific datum indicate?* (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser, 1978; Urquhart, 2013). As Charmaz (2014) suggests, identifying the actions within the data prevented coding the spoken language and actions of my participants as “people” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 116). Moreover, coding actions permit the researcher to interact with the data by gaining a perspective of what is going on, through “acting on [the] data” (p. 115). As Urquhart (2013) advises “get behind the lines” to see and feel what is really going on within the data and not to remain at a superficial level of coding and analysing data.

Figure 5
Observation multimodal transcript and coding



Note Multimodal transcripts are used to form descriptive vignettes as presented in Chapters VIII and IX. Table headings were adapted from Nevile’s (2015) description of embodied interaction (previously discussed in Chapter IV)

2.2 Managing the VSD & Practitioners’ Responses

Every VSD was transcribed (as illustrated in the extract in Figure 6), one at a time and a considerable amount of time was spent re-reading and re-listening to the raw data at separate intervals. I had previously underestimated the value and time in conducting this

process, as it was a lengthy process, however, a valuable one as it allowed me to listen to the rich contextual features of what the practitioners said. Having spent a considerable amount of time with each group, building the researcher-participant relationship prior to collecting the video observations provided a greater insight into the personality and expressions of the practitioners, this helped me considerably when it came to conducting their VSDs and transcribing their narratives. I did not feel at any time that I had misinterpreted their VSD content. Nearly all practitioners spoke of their own socialisation and their narrative was expressed with deep-rooted emotions that could only be heard through repeatedly listening to the raw audio recordings repeatedly. The interpretations of the data, the intonation in the practitioners' voice, expression, and emotions that were subtly weaved throughout the spoken content, often gave more emphasis to the emotional aspect of ECEC practice than the linguistic meaning of the words they spoke. Therefore, spending time with the data allowed me to access behind the transcribed written text.

2.2.1 Coding & Analysing the VSDs

The process of CGT analysis progresses through three steps of coding; initial focused and theoretical (Charmaz, 2014; Cho & Lee, 2014). Beginning with the first VSD analysing the first set of data, subsequently informed the second VSD data collection process and continued until the study reached *theoretical saturation*, defined as the point of analysis where nothing new is gleaned from the data (Charmaz, 2014; Weed, 2009). Once the study had reached the fifth participant, the data segments were no longer revealing anything new which is said to be the point in the study where saturation has been achieved (FitzGerald et al., 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Despite this and to ensure the right decision was made, an additional VSD (practitioner number six) was conducted. This last data collection point no longer contributed anything new, failing to

expand any further ideas, confirming the conceptual relationships that had previously been found intertwined within the categories

Figure 6

Video-Stimulated Discussion (VSD) transcript

15th January 2019

VSD THREE

Duration: 42.11 minutes

I: I am going to start recording now, and what we will do is play this, you should be able to hear it in a minute (*playing video observation*) (*Singing Polly has a Dolly on the video*)

I: OK, so what were you thinking there (*indicating the observation*) **How important do you think this communication is?**

P: It is important (...) because of the children (...) *as I'm bringing them closer to me that way, you know (...)* and *I'm getting ideas and feedback about their life and what they like playing with and I think that's the reason why I was doing this at this point, as I wanted to get information (...) also about the next topic (referring to the theme of the week)*

I: Very good because I notice you do this all the time, you always get them together to talk (*referring to the circle time that was witnessed every day as part of their routine*)

P: *Yes I love it (...) I love it (...) I love that (...)* and I tell them *"today we are going to discuss"* I actually use the word *"discuss"*, *"you know what we did today"* it is important (...) I feel yes, and like that they get to know something about me as well (...)

I: Exactly the fact that you've got a cat and it's a story

P: *Something about my life you know (smiles, laughs)*

I: Yes it is very important (...) I think we go into a bit more of it here as well let's see (*switches on the video*)

I mean getting them all to sit still like that is an art (*laughing*)

I: *Yes the number isn't so large over there (...)* but I do yes (...) I've always done this (...) *I always want the children to stay around me you know (...)*

I: Why?

Important to children
Producing intimacy & closeness
Seeking information, themes
Child's interests

Actively seeking the child's perspective & interests to relate to the educational topic/theme

Expressing professional satisfaction
Professional love
Use of discourse
Summarising the day events
Reciprocating knowledge, interests with children, forming bonds

Openness to sharing personal life
Sharing personal incidents/events, encouraging children to be interested and forming social bonds

Highlighting EYP:Child ratio
Part of routine
Encourages close proximity, intimacy with the children



Note Illustration of the initial coding process of VSD transcripts.

2.2.2 Initial Coding

The initial coding process is the first step of theoretical analysis. This consists of primarily organising the transcribed data into small manageable sections, with a view to assigning word-by-word, line-by-line or incident-by-incident initial codes (Charmaz, 2014). The codes are determined by the data rather than pre-existing categories. Glaser (1978, p. 57) begins coding by asking *What is this data a study of?* Charmaz (2014, p. 116) suggests beginning coding actions within the data, using simple and precise terms, whilst remembering to ask simple questions concerning the data; *What does the data suggest? What is pronounced? And what is left unsaid?* Repeatedly asking these questions throughout the initial signing of codes not only permits full emergence but maintains analytical focus, forcing emerging ideas from participants' responses. Once the tentative initial codes were in place, the analysis moved on to the second coding step.

2.2.3 Focus Coding

The second coding step is the focused coding process, through which narrow and focused attention is given to the important and recurring initial codes. Charmaz (2014) describes this second stage of coding as instrumental in extending the analytical view of the data, even when some codes may feel uninteresting. By extending the theoretical direction, the emergence of conceptual codes became visible, however, it was imperative that the links between the first and second coding steps were documented and accounted for. Accounting for these analytical steps, in and between data produced a consequential audit trail and scaffolded the succeeding analytical decisions.

After repeatedly revisiting the data, focused coding was initiated by collecting, gathering and colour coding similar initial codes. The assigned focused codes were predominately theoretical in nature when compared to the descriptive initial codes

(Charmaz, 2014). An overlap between the focused codes existed, the memos that were taken during the data collection phase informed the decisions taken in grouping the codes. In order to explain this point, an example of participants collectively discussing methods and strategies associated with developing a relationship with children became a predominantly focused code, appearing to play a significant part in practitioners' responses. This focus code later became an integral concept, forming the foundation of practitioners' professional beliefs. The VSD phase of the study was the opportunity to confirm with the participants what was interpreted from my position as the observer. Through watching and discussing the pre-recorded observations, I became aware that the descriptive initial codes assigned to the video observations became a reflection of practitioners' own view of child-rearing practices.

Figure 7*Initial Code to Focused Coding Process*

Initial Codes	Focused Codes
Working towards friendship, Building trust	Firm belief in the value of relationships
Expressing kindness & respect	Building Attachment Bonds
Stepping-stones process towards collaboration	Recognising a procedural approach to care
Creating working relationships	Demonstrating inclusivity/fairness
Creating social boundaries, Reciprocating emotions (fairness)	Understanding mutual respect
Actively reminding relationship bonds	Practicing attachment strategies
Using rituals/activities , Expressing intimacy (professional love), Respecting individuality	Managing group behaviour
Maintaining social connection across group	Providing learning opportunities
Providing opportunities for independence	Mutual Respect
Promoting acts of kindness, prosocial development	Collective working cohesion
Remaining aware of varying temperaments	Professional/Personal Reflection
Harnessing social ambiance, Encouraging modelling behaviours (peers), Occupying children, Influencing adult contribution/involvement	Identifying professional self
Regarding herself at a disadvantage (ratio)	Influence of lived experience
Reflecting, differentiating the personal & professional self	Influencing pedagogical factors
Reflecting as a parent/mother, Reflecting on own childhood/socialisation	Recognising value of professional self
Feelings of exclusion as child	Influencing professional factors
Being a role model, an example to child	Identifying self & connecting with professional self
Resisting dominance/authoritative caring style	
Being labelled by colleagues	
Empathising, Being proactive	
Finding comfort zone, Feeling satisfied (accomplishments)	
Aware of child's home/family influence	Reflecting on environment/expectations, Challenging demands
Recognising existing parenting beliefs/norms	Parent expectations
Individual child social challenges	Problem solving
Making progress with individualised social issues	Challenges to productivity/cohesion

Recognising the value of every child	Believing in the unique child,
Controlling issues related to power dynamics	Individuality
Physically positioning (non-overbearing)	Inclusive education,
Minimising feelings of isolation	Levels of organisational power & dominance
Recognising learning opportunities	Valued learning experience
Seeing the child as independent, able learner, agentic	Recognition of education within ECEC
Creating learning opportunities	Promoting and awareness of child-initiative play
Self-reflection, Child-initiative play	Creating child-centred spaces
Emerging child-centred interests	Child as able social actors, agentic
Recognising self-directed play in action	Creating memorable, teachable moments
Harnessing opportunities for learning, Providing space	
Creating memorable memories of learning experiences	
Including everyone within the groups	Reflecting on key aspects of professional role
Harnessing collective social collaboration	Prioritising social collaboration and construction of communication
Communicating effectively (non/verbal)	Organisational influence
Recognising the building blocks - socialisation	
Collective professional kindness, acceptance	
Foundations to working effectively with children	

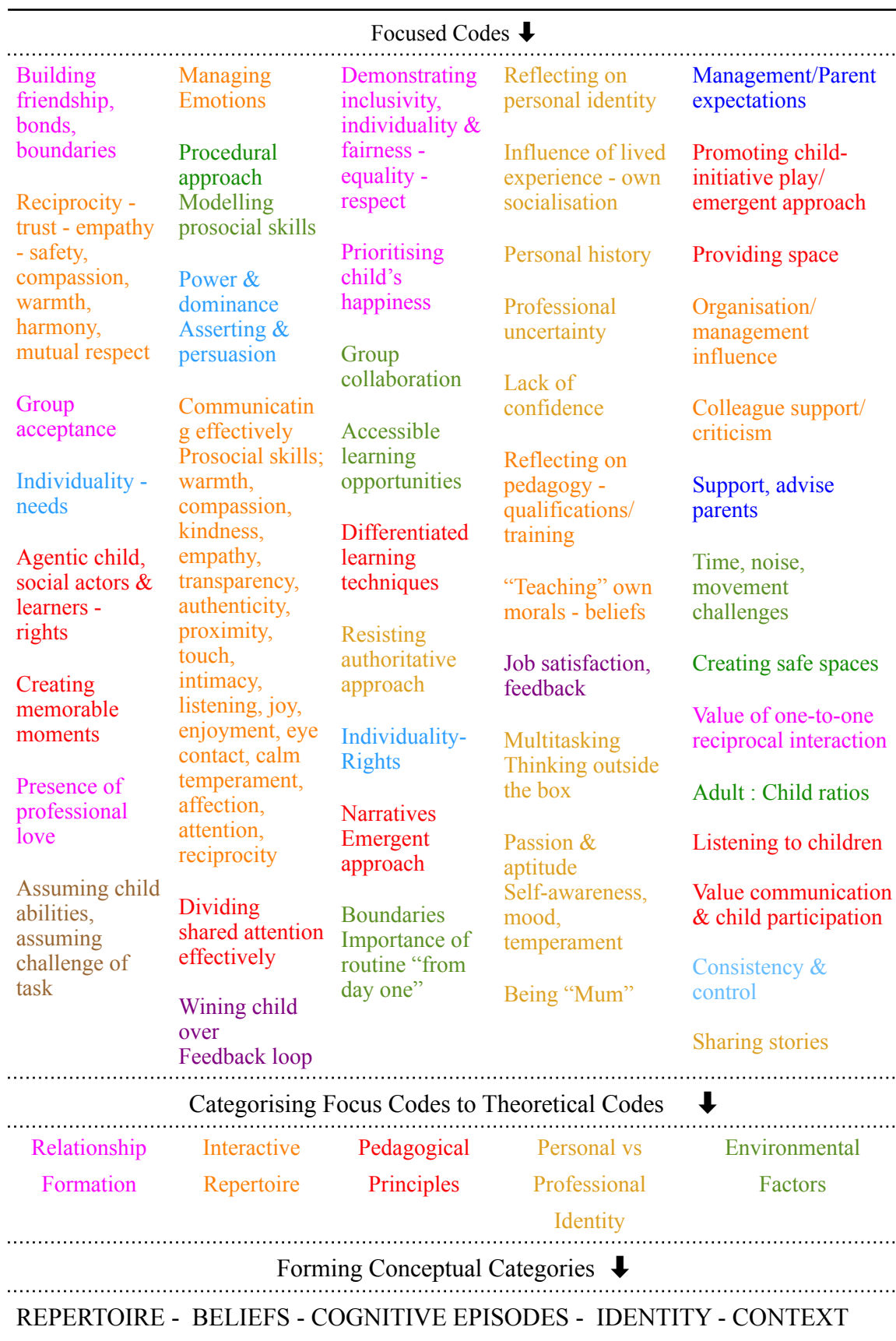
Note: Illustration of the initial coding process of VSD transcripts.

2.2.4 Theoretical Coding

The last and final stage of the coding process is theoretical coding. Charmaz (2014) describes how at this stage of the coding process, focused codes are reanalysed to find existing relationships between them. These relationships form links to categories with the potential of reaching a theory. This stage is characterised by sophistication and abstraction, where substantive codes are linked to existing or indeed new theoretical concepts (Charmaz, 2014). Once the focused codes had been assigned to all sets of data, categorising the focused codes became the next analytical step. Conceptually,

categorising the focused codes permitted the grouping of focused codes and the foundations to develop a conceptual approach to understanding the practitioners' perspective of the PCI. As Charmaz (2017) describes, forming the categories derived from remaining close to the data, my interpretation of the data, referring to memos, whilst forming links between the presented focused codes - in essence, it was a process of "grouping" and collapsing the focused codes into categories as illustrated in Figure 8 below.

Figure 8
From focused to theoretical codes and conceptual categories



As the last stage of the analytical process, the focused codes assigned to practitioners' VSD responses were grouped into conceptual categories, where the act of moving between the data, visiting and revisiting the large data segments, whilst practising constant comparison methods was a non-linear process. At times it was a messy process, resulting in repeatedly questioning my interpretation of the data, which, admittedly, was a daunting experience. This is what Timonen et al., (2018) described as a "time-consuming and convoluted" set of analytical challenges. Physically grouping and arranging data segments by hand, colour coding, whilst comparing responses facilitated the next step of the CGT analysis; assigning theoretical coding. Anonymising the data enabled focus, where extracting and interpreting exactly *what was going on? What was being said?* Rather than *who was saying what?* became the analytical mindset. This was the first step to theoretical abstraction. The act of shifting to conceptualising what the main theoretical ideas were, however, more importantly, considering the relationship between the concepts. This was achieved by initially describing what practitioners were saying to transition to a conceptual understanding of what they were reflecting *on*.

2.2.5 Grappling with Interpretation

According to Creswell and Plano Clark (2011, p. 209) interpreting qualitative research is the act of "stepping back from the detailed results and advancing their larger meaning". At the time I found "stepping back" challenging and I did question whether I was able to stand back given that I was close and integral to the data. At one point of the data analysis, I recall physically laying the data segments and accompanying memos on the floor and physically stepping back from it to see if this helped me gain a "birds-eye view" of the developing categories and developing themes. Although this physical act may have appeared foolish to an observer, as a novice researcher, it helped enormously as

it gave me a sense of perspective. A wider perspective to not necessarily see what practitioners were saying, but interestingly how they were articulating their responses and what was lying underneath what they were saying. Throughout the analysis and writing-up period, I found that re-playing the audio recording continuously aided in widening this view of the data. Once I had accomplished this stage of analysis, as the researcher I had to interpret how the research findings addressed the research questions. To successfully interpret the findings I visualised the act of interpreting as a research tool, one that enabled me to draw comparisons and conclusions concerning the conceptual categories and existing pedagogical approaches. This process occurred whilst simultaneously aligning my experience and knowledge of quality interaction, early years pedagogy, reflective practice and social psychology.

2.3 Representing Simulations as Vignettes

The purpose of incorporating vignettes into attitudinal research is to provide a proportion of uniformity, where they can be used to “mine pockets of data” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 81). They can be used for one of two purposes, either; to evoke a participant response by presenting a hypothetical descriptive account of a case, or to present a real-life snapshot of research inquiry (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In both circumstances, vignettes are characteristically “short descriptions of a particular circumstance, person or event” (Arthur & Nazroo, 2003, p.129) and represent the contextual features of qualitative research (Trainor & Bouchard, 2013). Erickson (1986) described narrative vignettes as presentations of “subsequent analytic reflection” (p. 121) of the research field. In agreement with Erickson, narrative vignettes pertaining to the classroom, observations were woven through the anecdotal narratives of the practitioners’ VSDs findings (as printed in the following chapter). Given the coding of the multimodal

classroom, observations were descriptive, I found using the initial coding of multimodal data to form vignettes provided the thesis with a contextual landscape in which to present the practitioners' perspective. Moreover, the vignettes demonstrate how the practitioner-child recorded observation indicated the larger study context.

Chapter Summary

The aim of this chapter was to clearly demonstrate an understanding of the analytical steps aligned with Charmaz's (2014) version of Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) analysis. In doing so, this processual chapter presents the hallmarks of grounded theory analysis whilst demonstrating how this study interpreted the required analytical steps, so as to arrive at a conceptual theory. As a reminder, the study aims were summarised and clear excerpts were provided to illustrate how the large VSD data segments were collated and analysed. It is hoped that this chapter provides an analytical overview, a paper trail that contributes towards demonstrating the academic rigour of this study.

Chapter VIII The Findings Part One

Chapter Introduction

This chapter presents the first part of two findings chapters. It marks an important point of the study by illustrating practitioners' responses to watching pre-recorded practitioner-child interactions (PCI). Practitioners articulated and conceptualised their understanding of quality interaction with children via Video-Stimulated Discussions (VSD). The preceding chapters have thus far; positioned the study within a Maltese Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) context, provided the origins and background to the study, furthermore, justified the purpose for conducting this study, given the under-discussed perspective of an early years practitioners and their conceptualisation of quality interaction with children. The methodological framework has been justified by the chosen methodology which was Charmaz's (2014) Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) informed the chosen study methods (as discussed in Chapter VI). This cyclical method of analysis previously presented (Chapter VII) provided a detailed description of the interpretative analytical steps that were taken for a CGT analysis. Therefore, this chapter is the first part of the findings and discusses the first three theoretical categories, whilst the second findings chapter (Chapter IX) presents the remaining four categories. Together both findings chapters lead to the final discussion (Chapter X) and study conclusion (Chapter XI).

The purpose of both findings chapters is to position the findings within an existing body of literature, in addition to, highlighting a contribution to knowledge. Therefore, it is important to clarify that the findings not only relate back to the previous literature (Chapters II, III and IV), furthermore, are compared to additional links to literature,

which have not been reviewed. As Charmaz (2014, p.305) discusses, existing literature can appear at different stages within a CGT study and can be a tool to demonstrate how existing “ideas illuminate your theoretical categories and how your theory extends, transcends or challenges dominate ideas” This chapter takes on an interdisciplinary structure, as the practitioners’ responses related to early years relational pedagogy at the same time being directly linked to practitioners’ psychological constructs, such as their professional/personal beliefs concerning early years socialisation.

Given the interpretative nature of the study, it was necessary to share the contextual features of the PCI, therefore, both findings chapters refer to vignettes which are descriptive snapshots of the PCIs. The vignettes enable the reader to take a glimpse at the unique moments of interaction that were shared in this setting. Furthermore, sharing these communicative moments preserves the energy and dynamism in which these interactions took place which further supports the categories that were assigned to practitioners’ VSD responses.

Chapter Organisation

Part one findings chapter is divided into four sections. The first section provides a summary of the interpretivist view of exploring the subjectivity of reflecting on the PCI. The following three sections present the first two conceptual categories, practitioners’ repertoire and beliefs. Each category is initially defined within the context of the study, thematically explained and embedded within the wider ECEC research field.

Situating the Findings

Previous chapters have so far discussed and described the PCI as an important attentive reciprocal communicative exchange between adult and child (Degotardi &

Pearson, 2009; Gooch & Powell, 2013). As discussed in Chapter III (Section 3), despite the prevalence and use of existing ECEC observational scales that attempt to quantify the quality of ECEC interaction, it remains notable that these interaction scales typically neglect the subjective and reflective view of the practitioner. This means that practitioners' conceptual understanding of how they perceive "quality interaction" between themselves and the children remains largely under-discussed from both an objective and positivist methodology (Bryant, 2010) (for examples of existing scales refer to Chapter IV, Section 3.3 Table 1). Practitioners' perspectives of quality interaction inevitably vary, however, their perspectives are an important part of the quality discourse, given practitioners' influencing role within the interactive dyad (Gooch & Powell, 2013). Despite the reliability and fruitful insights quantitative research provides, an interpretation of the adult perspective of the PCI remains under-discussed across existing literature, especially within Maltese literature. As this study has previously presented (Chapter IV) the quality of early years relational pedagogy, specifically, the intricacies of human dialogue cannot be easily quantified, nor operationally defined. Therefore, as previously argued (Chapter VI) an interpretative research approach captures the practitioners' unique subjective perspective of the PCI.

For the remaining part of this chapter and the chapter which follows, the sections present conceptual categories as the outcome of the Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) analysis. As Charmaz (2014, p. 239) discusses the nature of constructivist studies, this chapter demonstrates *how* participants conceptualised quality interaction and *what* practitioners discussed as a way of constructing meaning about their recorded actions during the PCI.

Section I Conceptual Category One: Practitioners' Repertoire

As previously discussed (Chapter IV, Section 4) the term 'repertoire' is defined as the diverse range of communicative and interactive behaviours a practitioner can demonstrate, referred to as their "holistic compilation of behaviours" (APA, 2020). Stern (2004) and Nevile (2015) describe features of primary caregiving and interactive behavioural traits (facial expressions, eye coordination and gestures) that are universal and are not necessarily rehearsed as "caregivers usually perform them naturally, almost unaware" (Stern, 2004, p. 24). When interacting with young children, the caregivers' communicative behaviour (their repertoire) adapts, evolves and becomes unique to the individual caregiver (Stern, 2004). Typically, when interacting with babies and infants, adults will overemphasise facial expressions, dramatise language and movement, elevate voice pitch and incorporate maternal speech, which is typically referred to as "motherese" and/or "infant-directed speech" (Gree et al., 2010; Paterson & Werker, 2003; Stern, 2002). As previously stated (Chapter IV,) this description of infant-directed communication is referred to as practitioners' repertoire.

The first conceptual category repertoire was assigned to the range of overt and subtle interactive behaviours that were captured during phase one of the study (refer to Chapter VI, Section 5.2 for a description of this study phase). As previously discussed (Chapter VII, Section 3) prior to conducting the practitioners' VSDs, I coded the video-recorded observations of the PCI beforehand. This provided the opportunity to verify how I interpreted their embodied interaction (such as their spoken language and physical action as an observer). The term repertoire was assigned to the features of embodiment as previously described by Nevile (2015) (Chapter IV), which included non-verbal forms of communication (eye coordination, facial expression, body orientation and hand gestures).

Rather than assigning the term embodiment as a conceptual category to practitioners' responses, alternatively, the term repertoire was chosen. This is because practitioners revealed more than features of embodiment as stipulated by Nevile (2015). Practitioners' attentiveness (described as their warmth, attention and intimacy) and practitioners' reciprocity (described as how they reciprocated interaction and sharing of interests) were extensions of simply discussing their features of an embodiment. Therefore, assigning the term repertoire encompassed all three features; embodiment, attentiveness and reciprocity as the main facets of practitioners' repertoire. As a starting point, this first section begins with practitioners' repertoire, including the three subcategories that were found in practitioners' responses. Each sub-category is presented in the following three sections (1.1 to 1.3).

1.1 Sub-Category One: Embodiment as a feature of practitioners' repertoire

The first subcategory of practitioners' repertoire is practitioners' embodiment. Apart from practitioners' use of language during their interaction with children, how they include their body movements, physical actions and orientation is according to Nevile (2015) called embodiment and forms part of practitioners' repertoire. As Hamington (2013, p. 34) describes, "embodiment is part of the human condition" and we use features of embodiment to care. From observing the PCI as the researcher, collectively, practitioners' embodiment was interpreted as their unconscious way of communicating with their children. It became apparent that several practitioners stated that they were unaware of the subtlety of their embodiment;

Look at your body language there, you have your arm around him and you followed what he was pointing to outside the window.

(Researcher)

Oh yes...that's right, but you know I'm really enjoying watching this, not because I'm seeing myself, obviously, but I don't even know I do these things automatically, as a carer should...kind of, it's not... I don't know even know I'll be doing this... It's like a good contact, of course, hugging I think it's important.. but I do feel that the children want this as well, they all come round for hugs, so they need it, it's their some kind of reassurance"

(Anne, extract 1.1.1)

A gaze, touch or hug of encouragement were typically unconscious recorded actions made by all practitioners, amidst the varied forms of non/verbal characteristics of communication, such as language and embodiment. This finding resonated with Cekaite and Bergnehr (2018) and Jones's (2016) description of the physicality of care which includes a stroke, embrace, gaze, and/or touch. However, despite the similarities between the physical characteristics of care presented, what remained an interesting point in Anne's response (extract 1.1.1), was her admitting that she was unaware of her embodied interaction. In this extract, Anne appeared surprised at her physical actions toward the child. In response to watching her recorded observation, Anne describes a degree of self-validation, from her perspective, she was "doing a good job" as a "carer should". This was an interesting point, as it suggests Anne was rarely mindful of subtle features of embodiment during her interaction and what effect it may have. This resonated with Fisher and Wood (2012, p. 126) who also found that video-recall shows practitioners "unconscious competence" allowing practitioners to become aware of what they "do" in practice. Despite being aware of the child's social and emotional need for affection, Anne noted that at the time she was unaware of exactly *what* she did (her embodiment). Practitioners were overt in recognising the importance of physically "getting down to their [children's] level" "listening" and "making eye contact" which resonated with the recent

findings from Sollars (2020b, p.11) who also found practitioners (within the local context) features of embodiment were indicative of process quality. Despite this, practitioners were not always conscious of the ways in which they were using their bodies during their interactions with their children.

1.2 Sub-Category Two: Attentiveness as a feature of practitioners' repertoire

The second subcategory of practitioners' repertoire is practitioners' attentiveness. As previously discussed (Chapter IV Section 5.1) attentiveness refers to practitioners demonstrating a warm, sensitive response to the needs of children (Brebner et al., 2015), however, attentiveness stretches beyond the physical and verbal forms of communication. It is where practitioners are completely engrossed in what and how the child is reciprocating and practitioners are seen to be 'engrossed' (Noddings 2005, p.16) by the child. An example of this is illustrated in Vignette One: Sharing Space Together (Figure 9).

Figure 9*Vignette One Sharing Space Together Anne's Group*

Towards the end of a busy day, whilst outdoors Anne thought of using the last ten minutes of the session to connect and share. Despite the appealing push-along toys and adjacent climbing frame, the children followed Anne's suggestion of sitting in a semi-circle on the turf area. Anne initiated a conversation by asking "who has animals at home?" after a slight pause, Amy responded with a "no". Anne noticed several children paused, looked at each other, Anne tried a different question in response to Amy's answer "what about a dolly, who has a dolly at home?" Amy repeated "no". Perhaps Amy did not understand Anne. "I have a dolly at home" shouted Jenny whilst running around the perimeter of the group-circle towards Anne, so as to sit next to her. One-by-one the other children soon followed by shuffling their way towards Anne, using the small amount of space in front of them to gain Anne's attention. Anne responded to the groups movement whilst smiling "oh be careful not to squash each other" Anne did not instruct them to return to their original seated position, she simply reminded them to share the space. Jenny also told Anne that the name of her dolly was Polly, to which Anne responds "Polly? Like Polly had a dolly" Anne smiled, knowing full well this was her queue to start singing the popular nursery-rhyme. "Shall we sing the Ms Polly had a dolly song?". The group eagerly joined in by emphasising the familiar key words and actions which had been sung many times before. By the end of the song, Anne added to the conversation a story about her own dolly at home. The conversation progressed to discussing the children's favourite toys they liked to play with.

This first vignette provides a snapshot of Anne's pre-recorded PCI and demonstrates how Anne would use the physical space (of the outdoors) to sit with her children to connect and engage with them as a group. Anne would call for the children's attention by saying "it's discussion time everyone" which signalled them to gather together. I often observed this spontaneous group activity, as Anne often did this when she felt that her group needed to re-group. This was an example of one of her ways of being attentive to her group. By proposing a simple question to the group, Anne provides an example of a

democratic discussion and ethical care. Anne believes that from a child's perspective, she is communicating authentically and with genuine interest. She is indirectly showing the children that she values taking opportunities to connect with them, resonating with Nodding's (2005) understanding of engrossment, being the full attention of the carer. It would have been perhaps easier to have let the children continue to play on the outdoor toys, given it was nearly parent-pick-up time. Instead, Anne took advantage of a spontaneous opportunity to model what she understands as attentiveness through shared dialogue, whilst bringing their day to a close.

This example of attentiveness supports tenets of Nodding's (1984) theory of care by demonstrating how Anne uses the physical space around her to create a democratic space for her group to equally connect, express interests and share the joy of a familiar nursery rhyme, albeit an unplanned activity. This is an alternative way of understanding practitioners' perspectives of attentiveness, as existing research describes attentiveness as practitioners' "availability, patience and firmness" when responding to the child's needs, especially during busy times (Pierrehumbert et al., 2002). Pierrehumbert et al., (2002) suggest that practitioners' attentiveness occurs only in response to the child's demands and is not necessarily something practitioners orchestrate as part of quality interaction. The findings in this study suggest that practitioners are mindful of their attentiveness and are not merely a response to a child's demand, practitioners equally use their attentiveness when orchestrating interaction with children.

1.3 Sub-Category Three: Reciprocity as a feature of practitioners' repertoire

The third sub-category of practitioners' repertoire is reciprocity. As previously discussed (Chapter IV, Sections, 2 and 4) reciprocity is central to interaction and forming social relationships (Noddings, 2013; Nuttal & McEvoy, 2020) and is understood as the

two-way process, the forward and backward nature of an interaction. However, for reciprocity to exist within the PCI, it is reliant on the feedback both parties receive from one another for the interaction to be sustained. From the practitioner's perspective, this can be challenging within a childcare context when infants are pre-verbal as interpreting features of embodiment is typically more subtle when compared to spoken language (Bertram & Pascal, 2002; Nyland, 2004). As part of their reciprocal interaction, practitioners commented that the feedback from children was predominately centred around recognising children's level of engagement. As an example (extract 1.3.1), Daniella discussed that children's level of engagement was what she describes as positive reciprocal feedback;

I really enjoy my work and when I see them like that engaged, I get so much satisfaction out of it... I love it... that they're all around the table, they're all there, all focused, it's really nice... I just love my job, that's the real satisfaction when you see them like that [*pointing to the recorded video of her children attentively smiling and waiting for Daniella*]

(Daniella, extract 1.3.1)

Daniella gains a great sense of professional satisfaction whilst observing her children engaged. Buber (1923) would have described Daniella's interaction as an *I-Thou* dialogue, a "living in the moment" mindful encounter (Aspelin, 2010). Having spent time with Daniella in practice it was apparent that she would be spontaneous in creating innovative activities for her group;

When I come in at 8:30 [am] they all come around me and Ms Maria says '*oh my god, they're always so excited when you come*' because they know I'm always inventing

(Daniella, Extract 1.3.2)

Daniella is a creative and enthusiastic practitioner who influences her children's level of engagement, as I observed on several occasions, the children copying Daniella's

level of excitement by mimicking her smile and laughter. I interpreted this as a shared experience between Daniella and her children. I also noticed that Daniella would exaggerate further once she saw her children joining in the laughter and excitement, this made her laugh further. I interpreted this as one of the ways Daniella was being authentic with her children and by doing so, she was showing the children how to enjoy being with each other. This was not only an enjoyable experience to witness, but this example of reciprocity prompted connectivity between the practitioner and the child. By sharing her joyful expression, Daniella was facilitating positive reciprocal interaction.

Practitioners used their classroom areas as a strategy to engage in reciprocal communication. Returning to the first vignette (Figure 9), the use of open spaces, floor areas and arrangement of classroom chairs/tables to form semi/circles were typical observable actions when practitioners wanted to initiate reciprocal conversations. Interpreted as a symbol of unity, a sense and feeling of togetherness were harnessed through physical actions and making use of their given area. In particular, Anne frequently commented on making use of her sense of space to facilitate reciprocal interaction (Extract 1.3.3). During my observations with Anne, I was struck by the number of times Anne would facilitate a group discussion almost every time she entered a new classroom/outside area. Anne would frequently begin and/or end the session time by holding a reciprocal discussion as illustrated in the first vignette (Figure 9). Whilst reflecting on the video observation, Anne commented;

I always want the children to stay around me because like that they can express their ideas to make us closer in a more, confidential, close way... confidential kind of, they feel like I'm coming down to their level if anything... they are giving me... they are giving me their time and I'm getting them more as well like that"

(Anne, extract 1.3.3)

The notion of ‘being close’ ‘sharing’ ‘getting down to the child’s level’ and ‘giving each other time’ were a few of the reflections given by practitioners as they described features of reciprocity. Practitioners were aware that creating intimacy and closeness formed part of the practitioners’ repertoire. In comparison, whilst watching the pre-recorded observation Anne explained that reciprocity and closeness are more effective in quality interaction when compared to being “above” or “superior” to the children;

I don’t want to be above them, I want them to treat me as a friend, not somebody superior... except when I have to show certain discipline and then I have to... you know be a little bit... but no, especially during playtime like this, why not?

(Anne, extract 1.3.4)

In this example, Anne (extract 1.3.4) demonstrates an awareness of what Buber (1923) described as the *I-It* relation, an objective way to address the child that results in hampering their relationship (Aspelin, 2010). Other practitioners supported Anne, by justifying the importance of “closeness” as a means of building a trusting bond between adult and child so the child would be encouraged to reciprocate. There were strong similarities between the practitioners’ responses as they all agreed that physical proximity was socially and emotionally beneficial to themselves and their children.

Section II Conceptual Category Two: Practitioners’ Beliefs

The second conceptual category refers to practitioners’ *beliefs*. At its most basic a belief refers to convictions individuals accept to be “truth, reality or validity of something” (APA, 2020a). In the context of this study, the term belief was assigned to practitioners’ perspectives that quality interaction was based on developing the practitioner-child relationship. During their VSDs, practitioners discussed dimensions of building relationships with their children as an outcome of quality interaction. Their

belief in forming relationships, and friendships and believing that they, as an adult had to be accepted by their children before securing relationship bonds and boundaries were associated with quality interaction. Practitioners also believed in the importance of leading by example, modelling positive communication and forming trusting bonds between themselves and their children. Therefore, practitioners' beliefs encompassed five sub-categories; *forming relationships*, *forming friendships* and *forming bonds and boundaries*, *forming trust* and *modelling behaviour*. Each sub-category is presented in the following three sections (2.1 to 2.5).

2.1 Sub-category one: Forming relationships as a practitioner's belief

The first sub-category of practitioners' belief, was the belief that forming relationships with their children was the foundation of quality interaction. Every practitioner expressed a belief in working with their children to establish social relationships. This supports existing literature, which claims that relational pedagogy is characterised by the interconnectedness of the relationship that is central to communication (Degotardi et al., 2013; Papatheodorou & Moyles, 2009). In this context, forming relationships is the action practitioners take to form a reciprocal dialogue. Despite practitioners agreeing that forming relationships did not happen immediately, nevertheless, the strategies of forming relationships were prioritised in ECEC practice based on the belief that relationships were integral to sustaining quality interaction. Findings supported Sollars (2020b) who also found locally that practitioners viewed relationships as indicative of process quality. Furthermore, Degotardi et al., (2013) found that practitioners were acutely aware of the mutual and reciprocal nature of their relationship with young children in setting. Practitioners were acutely fixated on establishing social connections with their children, as opposed to a reliance on technical

behavioural management skills that formed part of their professional training. Similar to existing research by Sollars (2020b), practitioners in this study also believed that expressing professional love was a strategy for forming relationships and quality interaction. Practitioners expressed their belief in professional love, where every child was almost “cherished” in practice (extract 2.1.1).

I actually love them all in their own unique way, you know... I have enough love for everybody.

(Mary, extract 2.1.1)

Participants were overt with their expressions of love for their children, which supports existing literature that supports the “language of love” is present amongst practitioners in the setting (Rouse & Hadley, 2018, p. 166). It could be that this is a reflection of the Maltese culture (previously discussed in Chapter IV, Section 2) that children are seen as active citizens of society, deserving of secure and loving child-rearing practices (Abela et al., 2014). Furthermore, as previously discussed (Chapter IV, Section 2) southern European countries, such as Malta are regarded as a high-context culture (Hall & Hall, 1990), meaning that communication is associated with the open display of emotions and affection when compared to northern European countries. As Recchia et al., (2018) discuss, the discourse of love remains taboo in most ECEC contexts (Page, 2011, 2018) and yet very present in this study. As Elfer et al., (2012, 2018) discuss, appropriate physical and emotional contact with young children is predominately part of the key person’s role, however, it would be unwise to assume that there is a shared understanding of what constitutes appropriate contact as culture plays an important role on how embodiment is understood. In agreement with Elfer et al., (2012, p. 63) striking the

balance between inappropriate emotional and physical contact and insufficient contact is a tightrope that many ECEC practitioners, managers and authorities find themselves on.

Whilst practitioners expressed the importance of establishing intimate bonds and professional love as being the reciprocal relationship between them and their young infants in setting (Page, 2011, 2014, 2017a, 2018, 2021) , they were able to differentiate between their love for the children in practice and their parents' love. They did not try to compete with parents, they were aware that parents also wanted them to love their children:

hugging I think is important, I let them kiss me as well you know, I try not to kiss them so much on their face, just in case I have a cold or something... but at least on their head, you know and the parents have seen me do this and nobody has ever objected... I do feel that the children want this as well... they all come around for hugs, so, they need it... it's their some kind of reassurance... otherwise, they just move away... we are not here to replace the parents, far from it

(Anne, extract 2.1.2)

Anne's understanding of professional love resonates with Page's (2011, 2018) and Rouse and Hadley's (2018) proposal that parents welcome a practitioner's pedagogy of love in their absence. Furthermore, supports Sollars (2020a) who found that parents want practitioners to love them "as though they were their own" (Sollars, 2020, p. 8). The findings suggest that practitioners (within the local context) have not been negatively impacted by what Page (2011, p. 313) describes as practitioners' fear of "child protection reprisals". The practitioners in this study showed an understanding of engaging in affection with their children as a response to their need for love in ECEC settings. Despite Page's (2018, p. 123) point that such "moral panic has evoked a trend towards the further devaluation of love in many policy circles" it is evident that the practitioners in this study have not been impacted and neither do they appear intimidated by the importance of

professional love within ECEC. Alternatively, practitioners did not hesitate to discuss their feelings of professional love;

I just love kids...I just love kids, and I think as I've said, you've got to love kids otherwise, it's no good and they will feel it in you...I mean they know that I love them, and I give my 100%.

(Daniella, extract 2.1.3)

By her admission, Daniella (extract 2.1.3) made the point that from her perspective, she believed that professional love must be visible and present within quality interaction, otherwise, her children would instinctively doubt her professional commitment. As Lynch (2007, p. 553) reminds us, "being loved and cared for is not only vital for survival in infancy but throughout human life". Daniella's statement supports the duality of professional love, that is both child and practitioner socially and emotionally benefit from the reciprocal nature of professional love. In doing so, the practitioner takes on *loco parentis* by fulfilling the child's needs for care, love and intimacy (Page, 2011, 2018).

This is typically reflected in the practitioner who, in response, can equally gain a sense of belonging and acceptance from the child. Despite the scaremongering, yet provocative nature of love discourse, how love is conceptualised within the PCI is typically absent. As Lynch (2007, p. 551) discusses, there is still great uncertainty about the notion of love in society, as love has historically been granted minimal "political importance". It is possible that Freud's (1956) misinterpretation that love is an action has contributed to the ideology of love only being a private concern that does not warrant societal importance.

Alternatively, practitioners (extract 2.1.2, 2.1.3) in this study referred to love as an adjective that influenced their relationship with their children. Their articulations of love were examples of ethics of care, put simply, their expressions of love were their way of connecting their "humanity to the humanity of others" in this context, their children

(Cicovacki, 2017, p.81). The findings further support Osgood's (2010) claim that both ethics of care and emotional labour are the cornerstones of practitioners' role within the practitioner-child interaction and therefore key markers of quality interaction.

2.2 Sub-category two: Forming friendships as a practitioner's belief

The second sub-category of practitioners' beliefs, was the belief that forming friendships with their children is part of forming quality interaction with their children. In the context of this study, friendship was understood as a close and supportive relationship that was built on mutual respect and trust between the practitioner and child. From "day one" practitioners stated that it was important (to them) to establish a working relationship with the children, beginning with friendship and acceptance. Mary (extract 2.2.1) believed that changing the child's perspective of her role was an important step toward forming the relationship before becoming a teacher;

I spent all of October working on relationships because they knew me, but I was not their teacher, I was just an acquaintance in the hall corridor, so I wanted to become their friend first and then the teacher...because I believe in that.

(Mary, extract 2.2.1)

A typical belief practitioner commented on being empathic toward the child's perspective before the start of the term. In this example, Mary appears to not only prioritise building friendships with her new group but also plans several activities for her children to engage with;

We have the pinky promise as well and we go like this [*imitating action with the joining of individual little-finger*] that's what I worked first, before anything else... before any rules, we had the pinky promise and it's going to stay there [*indicating to the visual craft on the classroom wall*] ... so we are friends now.

(Mary, extract 2.2.2)

The "pinky promise" Mary (extract 2.2.2) describes is a craft that Mary carries out on the first day of term with every new group of children. Centred around the idea of

friendship, Mary encourages her children to draw, colour and scribble around their hands as a physical representation of their group friendship, a friendship promise to be kind and considerate to each other. Mary claimed that having the tangible craft display, representing each child was a reference point that Mary could direct her children to in times of conflict and challenging behaviour. Mary explained that when the child/ren disagree with one another or find it difficult to regulate their emotions, they would be reminded of their pinky promise by pointing to the displayed craft. Or when they are away from the classroom, Mary would physically place her hand and the child/rens' hands together whilst simultaneously linking their small fingers together. At the same time, Mary would verbally remind the child/ren of their "pinky promise". This was something Mary described as a "tried and tested" activity, where over the years, Mary had reflected on the value this brought during her interactions with her children. This resonates with Recchia's (2012) claim that promoting positive relationships by adjusting activities during transition phases harnesses building positive relationships. There were times during group disputes when I would often see Mary intervening with the "pinky promise" reminder, which was an effective conflict resolution strategy and a productive way of sustaining friendships and quality interaction. Mary implies that her children demonstrate agency to form friendship bonds with peers and Mary during this activity. This supports Katsiada et al., (2018, p.947) finding that young Greek children will "exercise agency to form close relationships with emotionally available adults" and are active participants in forming quality PCIs.

Figure 10*Vignette Two Being Accepted Leah's Group*

Sat around the afternoon snack table, Harry, Lewis and Jack only remained. Leah saw the opportunity to interact. The children remained seated, Leah sat alongside with her arms open on the table. Initially gaining the eye contact of Harry opposite her, she directed her speech to the others and asked *“What did we do today?”* A typical question used to initiate an interaction. In response, mumbles and sounds came from the children, *“A tree!”* shouted Harry. Lewis sat opposite, making incomprehensible sounds, he repeated, he wanted to join in. Lewis persevered changing his intonation, modelling Leah as she changed her intonation. *“Yes, the Christmas tree”* she said joyously. Lewis focused on Leah's mouth as she spoke. Watching and trying to imitate Leah's gestures, Lewis raises his eyebrows, copying Leah and follows her glance. As Leah described the activity, waving her hands to imitate the shininess of the glitter they had been using earlier on that day. Lewis became excited, smiling as he remembered using the glitter. He copies Leah pointing to the residue of glitter spots on her face. Lewis is unable to see his own face, yet, he still points to his own face to inform Leah that he too has glitter spots on his face (although he didn't). Lewis was preverbal, but still reciprocated interaction in his own way. Leah shared his excitement, they had connected, sharing the joyous memory of the day.

Mary's perspective (extract 2.2.2), Leah (extract 2.2.3) further commented on her belief that forming friendships with her children started with her being accepted by her children. Vignette Two; Being Accepted Leah's Group (Figure 10) was one of the observations that Leah reflected on during her VSD. It was apparent that Leah believed that taking the opportunity of sitting with her children to interact was a strategic way to build quality interaction with her children. As the researcher, my perspective only accounted for Leah's observable behaviours, not Leah's conscious sense of belonging and group acceptance. This was only revealed during her VSD and leaned into the notion of being accepted by her group. In her comment, Leah interprets Lewis's non-verbal reciprocity as acceptance;

They got used to me now, now I know, I have them, I can talk to them now, they are secure with me now...before until they got to really know me, they use to talk together and then if they really need me, and look at me they ask me something, but now look... [*pointing to the video recording, of Vignette Two*]... no, no, I can talk to them and it's before the end of the term... that is why it's nice to talk to them because they got it out... they start telling you, on their own... they start talking to you like a friend I'm one of them... they're talking.

(Leah, extract 2.2.3)

Until Leah was accepted by her children, she had felt excluded from what her children had previously shared. Given that most of her children were preverbal, Leah reflected on Lewis's reciprocation and acknowledged that through his imitation he had accepted her into the group. A shared communicative connection that Leah believed was the beginning of their friendship.

2.3 Sub-category Three: Forming bonds & boundaries as a practitioner's belief

The third sub-category of practitioners' beliefs was the belief that relationship bonds and boundaries were important components for forming relationships and friendships with children. In this context, *bonds* refer to the relational connections between practitioner and child, based on their shared experience, interests and feelings. Whereas, *boundaries* are the limits, the remit in which the practitioner-child relational bond exists. Practitioners believed that relationships and friendships were sustained through forming bonds and boundaries with their children, which as a result contributed to establishing quality interaction with their children;

The bonds, to me, is the most important thing... bonding with then children, that's the first thing, the first step a carer should do, you have to do, the bond and then when you have a strong bond with them, you can do whatever you like. "The bond is the most important, this before teaching them the letters, then the numbers... to teach them, your bond and socialising between themselves and between you, that's for me that is more important than numbers... to have control over them in a nice way"

(Lucia, extract 2.3.1)

Having probed Lucia by asking her what she thought she had to do to create the “bonds” with her children, from her perspective, she believed that;

You have to study their characters individually... that’s what you have to do, for the first two months, that’s what I try to do, I try to make that bond with them.... It takes you quite a while to study their character...he’s like that, she’s like that... so you have to go down to their level, and change your moods all the time.

(Lucia, extract 2.3.2)

Lucia believed that observing the individual child enabled her to create a social bond and, furthermore a relationship and friendship with her children. The findings resonated with Brebner et al., (2015) who found that practitioners used the practitioner-child relationship as a tool to successfully meet the child’s social, emotional and physical needs. Lucia claims taking time “to study” and interpret individual characteristics provides the necessary information about the child’s character, likes/dislikes and interests. Although Lucia is unknowingly describing an emergent pedagogical approach (MEDE, 2015), the gathered information would certainly support the quality of Lucia’s interaction. However, Lucia was insinuating that there was a process that she followed, a systematic approach that involved assigning labels to the characters of her children. Believing in this method, Lucia then expressed that this approach was not only instrumental in developing relationships, furthermore, was the gateway to managing her group and positioning herself within the group. Lucia believed that securing relationship bonds gave her *carte blanche* to work alongside her children, resonating with Brebner et al., (2015) previous findings. At first glance, Lucia’s approach (extract 2.3.1, 2.3.2) may appear to be an objective way to describe her interaction, however, as the findings in this study have been interpreted so far, the existence of professional love remains present within practitioners’ responses. With this in mind, an alternative way to interpret Lucia’s (extract 2.3.1, 2.3.2)

understanding of relationship bonds is to consider Lynch's (2007) description of "love labouring". Defined as the practitioner's ability to remain in the moment psychologically, physically and emotionally with the child. Love labouring can be demanding for the practitioner as it requires complete attentiveness and engrossment (Noddings, 2013a). Such a demanding responsibility includes a degree of emotionality and solidarity from the practitioner's perspective. As Lynch (2007) discusses, all of us need care and support to flourish, therefore, unless the practitioners' perspective of love labouring is not accounted for as part of assessing process quality, then a comprehensive view of quality interaction remains biased. Anne (extract 2.3.3) additionally articulated her beliefs in creating boundaries and routine;

Routine is important, I was always taught routine is important and when I apply it, I can see how important it is... definitely"

"Starting the group of children from day one, showing them what you want and then, they just carry on.

(Anne, extract 2.3.3)

During her VSD Anne (extract 2.3.3) frequently referred to the functionality of routine and boundaries, not only as a classroom management strategy but also as a way to "get to know" her children and how "they get to know me". Anne infers that boundaries provide both practitioner and child with mutual understanding and, furthermore, allow practitioners to set clear and respectful relationship intentions with their children. Through an established routine, Anne believed that her "tried and tested" method of setting boundaries taught her children about mutual respect and her expectations of them whilst attending the centre. When Anne was asked whether she believed anything would prevent her from setting boundaries, she replied;

What would stop me?... if the children were too disruptive if they're all over the place, that's why it's important to get them from day one... that way, they know

they have to come and sit down, and then the rest of the time free play... but they know that they have to have a few moments like that.

(Anne, extract 2.3.4)

In response, Anne (extract 2.3.4) clearly states that boundaries allow her to show the children that there is a time and place for free play and times when she requires cooperation by sitting down and focusing on the task at hand. These early lessons of pro-social behaviour are important within an ECEC setting as they expose the child to acceptable, appropriate behaviour and the practitioners' expectations. Boundaries can motivate the child to cooperate when activities typically involve the child's opinions and contributions. Boundaries also produce a sense of safety for the child and can harness peer learning and contribute towards healthy professional relationships, where working in partnership with the child becomes an enabling learning environment.

2.4 Sub-Category Four: Forming trust as a practitioner's belief

The fourth sub-category of practitioners' belief reinforcing quality interaction was the belief in creating a sense of trust and security with their children. As previously presented in this chapter, practitioners developed trust through the relationships they formed with children in practice and that trust was integral to securing social bonds. The notion of trust repeatedly featured across practitioners' responses, resonating with Bowlby's (1988) secure attachment theory, that trust is established through the "reliability" and "sincerity" of the caregiver. Findings were also aligned with Nodding's (1984) ethics of care. Practitioners were acutely aware of the child's rights to a safe, secure and engaging environment, therefore trust was a belief that guided practitioners' interaction. The findings suggest practitioners understood the value of building trust to make the child feel safe and secure through quality interaction:

How would you describe your relationship with her?

(Researcher)

Trustworthy, very trustworthy... at the beginning she was crying, a little but then... she settled about a week she settled. I reassured her that Mummy is coming back all the time and I let them express their feelings because they are distressed at the beginning of the year... very distressed.

(Maria, extract 2.4.1)

How does that make you feel?

(Researcher)

Oh...I feel sorry for them... I really feel sorry for them...because it's hard... it's hard, it's tough and I say you look at these children are so small, they don't deserve this... for example, Bill, he still doesn't go... he was very reserved... yes, and he wouldn't let me touch his back or his hair, you know... like when we are going out from a room, I touch them, to guide... but now it's ok... now he's ok, but still he doesn't go to the toilet here... he spends all that time and he's never had an accident... he is very reserved.

(Maria, extract 2.4.2)

They are enjoying it... and so am I, because you feel like one of them, sometimes... like this, you see the work from their eyes because when they cry, I think that sometimes the world expects too much of them, too much of them.

(Maria, extract 2.4.3)

Can you tell me a bit more about that? What do you mean?

(Researcher)

They have to get up early, they have to have something [*breakfast*] before they come, maybe they don't feel like it... then they have to come to school... they will be with other children... sometimes you don't want to see other people and they have to... things like that.

(Maria, extract 2.4.4)

In her VSD, Maria (extract 2.4.1) spoke about the goal of building a trustworthy relationship with her children by continuously reassuring her children both verbally and physically. During her discussion, Maria (extract 2.4.2) shared her feelings of compassion when she was asked to elaborate on how it made her feel to see her children upset. It was clear from her response (extract 2.4.2) that Maria was not only empathetic toward her children's upset but also demonstrated patience in allowing her children space to settle

into the setting and build trust with her over time. Building trust with young children was not immediate and meant that practitioners had to be tolerant if they were to build quality and meaningful interaction. As Maria (extract 2.4.3) elaborates, she too has to feel a sense of enjoyment to fully understand her child's perspective, therefore this is another example of how reciprocity is integral to sustaining quality interaction.

Whilst it is evident that Maria (extract 2.4.4) demonstrates a great deal of empathy for her children, empathy plays a part in establishing a sense of security and trust with children. Being empathic, therefore allows practitioners to resolve conflict and enables the distressed child to feel heard. An interesting point Maria (extract 2.4.4) made was how she viewed the social expectations and demands on children attending the centre. Maria not only understood the child's perspective but could relate to spending time away from social encounters. This also questions Maria's thoughts on young children regularly attending provision, especially those younger children enrolled on full-day programmes.

Maria was the first practitioner to comment on (from the child's perspective) the demanding nature of ECEC and the potential negative influence adult expectations have on the child's sense of security when attending provision. Although Maria believed trust and security were part of quality interaction, her comments (extract 2.4.1) demonstrate her awareness of the emotional toll that young children feel when attending childcare. Maria would comment that young children attending their first out-of-home experience would inevitably "feel very scared". On the whole, all practitioners spoke about building trust as a belief they all shared and they all experienced similar methods of trying to "settle the children" as they started provision. Lucia (extract 2.4.5) also commented that sustaining trust was an ongoing practice, it was not necessarily something practitioners

had to accomplish only at the start of a new placement. Inferring that to sustain quality interaction and reciprocal relations, maintaining trust was a core belief that continually guided practitioners to act on providing a secure and trustworthy environment for their children;

I always tell them, *'now we going to put our bags on the shelf and then we go here, and then we go there'* and there's always a reason why... what we are doing... a story they can follow, they know where we are taking them because they don't like otherwise... it's safe.

(Lucia, extract 2.4.5)

As Lucia (extract 2.4.5) demonstrates, talking with her children about the small actions she and her group routinely did was her way of informing and supporting her children and building trust. Lucia never assumed that her children always knew where they were going, despite the number of times many of the activities and transitions from room to room became routine. Her attention to detail in providing the children with a “story” was an effective strategy for creating a sense of security and building trust. The findings concerning practitioners' belief of trust were important as existing research suggests that elevated levels of the stress hormone cortisol have been found to increase throughout the day of those children attending a full-day programme, and not necessarily an indication of simply settling into childcare for the first time. As Gunnar et al., (2010) discuss, a substantial number of boys and girls showed regularly increased levels of cortisol throughout the day. Their explanation included findings that process quality, specifically over-controlling and intrusive care was the main predictor of raised cortisol when compared to structural facets of quality. The authors also commented that over-controlling care was predominately evident in centres where children experienced several transitions throughout the day moving between activities and areas. The authors stated that continuous changes “overtaxes their coping capacities as the day progresses” (Gunnar

et al., 2010, p. 864). This is an important point that deserves further attention as it is unknown the degree to which practitioners are aware of the potentially damaging effects of elevated cortisol levels, whether they recognise changes in children's behaviour as a response to being overtaxed and how to manage numerous changes throughout the day. Becoming aware of this risk and how it can impact trust can potentially minimise the risk of elevating children's cortisol levels. Just because children may not be showing overt signs of distress, such as crying, does not imply they are not feeling overwhelmed.

2.5 Sub-Category Two: Modelling behaviour as a practitioners' belief.

The fifth and final sub-category of practitioners' beliefs is related to practitioners modelling prosocial behaviours, such as caring for others. For example, practitioners model mutual respect, and caring behaviours in the hope to influence their children's prosocial development. All practitioners spoke about establishing mutual respect between themselves and their children, in addition to, the importance of modelling caring prosocial behaviour. An example of how practitioners modelled mutual respect is demonstrated in Vignette Three, In the Garden Mary's Group (Figure 11). This recorded observation was conducted outside during Mary's session of free play. Mary's vignette provides a snapshot of modelling mutual respect in front of her children.

Figure 11*Vignette Three In the Garden Mary's Group*

In the outside mud-kitchen, Adam, Lewis, Jack and Karen were washing plastic fruit whilst role playing cooking activities. On the opposite side, their peers were building a camp fire. Mary continuously moved from one group to the other. Her interaction was less intimate, compared to indoor activities, she seemed pre-occupied by giving her time to each individual child. *“OK listen everybody, we will have to pack up soon, OK?”* she said. *“Kitchen tools together please”* indicating the end of the session. *“No, no, no”* called Adam, he did not want to finish his game. *“Yes, I am afraid sweetheart, so the fruit can come back in here”* Mary said shaking the plastic container. Adam continued to protest *“No, no, no”*, his voice becoming louder. Lewis continued simulating the activity of rolling food on the work-top, he had heard Mary's request, yet he continued playing. Conforming, Jack started to place the objects in the container *“Wow, what a good job you did, the fruit are so clean, well done Jack, look everyone, Jack is helping”* Mary said, making an example of Jack, in the attempt to encourage others to follow. Turning her attention to Lewis, Mary asked *“Are you cooking Lewis?”* he responded *“Yes”* to which Mary replied *“Yes, yummy, what are you cooking?”* the child paused to think about his answer. Karen responded on his behalf *“We are cooking cars”* Mary questioned *“Cooking cars?”* as she manoeuvred around them, tidying up the play objects. Mary asked them both *“Do they taste yummy?”* as she continued to tidy, still directing her attention to both children. Lewis responds *“Yes”* as he handed Mary the rolling-pin. This conversation became a distraction for Adam, who by the end had stopped protesting and was eager to help to tidy-up.

Towards the end of the session, Mary's request to start tidying up was met with Adam's overt refusal and protest. Instead of over-controlling the situation by demanding Adam finish, instead, I observed Mary take a caring approach to the situation by leaning into communicating with Adam's peers who stood close by. I witnessed Mary use Jack's agreement to help tidy up as a modelling example, which raised Adam's curiosity and almost encouraged Adam to do the same. By doing this, Mary is caring for Adam's conflicting emotions and shows him that she values and respects Jack for helping, Mary is

also respecting Adam's wishes to remain playing for a few minutes longer. Mary waits patiently for Adam and does not walk away from the situation, instead, she remains nearby so that Adam does not think Mary has ignored him, but she is patiently waiting for him to join his peers and help tidy away the toys.

This is an example of Mary modelling mutual respect and care, furthermore, Mary is making an example of Jack's prosocial behaviour in the hope that Adam will witness Jack's cooperation and understand that this was the response Mary sought. As Noddings (2005, p.22) discusses, modelling is an essential part of moral education. Just because the children in Mary's group are too young to be carers themselves, they are still learning what it means to care for others, simply by witnessing Mary modelling mutual respect and care for Adam's feelings. Mary indirectly acted and responded to Adam's needs, whilst simultaneously providing a model of how to care for others within her group.

Chapter Summary

The first part of the findings presented in this chapter suggests that practitioners' responses to conceptualising quality interaction pivot on their subjective view of the social relations they hold with their children in practice. Contrary to the dominant discourse that Western ECEC practitioners are deterred from having close relationships with children in practice (Ailwood, 2007; Degotardi & Pearson, 2014; Degotardi et al., 2017; Elfer & Page, 2015; Page, 2021) practitioners (in this study) did not articulate or impose distance between themselves and their children. Alternatively, they embraced professional love by predominately focusing on their micro-facets of interaction; professional repertoire and beliefs. Their responses presented here demonstrate an awareness of the many ways of forming relationships as the fundamental basis for

building meaningful quality interactions and connections. The first part of the findings presented here is further built on in the following Chapter IX The Findings Part Two.

Chapter IX The Findings Part Two

Chapter Introduction

This chapter presents the second part of the findings chapters and continues the preceding (Chapter IX). Part one has thus far presented the first two conceptual categories (practitioners' repertoire and beliefs) which were interpretations of practitioners' responses to reflecting on their practitioner-child interactions (PCIs) as part of their Video-Stimulated Discussions (VSDs). This chapter presents the remaining four categories that were interpreted and analysed using Charmaz's (2014) Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) methodology. As previously discussed (in Chapters VI and VII) the practitioners' responses were interpreted as an outcome of conducting a series of VSDs, hence, this second part extends the previous findings chapter by presenting the remaining categories prior to the following discussion chapter. The third category practitioners' *cognitive episodes* was assigned to practitioners' reflections on shared moments of interaction that were characterised by allowing the child to lead the interaction, experiencing moments of shared thinking and episodes of managing the emotions of their children. Cognitive episodes thus represented practitioners' awareness of scaffolding the child's learning. The fourth category was practitioners' *identity*, whereby practitioners recalled previous life experiences of being labelled and their own experience of socialisation and motherhood. Practitioners' responses additionally included a fifth category that referred to their view of the wider ECEC setting context, which was assigned the term *centre context*. This fifth category included their view of group ratios, their use of the classroom space, parent partnership and how these wider facets impacted their perceived stress and overwhelm. Furthermore, this chapter presents

the final category as the theoretical category, which is aligned with Charmaz's (2014) final stage of coding in a CGT analysis. The theoretical category practitioners' *emotionality* presented in this chapter differs from the previous five conceptual categories, as it demonstrates a higher level of grounded theory analysis by proposing a relationship between the existing conceptual categories. It is by nature "integrative" (Charmaz, 2014) as practitioners' emotionality combines practitioners' repertoire, beliefs, interaction episodes, identity and setting context together to construct an interpretation of how practitioners approach quality PCI.

Chapter Organisation

This chapter is divided into four sections, each representing the remaining three conceptual categories; interaction episodes, identity and centre context and the theoretical category, practitioners' emotionality. Similar to the previous findings chapter, the categories are in turn defined within the context of the study, thematically explained and positioned within the existing ECEC research field.

Section I Conceptual Category Three: Practitioners' Cognitive Episodes

The third conceptual category code was labelled *cognitive episodes*, as it reflected practitioners' awareness of supporting the child's learning. This was largely based on a key finding from EPPE and EPEY projects (Siraj-Blatchford et al., (2002, 2004) as previously discussed in Chapter II, Section 3). In this study, the author found that educators' pedagogical interactions (within a +3-year setting) were typically divided into two categories; cognitive and social. Cognitive interactions were found to be more prevalent in their study and were described as practitioners' direct teaching, monitoring and sustained shared thinking. Whereas, social interactions were described as practitioners' encouragement, behaviour management, social talk and care. (Siraj-

Blatchford et al., 2002, p. 50). The prevalence of cognitive pedagogical interactions is likely to reflect the age of the children who participated in their study. Whereas so far, part one of the findings has revealed that practitioners predominately focused on social pedagogical interactions, possibly reflecting the age groups of younger children in this study. Having said that, this second part of the findings interprets practitioners' episodes of cognitive practitioner-child interactions as described by Siraj-Blatchford et al., (2022). I found that using the term episode, instead of interactions for this category, made a distinction as the term 'episode' refers to either "a single event or a group of" occurring events that take place over a period of time (Cambridge University Press & Assessment, 2022).

The practitioners recalled several stories of communicating with their children throughout their VSDs and there were many contextual similarities between their responses. The similarities were grouped into three sub-categories of cognitive episodes each representing a moment in time where both practitioner and child engaged in a quality interaction. The following three interaction episode sub-categories included practitioners; following their child's lead and interests, sharing a moment of sustained shared thinking and lastly, episodes of managing the emotions of children in everyday practice.

1.1 Sub-Category One: Following the child's lead & interests as a cognitive episode

The first sub-category *following the child's lead and interests* was assigned to those cognitive episodes of quality interaction that practitioners described as times they encouraged children to engage in play-based activities and learning. In this particular centre and across all groups of children, the centre management would typically assign a

“theme of the week” for practitioners to follow. A theme of the week (as described by Daniella, extract 1.1.1) is said to be predominately a practitioner-led activity that is less child-initiated when compared to the early years project-based emergent approach. As previously discussed (Chapter V, Section 2) the emergent approach is described as a self-directed, inquiry-based approach to teaching that is responsive to the interests of young children (Jones, 2012; Nxumalo, et al., 2018; Wood & Hedges, 2016).

Despite having an assigned theme (topic), Daniella (extract 1.1.1) demonstrates an awareness of encouraging her children to “open up” with their ideas, inferring that Daniella was still aware of the benefits of the emergent pedagogical approach to early thinking skills development.

We have a topic, so we work on that, we find what we can give them, we have an introduction then we simplify, they are two years old, so first we have to simplify and show them... you can't expect them to know what you are doing, so as many stages as I can... first show them visually... show them toys... open us as much as you can, they will then show you where they want to go with it.

(Daniella, extract 1.1.1)

Although in this example, Daniella (extract 1.1.1) was given a broad topic to cover with her group, Daniella describes her small-step visual approach to introducing a new topic, which encourages her children to develop their ideas through active engagement. It appears that without taking smaller steps to help guide her group, Daniella assumes that her group are too young to grasp broader topics. This finding aligns with Degotardi & Davis (2008) who found educators perceived children's developmental experience as a co-construction between them and the child. Daniella (extract 1.1.2) also states that she prefers to be prepared beforehand and to have an element of structure to help navigate her sessions.

you have to know what you're going to do... when you come to work and you just don't have anything prepared

(Daniella, extract 1.1.2)

In comparison to Daniella's preference for a pre-planned structure, Anne (extract 1.1.3) and Mary (extract 1.1.5) expressed the importance of following their children's ideas.

Yes, I let them lead as much as possible.

(Anne, extract 1.1.3)

Anne's (extract 1.1.3) recognition that she allows her child to "lead" indicates that she is fully aware that her children have agency to make decisions associated to their choice of activity.

Mary (extract 1.1.4) was less concerned with prior planning and tended to give less emphasis on structuring the given topics, instead, Mary embraced the emergent approach and was often seen following the child's interests. In her VSD Mary (extract 1.1.4 to 1.1.6) reflected deeply on following the child's lead as we discussed the recorded observation of her group playing outside in the mud-kitchen garden area (refer to the previous chapter, Vignette 3 Figure 3). As part of our discussion, Maria (at first) expressed uncertainty about her role when she was outside with her children and tried to justify her actions. She believed that part of her role was ensuring that she took time to connect with every child as she believed demonstrating a level of attentiveness remained important. This was an interesting point, as after re-watching the observation Mary soon became aware that her children were less reliant on her and that her children were content in being preoccupied with their play.

It's a little bit harder to get along with everyone [outside], but I try to include as many [children] as possible although here they create their own games as well...so they're calm. I'm not conscious that somebody has been left out they really enjoy this, and me... I enjoy this as much as they do, I'm going around trying to involve everyone, I can actually stay [still] and they'll do it, they don't need me actually.

(Mary, extract 1.1.4)

They come up with their own ideas, they don't need me, things they love, they love from last time...I depend on them creating their ideas, I don't need to prepare myself because they come up with ideas and then we say 'Let's give them some more, like the emergent curriculum...we can open from their suggestion.

(Mary Extract 1.1.5)

I try to do what they want to do, you know unless it's a hopeless idea, usually, it isn't...they come up with smart ideas, actually, it's not because they're young they don't have smart ideas... and they are fast.

(Mary Extract 1.1.6)

In her comments, Mary (extract 1.1.4 - 1.1.6) is aware that her children (although older than Daniella's group) thrive when allowed to explore and initiate their play, either as an individual or in friendship groups. Mary (extract, 1.1.6) is aware of the child's emerging ideas and sees their contribution as an integral part of quality interaction. As Mary reciprocates by following the child's lead, what is interesting is Mary's realisation that the children's emerging ideas vary in intensity, as Mary explains (extract 1.1.5), the outdoor area triggers the children's curiosity and innovative ideas, and they are less dependent on Mary. In Mary's case, she expressed feelings of surprise and gratitude in recognition of the children's independence and development. Mary's comments are supported by existing research by Salomon and Harrison (2015) who found that practitioners who recognised young children to be active in their own physical and cognitive development were more likely to provide optimal and scaffolded learning opportunities for their children, similarly to what Mary has described.

1.2 Sub-Category Two: Sustained shared thinking as a cognitive episode

The second sub-category of *sustained shared thinking* was assigned to those cognitive episodes that practitioners described as times they shared an “ah-ha” moment with their children. In agreement with Siraj-Blatchford et al., (2002, p.8) the “ah-ha” refers to moments of sustained shared thinking, where both practitioner and child equally acknowledge a moment of attunement. This shared episode occurs when a practitioner and child are connected in dialogue, where problem-solving, completing a task, and sharing a communicative exchange extend the child’s learning and understanding (Purdon, 2014). Throughout the video-stimulated discussions, participants reflected on moments they shared with their children in practice. Although practitioners did not specifically articulate these episodes as sustained shared thinking, their descriptions and recollections echo the “ah-ha” moments.

These cognitive episodes are often examples of when practitioners (Daniella, extract 1.2.1) felt that they “clicked” with specific children and that they could observe their children acquiring new skills and competencies, especially with those children who at the beginning were reluctant to reciprocate and interact. For example, the following vignette (Figure 12) of Daniella “clicking” for the first time with Lucy during a simple activity was discussed during her VSD. Daniella commented that Lucy was a very shy child who took the time to reciprocate with Daniella in a one-to-one interaction. This vignette is an example of a sustained shared thinking interaction, where Daniella not only followed Lucy’s lead but shared a moment of scaffolding the child’s confidence in rolling the plasticine whilst simultaneously connecting with each other through dialogue.

Figure 12*Vignette Four Sustained Shared Thinking Cognitive Episode Daniella's Group*

Daniella positioned herself at the activity table and encouraged the children to play with the plasticine and tools. The children rolled and flattened their lump of plasticine, watching Daniella do the same. Lucy tentatively stood next to Daniella watching her. Lucy was shy in character and spoke very little. *“Roll-it, roll-it... good girl! Let's make it big so we can cut some shapes”* Daniella said. Daniella noticed Lucy watching her lips as she spoke, trying to imitate her sounds silently. Lucy remained on task, gaining confidence, expressing excitement as she peeled back the moulded shapes from the table without them tearing. Lucy's face beamed as Daniella congratulated her efforts *“Good girl, Brava!”* Lucy became distracted by a small fly flying past her as she quietly said *“Bumblebee!”* Daniella responded *“That's not a bumblebee, that's a fly... do you remember the song of the bumblebee? How did we sing the song?”* Lucy smiled, triggering Daniella to start singing the nursery rhyme. Simultaneously Daniella moulded her piece of plasticine to resemble a bumblebee sitting in her hand. Mesmerised by Daniella's singing, Lucy attempted to imitate the words. Lucy knew the song and would wait in anticipation for Daniella to sing. At the end of the song Daniella opened her hand to reveal the squashed bumblebee (the plasticine) Lucy remained gazing at Daniella whilst together they shared a moment of sustained shared thinking, for a few seconds they were in sync, affectionately smiling at one another. Daniella offered the squashed plasticine from her hands to Lucy, Lucy smiled, gently took Daniella's offering and proceeded to sing *“I'm-am-ma...squashing...ma-baby-bumblebee...me-ya...ya...ya”*

As we watched this video-recorded interaction during her VSD, Daniella commented;

From then [on], she was starting to warm to me... they need to feel safe with you... she's trying the language... look... she has clicked.

(Daniella, extract 1.2.1)

It is here that Daniella could see how Lucy had developed her confidence and physical skill of rolling the plasticine with Daniella's help. Daniella was aware that her role of modelling the rolling action would show Lucy how to do it but also invite her to participate. As Pardon (2014, p. 270) discusses thinking is a primary process as “there is

no doing without thinking”. Practitioners were aware that their actions and their modelling contributed to cognitive episodes of sustained shared thinking;

When I ask them something, after about 10 minutes, they tell me exactly what we have done, they remember... so they are learning as well.

(Leah, extract 1.2.2)

In 20 weeks... even their speech has improved they're sitting...their concentration span is expanding... as they got used to us now as teachers.

(Daniella, extract 1.2.3)

Leah (extract 1.2.2) and Daniella (1.2.3) provide examples of the feedback they gain from the children to determine (from their perspective) whether learning is taking place. In Leah's (extract, 1.2.2) comment she describes children's memory recall as her confirmation that learning has taken place. Similarly to Daniella's (extract 1.2.3) understanding that learning is taking place, she observes changes in her children's behaviour.

Even with our preparation for the concert... if I show them the steps now, they're going to remember them slowly... slowly, I build up, it's repetition.

(Anne, extract 1.2.4)

Anne (extract 1.2.4) further elaborates on her understanding of children's development of shared thinking skills as she comments on the value of repetition as a strategy of learning. Anne also implies that modelling the actions of her children and being part of the learning process, equally scaffolds the learning process. The active involvement of the practitioner, whether that is modelling actions (such as the dance steps in Anne's comment, extract 1.2.4) or sharing enthusiasm for an activity, (such as excitement in Daniella's comment, extract 1.2.5), practitioners' recognise the part they play within a cognitive episode of sustained shared thinking;

You have to get them interested in it... give them things that will keep them and then what's coming next, what's she going to do... I want to see, and then they're like more, more, more.

(Daniella, extract 1.2.5)

There were moments during the VSDs when practitioners openly admitted that sometimes during their cognitive episodes, they assumed that their children would find the task difficult. In her comment, Danelle (extract 1.2.6) recognised that from the children's feedback, during an episode of sustained shared thinking her children were interested in the challenge that was presented to them. This feedback encouraged Danielle to pursue the activity and therefore suggests that an episode of sustained shared thinking is a reciprocal process, whereby both the adult and child are equally learning from each other;

I didn't realise how difficult it [the activity] was until I picked it up... and then I thought I should not have done this... and then actually, I saw they're loving it... they're loving the challenge, look... [*pointing to the recorded interaction*]... look at their faces (laughing) it kept them busy for a good 45 minutes, for kids this age.. this was amazing.

(Daniella, extract 1.2.6)

The practitioners' responses presented in this section were interpreted as examples of practitioners' engaging in sustained shared thinking with their children and demonstrated how practitioners conceptualise the varying ways children learn and what role the practitioner plays during cognitive episodes. As Bruner (1997) and Lourenço (2012) claim, Piaget's (1951) theory of learning claimed that young children's learning was based on a *solitarily* cognitive process of acting on the physical environment. However, practitioners' responses demonstrated periods of sustained shared thinking as part of the PCI. This resonates with Vygotsky's (1986) theory that learning (knowledge) is constructed by participating in a social interaction, where there is emphasis on the collective (Wells, 2001). The practitioners' responses presented in this section, suggest

that practitioners' cognitive episodes of sustained shared thinking are a mixture of both young children's self-initiated thinking (for example Mary's extract 1.1.5 and 1.1.6) and the scaffolding role of the practitioner (for example Leah, extract 1.2.2, Daniella extract 1.2.5). The point here is not to deem one approach better than the other, the aim is to highlight that practitioners responded slightly differently when engaging in sustained shared thinking and it is dependent on how they interpret the feedback from the child (for example Daniella's extract 1.2.6). Therefore, practitioners must be reminded that their level of involvement will be based on making an intuitive judgement as to how much support (scaffolding) the child requires. Moreover, as Siraj-Blatchford et al., (2010) highlight, practitioners' attentiveness is vital to making an informed judgement on how best to scaffold the child's thinking skills. The important aspect of sustained shared thinking is how the practitioner portrays his/her features of communication, specifically language, as language exposure and acquisition are positively correlated to the child's thinking skills development (Purdon, 2014). Therefore, practitioners' use of language and quality interaction is directly linked to the child's ability to develop his/her thinking skills (Sylva et al., 2010). The episodes of sustained shared thinking (presented here) are snapshots of quality interaction.

3.3 Sub-Category Three: Managing emotions as a cognitive episode

The third sub-category of cognitive episodes refers to how practitioners described moments of supporting the child during moments when they needed to manage their emotions. One of the greatest challenges practitioners discussed was the "managing" of children's characters, temperaments and "challenging" behaviour. Especially with those children who were preverbal and who had experienced separation anxiety, which is a

common occurrence in childcare settings (Elfer & Dearnley, 2007). Almost every practitioner commented on the challenge of managing the behaviour of their children and believed that it was part of their role as practitioners to create and maintain a sense of order within their groups. It can be argued that the notion of managing and/or controlling children's behaviour that does not meet the expectations of either the practitioner or the wider childcare settings expectations is somewhat a punitive and outdated lens that continues to marginalise practitioners' ability to be compassionate and responsive to children's needs. As Armstrong (2021) discusses, educators were led to believe (through their socialisation, educational experience, professional training and qualifications) that a set of ideas for "managing" a child's behaviour exists.

The practitioners in this study articulated that "persistence" coupled with "reasoning" providing the children with a "story" were strategies they had repeatedly used in their attempt to "manage behaviour". This was a strategy that Lucia (extract 1.3.1, 1.3.2) had learnt through lived experience that allowed her to step away from the punitive behavioural lens that she witnessed as a child.

When you have a small group, you can handle, them, much better. When they are eating their lunch, I don't let anyone get off their seat until the others are ready... because as soon as they see someone playing with something, they stop eating, they say "*I'm full up*" which I know...as they get distracted... and that's what happens... they are used to me, my routine and they all sit down nicely around the table, having their lunch, they talk between themselves chatting.

(Lucia, extract 1.3.1)

How did you get to this stage?

(Researcher)

By persisting on them, by telling them "*no, you have to sit down, finish your lunch and you have to wait for your other friends to finish their lunch as well*" I tell them "*it's not fair for your friends to see you playing while they are still eating*"... Not just a simple "*no*" ... there's always a reason why, what we are doing, a story they

can follow, they know where we are taking them, they don't like it otherwise... it's safe.

(Lucia, extract 1.3.2)

Lucia (extract, 1.3.1 - 1.3.2) describes an episode of how she manages her children's behaviour during snack time by insisting on a routine in the hope that her children will learn to modify their behaviour and comply. A repeated routine that Lucia perceives sets behavioural boundaries and expectations of what the children can and cannot do, which Lucia believes informs and encourages the children to comply. Although this may appear a regimented approach toward what is a social activity (eating together), Lucia repeatedly expressed throughout her VSD that routine is fundamental to the management of behaviour during a timed focused activity, such as lunchtime. From sharing this discussion with Lucia, I interpreted that one of the reasons Lucia adopts this approach is because she feels the added pressure of time during the lunch break. This is because practitioners (in this particular setting) work on a room rotation basis, where every group has a restricted time slot in each area of the setting. Therefore, practitioners are aware that there is no room for "wasting time" as they have to ensure that all of their children eat in a timely manner. Having said this, I observed Lucia during her lunchtimes and I noticed that her stern approach enabled Lucia to also join her children around the table and snack with them. Lucia would then open a group discussion which typically centred on talking about their day and what activities they were going to be doing after their lunch. Lucia was an experienced practitioner who had learnt through experience that young children become restless once they are finished eating, therefore remaining in control of the interaction by placing herself at the table and central in the lunchtime conversation was a strategy Lucia used when managing behaviour. As part of her

behavioural management strategy Lucia (extract 1.3.3) applies her reasoning when faced with other examples of managing the child's emotions;

He usually does a tantrum...like a bit like you saw today, over nothing you know he gives out a tantrum for nothing and then I reason things out with him. If you talk with him quietly and nicely, you know... he forgets all about it quickly... but he was ok then.

(Lucia, extract 1.3.3)

He used to cry and scream and shout all the time, it took me quite a while to win that boy, and to take him over...but now he's ok... he listens now if he doesn't have distractions...if they don't have any distractions at all... you can do whatever you like...because I know their characters.

(Lucia, extract 1.3.4)

Lucia (1.3.3 - 1.3.4) reflects on separate instances of challenging behaviour, it was evident that she had developed a firm, yet fair approach toward viewing "tantrums" and "outbursts" as the child's expression of need. She was aware that her ability to "win" the child's acceptance resonated with existing literature that advocates the value of positively reflecting on "challenging behaviour" as opposed to assuming the child is being defiant (Armstrong, 2021; Nash et al., 2016). Similarly, Maria (extract 1.3.5) expressed that having a compassionate lens in times of managing emotions was a useful approach. Maria demonstrated a sincere concern for the child's character development, as opposed to focusing on what was causing the child's emotional dysregulation at that moment in time.

Like what Bill did, today he is giving us a lot of trouble and we are worried because of him, we don't want him to grow up being like that, he's fine [but] he's an attention seeker...but we won't give up, we tried to be firm but kind, but sometimes like today he was taking all the toys from other children... it's part of his character, there is something that he wants to compete all the time.

(Maria, extract 1.3.5)

This morning he wouldn't come outside, he was crying and he was all over the place, so we sat him down on a chair and said "*when you are ready you can come*

outside” he spent I think almost 1 hour there, he didn’t come out to play... we kept checking on him, but he wouldn’t come.

(Maria, extract 1.3.6)

When children expressed moments of social and emotional dysregulation, practitioners typically levied responsibility at the child’s character and/or temperament. Rather than analysing the child’s immediate environment and questioning what was upsetting the child.

During all the years I’ve been with children, I’ve realised, first of all not to be angry at them, because I make them more angry, more, they will come double... so I calm down, sometimes they are angry that I am calm... but nowadays I realise calm, talk to them, let him scream, shout, don’t touch him because he will start... hitting and screaming and going on the floor and tell him” *we are going to start, if you want to join us come, if you’re not going to join us, you are not going to have that one*” and that in their mind... I think not having something like what the others are doing, I think it does work.

(Leah, extract 1.3.7)

Leah (extract 1.3.7) attempts to articulate the value of equality, in the sense that she assumes that she is providing the child autonomy. By giving the child space to “act out”, Brebner et al., (2015) would agree that autonomy features as an imperative aspect of quality communication. However, in this extract, it is inferred that Leah is subtly using negotiation as a tool to inform the child’s choice and to manage the emotional state of the child. Leah claims that she is allowing the child to make his/her decision on whether to join in with the rest of the group, Leah provides the child with a verbal narrative, advising the child of the outcome of his/her behaviour. On one hand, this may appear to be persuasive discourse, as Leah is relying on the child’s interpretation of “missing out” on something to manage the child’s outburst, instead of finding the root cause of the child’s emotional state. To a degree, there is subtle bargaining of power, as the consequential nature of telling a child s/he will miss out if they cannot remain calm, unintentionally

disregards the social and emotional state of the child during that moment in time, Leah continues;

There has to be some firmness in raising the children even here [at the centre]... not a firm arguing, shouting, scolding... I don't like it, don't, but "*sit down, watch the others, but you're not going to have like her*" ... they do [understand]... because when you tell them "*ok don't do it... just stay there go, go there, but then, they are going to take this and to show it to their parents, to Mummy and you're not going to show it to [your] Mummy*" and then you see them slowly, slowly coming there and they come, so it's not the shouting, it's not the power, calm and slow.

(Leah, 1.3.8)

Through her reflection, it is evident that Leah (extract 1.3.8) is aware of the influence of her communication, however, articulates how she uses a preempting narrative in the attempt to sway the child's actions. Although she describes the act of remaining calm whilst being firm (similarly to Lucia extract 1.3.3) infers that practitioners used this approach to directly manage the children's emotions, as opposed to considering the child's reactive state. The aim here is not to criticise practitioners' perspectives alternatively, the hope is to recognise the existence of language bargaining within the interaction when handling children's reactive emotions. It is valuable in the sense that it reveals a reflective opportunity for professional development, as practitioners may also use this communicative strategy to aid in managing children's emotions without being aware of the importance of addressing the child's unresolved emotional dysregulation.

The examples of practitioners' cognitive episodes presented in this section suggest that practitioners demonstrated an awareness of being aligned and responsive to the needs of their children, however, it remains questionable whether all practitioners were acutely aware of standing in the shoes of the child. As Noddings (2005, p. 21) discusses, ethical

pedagogy is not a virtue. It is not a conscious behaviour that practitioners prescribe to, alternatively, it reflects practitioners' individual morality, recognising the interests and needs of both practitioner and child. The three sub-themed cognitive episodes presented in this category collectively demonstrated what Papatheodorou and Moyles (2009) describe as the interconnectedness of relational pedagogy, where the practitioner is equally a learner. It can be argued that every encounter (such as the examples) here are snap-shots of the practitioner learning something new about their interaction with their children or something about them. As Peters (2009) stated, this style of pedagogy is asymmetrical in nature, meaning that practitioners' experience of either following the child's lead/interests, sharing a moment of sustained shared thinking or managing challenging behaviour is equally a learning experience for both practitioner and child within the interaction. This metaphorical space is what Nuttal and McEvoy (2020) described as a shared sphere of existence, however, whether practitioners are aware of this shared space remains a question for future research.

Section II Conceptual Category Four: Practitioners' Identity

The fourth conceptual category refers to the practitioner's identity as it forms part of the practitioner's interaction with children. According to the APA (2020b), identity refers to "an individual's sense of self" that is typically characterised by physical, psychological and inter/intrapersonal dimensions. As Davis et al., (2019) explain, features of identity can be both external and internal and therefore, are multifaceted constructs embedded within the wider social environment. From a sociological perspective, individuals categorise, act and respond to social identity meanings, whereas, from a psychological stance, inter-and intra-group identity processes are at play. According to Bandura's (2006, p 1-2) social cognitive perspective of identity, life trajectories forge "the

reciprocal interplay between personal factors and diverse influences in everyday societies”.

The study assigned identity to theoretical codes that were related to practitioners' comments concerning their professional sense of self and lived experiences. For example, the implications of being labelled a “shy and quiet child” and how this has influenced their idea of self in adulthood. Practitioners did not call themselves an educator, carer or practitioner during the VSDs. Instead, how they identified was through the perceptions and assumptions others had made from previous experiences, such as being labelled during their childhood and adulthood.

2.1 Sub-category One: Impact of identity labels on quality interaction

The first sub-category of practitioners' identity was related to practitioners being assigned identity labels by their colleagues and how labels impacted practitioners' perspectives of quality interaction. The notion of categorising individual identity using linguistic labels was evident in practitioners' responses (Mary, extract 2.1.1), furthermore (in this case) carried negative connotations from Mary's perspective.

Last year, I was labelled '*no discipline*' ... that's not it, I am a very disciplined person, of course, last year I had a lively group, so you know, they seemed like they were not obeying, but all over the place because they were full of energy types of characters.

(Mary, extract 2.1.1)

In her response, Mary (extract 2.1.1) comments on the negative impact of being labelled by her colleagues has had on her identity as a practitioner. From her perspective, being labelled as a 'non-discipline practitioner' implied that colleagues perceived her as not being in control of her children's behaviour. Rather than disagreeing with her colleagues, Mary continues to justify the imposed categorisation. This suggests that Mary

has connected her appraisal from her colleagues to her understanding of how she approaches her practitioner-child interactions. As Bodenhausen et al., (2012, p. 454) discuss, categorising human behaviour (and identity) not only allows individuals to organise knowledge of the world but also enables inferences to be made about one another. As Cumming and Wong (2018) discuss, feeling part of a “collective identity as an educator” connects practitioners as part of a team. A collective identity means that practitioners share similar values and professional attributes that enable them to feel a sense of belonging to the team. This is an important point to consider as existing research suggests that whilst the well-being of educators is considered to be a “comprehensive social, physical and emotional experience” (Cummings & Wong, 2018), labelling effects between colleagues could potentially disrupt the social bonds colleagues need within an ECEC setting as they impact practitioners collective identity. From my perspective as a professional working within similar settings, I have witnessed negative labelling effects as Mary describes, which have resulted in creating unnecessary social disharmony between colleagues. It is my interpretation that Mary felt somewhat alienated and disconnected from the group because of the labelling effects she described. Whereas, research suggests that educators with a positive mindset and a good sense of well-being are significantly correlated to quality interactions with children (Schipper, et al., 2008). Therefore, a positive mindset has a direct influence on the practitioner's sense of professional satisfaction, motivation and the quality of the interaction they have with children (Schipper, et al., 2008). Further understanding of practitioners' mental health would inevitably provide fruitful insight and help towards supporting practitioners'

mental health and their relationships with colleagues (and children). Practitioners carried identity labels from their childhood lived experiences;

I never talked when I was young, not like now, but I was always shy, I never opened my mouth and nobody ever told me *'tell me to talk'* they used to say *'she is shy, leave her'*... I don't want that for them [for my children], I don't want that here [in this centre], so through my own experience, I don't want them to pass through what I passed through.

(Leah, extract 2.1.2)

The nuns used to tell me *'You can't take part in the concert because you haven't got a voice'* They never heard my voice... they never asked me.

(Leah, extract 2.1.3)

I don't like leaving anybody out, when I was little, I used to be left out of the class... and I hated that because *'you're on your the quiet side... you're left out'* and one sister used to include me, so, I said well I love this attention who doesn't, you know, and I always wanted to work with kids and I said *'when I grow up and if I manage to become a teacher this will be my way'* you know... contact with everyone.

(Mary, extract 2.1.4)

The lasting psychological impact of labels is evident in Leah's (extract 2.1.2, 2.1.3) and Mary's (extract 2.1.4) responses. Considering both practitioners are mature and experienced ECEC practitioners they reveal a sense of vulnerability. Social labels of being 'shy' and 'quiet' carried negative connotations throughout their lived experience and still have an impact, otherwise, practitioners would not have mentioned it during their VSDs. As children, being socially categorised was associated with alienation from their peer group. At the end of her response, Mary (extract 2.1.4) demonstrates how feeling estranged as a child mediates her existing pedagogy as she is consciously aware of making sure she includes all her children. This implies that Mary has modified her pedagogy (to be consciously aware of inclusiveness and attentiveness) which is based on her unfavourable childhood experience and sense of self. Whilst it is important to listen to

practitioners' experience of labelling effects, emphasis should be diverted towards focusing on how practitioners attach their labels and how they categorise their personal and professional identities.

2.2 Sub-category Two: Practitioners' experience of maternalism on quality interaction

The second sub-category of practitioners' identity was related to practitioners' experience of maternalism and how these facets of practitioners' identity influenced quality interaction. Adulthood is shaped by normative stages of development such as age, social roles and status, however, as Bandura (2006) highlights "unpredictable occurrences" "irregular life events" and "major sociocultural changes" have profound effects on life trajectory and social interaction. The "life lived narrative" is therefore told through individualised interpretation and memory recall of past events. As Andrews (2007, p. 3) claims narratives, therefore "reveal much about who they are now, as well as who they were and what they did". Therefore, the need to be aware of how different practitioners' life trajectories and life events can impact practitioners' conceptualisation of quality communication with young children in practice are important factors to consider when exploring practitioner-child interaction. Practitioners frequently referred to their histories of being parented and how their maternalistic memories penetrate their professional role:

What I get to the classroom is how my Mum brought me up, and what I've been through, so what my Mum did, I really praise the Lord because she [brought] me up as a disciplined person...I think you need discipline in life, you can't just '*oh you know, come on*' no... I believe if you do something you do it right that's mine, and what I've been through personal sad experiences, '*now let me consider why this person is like this*, so you make allowances... not bulldozing over people's feelings, so these situations in my life have helped me a lot.

(Mary, extract 2.2.1)

I had a very strict mother, we used to call her Hitler! ... my mother was *a yes is a yes... and a no was a no'*...and she used to correct us like this [imitating an authoritative look] ...by her eyes, I have it, I corrected my children, I used to shout, I can never say I was never angry at them”

“There has to be some firmness in raising children even here at school, I don't like it, but you tell them nicely.

(Leah, extract 2.2.2)

Despite practitioners acquiring professional ECEC knowledge, skills and competencies, participants (Mary, extract 2.2.1, Leah extract 2.2.2) in this study indicated that their maternal figure has had a lasting influence on their professional role. In agreement with Lightfoot and Frost (2015, p. 402), it is evident that the practitioner's “professional identity is inextricably linked to personal identity”. As the findings suggest, practitioners' identity is more than “the sum total of attributes, beliefs and values” that describe the ECEC professional identity. “It is about who we are rather than the part we are playing” in ECEC (Lightfoot & Frost, 2015, p. 402). Therefore, practitioners' identities cannot be simply labelled, or characterised. It is dynamic, changing over time and significantly individualised. Maria (extract 2.2.3) and Daniella (extract 2.2.4) identified with maternalism which refers to their maternal instincts and describes how their understanding of being parents helps with their professional role.

Being a parent helps a lot... because you say ‘Do I want this on my child, no, I don't want it on another child then.

(Maria, extract 2.2.3)

I think my parenting has helped me a lot... being a mother of a child with special needs...it's just in you, it has to be in you, to be able to do this job... it has to be if it's not in you... how can you give 100%?

(Daniela, extract 2.2.4)

Practitioners' conceptualisation of the mother identity is individualised, however, it can be assumed that Daniella (extract 2.2.4) is referring to the universal meaning of motherhood that is largely based on the societal vision of the "relational and logistical work of child-rearing" (Arendell, 2000, p. 1192; Luff & Kanyal, 2015). In her comment, Daniella reflects on the practice of attentive mothering, furthermore, how this facet fosters her feelings of self-worth within her role as a practitioner. Daniella's identity categorisation comes from how she perceives her interaction with Lucy as a mothering figure (refer to Vignette 4, Figure 12). The emotionality that Daniella implies perhaps is grounded in the inherent responsibility of motherhood; to scaffold how infants initially form their sense of self, identity and place in the world (Arendell, 2000). Having said this, without further exploration, it would be naive to assume that practitioners typically consider a shared meaning of maternalism, despite how ECEC is historically rooted in maternalistic rhetoric. In agreement with Ailwood (2007), it is evident that maternal analogies remain steadfast within ECEC discourse where a dichotomy exists between female practitioners who proudly identify as maternal educators and those who deny the practitioners' role is maternalistic, given the professionalisation of the ECEC practitioners role (Lightfoot & Frost, 2015). Practitioners in this study positively identified with maternalism and recognised their experience of motherhood as integral to their work with children. Practitioners' perspectives of maternalism within the ECEC context and its influence on the PCI remain under-discussed from contemporary ECEC pedagogical research despite its presence, debates and long history. Therefore, shedding light on practitioners' perceptions of maternalism within ECEC provides further insight into how maternalistic characteristics influence practitioners' identity, pedagogical style and the

quality of interaction. Despite interpreting this finding, there is a need for caution, as it would be ingenuous to assume that all practitioners experience the same maternalistic experience. Practitioners working with children may have either had a negative experience of maternalism or indeed have experienced an absent motherly figure. Therefore, without further exploration, this finding does not suggest that maternalism is a precursor for the quality of PCI. I am simply recognising that this particular cohort of practitioners recognised that their materialistic experience also featured as part of their approach to quality interaction.

Section III Conceptual Category Five: Centre Context

The last conceptual category referred to the ECEC centre context in which practitioners engaged in quality interaction with their children. In this study, this particular ECEC centre and the context referred to the environmental influences that surrounded episodes of quality interaction. For example, the practitioner-to-child ratios and allocated time within certain areas of the setting. The physical and social factors described by practitioners were inextricably connected to the situatedness of the practitioner-child interaction. Practitioners viewed aspects of their working environments as having a direct influence on the quality of their engagement with their children. Factors such as group ratios, time, classroom areas, relationships with parents and practitioners' sense of environmental stress contributed to practitioners' perspective of quality interaction. It is important to note that this category was not looking to explore structural facets of quality (as previously discussed in Chapter IV, Section 3), thus, the focus remained on how practitioners commented about their environment as a reflection of the quality of the PCI.

3.1 Sub-category One: Influence of group ratios and time on quality

interaction

The first sub-category of the centre context that practitioners claimed influenced their quality interaction with children was the size of their group. Despite the consensus that practitioner-child ratios are an indicator of quality, the debate as to whether ratios are directly related to child outcomes remains unclear (Perlman et al., 2017). However, research advocates that group size/ratios have an immediate influence on how children are engaged, learning, and experiencing the ECEC environment (Bonnes Bowne et al., 2017). Having said this, practitioners often find themselves occupied with endless tasks to complete and minimal space left to focus on intentional interactions with large group sizes (Lim, 2019). During their discussions, Mary (extract 3.1.1) and Lucia (extract 3.1.2) reflected on having smaller group sizes.

This [group size] is just right actually, you can do something here... but I only have this kind of luxury after 12:30 pm... so I'm a bit unlucky this year.

(Mary, extract 3.1.1)

Sometimes you need to divide them into [smaller] groups, you go to one group and then you go to another and then they are [all] having their attention. When you have a smaller group... you can handle them much better.

(Lucia, 3.1.2)

Both practitioners spoke about group size as having a direct influence on their ability to have meaningful interactions with their children. The visualisation of having small manageable groups as a 'luxury' infers practitioners gain more from their children when there are fewer of them seeking individualised attention. These first-hand views are often ignored by imposing policymakers who typically view the group size/ratios dilemma from a political and economic standpoint. This debate frequently makes media

headlines (Demarco, 2017; Gaunt, 2022) that simply add to the unrest among those involved in ECEC. Such publicity causes unnecessary tensions and raises parental concerns. As leading ECEC advocates (Nutbrown, 2012, 2013) continue to voice concerns over diluting and relaxing ratios, assuming more qualified practitioners would be more “able” to manage a larger group of children is simply economically driven and is at the expense of both practitioner and child. Practitioners in this study related this to the ways they spend their time interacting with their group. Concerns about working within time frame constraints were articulated by Mary (extract, 3.1.3).

I try to have a little bit [time] with everyone, so at least they can have a memory, you know, every single session for me is important, at least they're 2 minutes, 2 seconds, whatever at least I spoke to him... because some other kids are very demanding, and they will take all your time and I don't allow that all the time.
(Mary, 3.1.3)

Aware of dividing her attention, Mary (extract 3.1.3) makes a conscious effort to interact with individual children in pursuit of securing the child's memory of feeling connected and involved. This demonstrates that practitioners remain aware of finding opportunities to connect as a precursor to process quality. As Nutbrown (2013) and Osgood (2010) have argued, the consequences of practitioners having enough time to interact consistently and attentively with children prevent fracturing the foundation of quality interaction. Keeping group sizes small not only preserves practitioners' time spent attending to individual needs but is certainly a “price worth paying and in terms of the life course, this can only be a solid, sound investment for future generations” (Nutbrown, 2013, p. 10).

3.2 Sub-category Two: Influence of classroom space on quality interaction

The second subcategory of the centre context, referred to practitioners' comments about the physical space around them whilst interacting with their children. The physical space practitioners reflect on during their VSDs refers to the wider setting and not necessarily a certain classroom or outdoor area. As previously discussed (in Chapter IV, Section 3), the physical environment plays an intrinsic part in the child's ECEC experience and is considered to be one of the facets of structural quality. However, there has been minimal attention directed to evaluating the influence of environmental distractions in ECEC. Part of practitioners' conceptualisation of quality interaction involved their wider surrounding environment. The context in which practitioners worked alongside their children was based on a rotation basis throughout the day moving from different areas including outdoor, eating areas, classroom and gym activity areas. As Leah (extract 3.2.1) describes, during the timed transitions, groups would frequently pass one another and would often share common activity areas, however, Leah felt that she needed quiet areas to engage with her children. Leah (extract 3.2.1, 3.2.2) infers that the quality of her episodes of sustained shared thinking is negatively influenced by environmental distractions such as noise and distractions. Lucia (extract 3.2.3) also confirms Leah's comments.

I like that they [we] go from one place to another...but I would like to have this part for my group... when I'm talking to them, I'm in silence, our own noise because that keeps us more focused. Give me a day when I will be alone [with the group].
(Leah, extract 3.2.1)

We have to have that little bit [of quiet space] ...don't tell outside I do circle time outside. When they are supposed to be running... it's the only time I can let them run, play, jump... you [management] tell me five minutes make it... we're always two groups and perhaps the other one doesn't want to make their circle time that time.

(Leah, extract 3.2.2)

I would change our environment for sure, less colours all around, less noise, that's what I would change and a helper, for things to run more smoothly, so not to panic the children, sometimes I see that there is sort of... we panic them and I don't like that, I don't like panicking the children... but sometimes you can't help it, here even when we are changing in the corridors, there's shouting, screaming and they are running around from here to there. I would change these things.

(Lucia, extract 3.2.3)

Findings revealed that environmental distractions of noise, group movements, limited quiet spaces and having extra assistance were factors of environmental context that negatively influenced the quality PCI. Whilst these are recognised as structural elements of quality, these findings demonstrate that there is an overlap between both facets of quality (structural and process). Therefore, it can be argued that from the practitioner's perspective, quality interaction is influenced by the physical context in which it is held and not necessarily just the dialogical space between the practitioner and child. Although these findings are to a degree commonsensical, sustaining quality interaction must not only be the responsibility of the individual practitioner. A centre approach is needed to address these influencing factors. Physical distractions, therefore, are potentially extraneous challenges practitioners must work against when trying to navigate the sensitiveness and delicate process of establishing reciprocal quality interaction. Furthermore, there is also a health concern that requires further attention. Considering the long hours of ECEC attendance, being exposed to high levels of noise disturbance, especially distressing sounds of crying can lead to hearing impairment and emotional distress (Persson Waye et al., 2019; Gokdogan & Gokdogan, 2016). Furthermore, Persson Waye et al., (2019) found that elevated noise was significantly related to children's negative emotional behaviour. In reaction to their distracting

environment, young children were more likely to raise their voices to be heard and act out. As a result, when all environmental factors occur simultaneously, it can be suggested that larger groups, within smaller areas, creating increased levels of noise are a major ECEC health concern for children and practitioners. Together the working environment makes the practitioners' responsibility of forming sensitive and responsive interactions that much more challenging. Consequently, the quality of the PCI is directly affected. Although the setting did have an outdoor area, the space was still limited and groups had timed slots for outdoor play.

3.3 Sub-category Three: Influence of parent partnership on quality interaction

The third sub-category of centre context refers to practitioners' comments concerning their relationships with their respective parents. As previously discussed (Chapter III, Section 3) the relationships practitioners share with parents are vital for the overall well-being and sense of safety of the child whilst attending ECEC provision (Siraj-Blatchford, 2002) and are recognised as a facet of process quality. However, relationship formation with parents varies and culture can impact how this relationship develops and is sustained, that is why Elfer et al., (2012) claim the key-caregiver approach effectively sustains the triangular relationship between practitioners, child and parent over time. As the findings of this study have suggested, meaningful relationships develop over time, therefore, to achieve quality interaction practitioners are responsible for developing relationships and demonstrating an awareness of diversity when it comes to working alongside young children and their families. Having said this, the practitioners in this study did reflect on their involvement with parents and how this influenced their perspective on the practitioner-child interaction.

During her discussion, Anne (extract 3.3.1 - 3.3.3) acknowledged working with parents was often challenging due to their expectations of the practitioner. This supports existing literature that parents can have a “fixed mindset” about their children (Seaman & Giles, 2021; Sims-Scouten, 2016). Once parents participated in the triangular relationship by providing feedback on what the child was doing at home, then Anne commented on feeling a sense of positive recognition. Although this may have been a passing comment made by the parent, the impact it had on Anne’s sense of purpose was significant as it reassured Anne that her children were learning and enjoying themselves to then revert to their parents. Unknowingly, the parents’ remark completed the triangular relationship that Elfer et al., (2012) propose, hence is more likely to encourage Anne to continue interacting with the child.

It can be hard work, I do get satisfaction, especially when you see parents and they tell you “*have you started practising for the concert? Because they are telling me certain words*”, so the children are eager to go and tell their parents about what they are doing, which is very good.

(Anne, extract 3.3.1)

Although practitioners in this study did not report any negative experiences with parents, this does not imply they have not experienced such an encounter as practitioners were not asked specifically to comment on this. Instead, practitioners spoke about their thoughts on the role of parents as part of the wider centre context, therefore, it can be assumed that parent involvement did not have a direct influence on practitioners’ perspective of the quality of interaction they had with their children. Furthermore, episodes of quality interaction occurred once parents had left the centre and so the parent's involvement was to a degree on the periphery of the practitioner-child dialogue. Anne (extract 3.3.2, 3.3.3) continued to express her views on the role parents play within the triangular relationship.

Nowadays the parents are a bit short of time... you don't have time for your children if you come home at 6 o'clock in the evening and then you have to prepare your meal, their meal, what time is there?... but that's society... they need to work, at least over here [at the centre] there have been given something that maybe at home [they don't have].

(Anne, extract 3.3.2)

At home they are spoilt... they start crying ok... open the laptop let them see whatever they like... because I have to carry on with my work... so at least here [at the centre] we are giving them more quality time here... I feel.

(Anne, extract 3.3.3)

Although Anne is entitled to her view of contemporary socialisation, it is interesting to see how Anne sees her role within the triangular relationship. She openly assumes that her children are given quality input whilst attending the centre. The aim here is not to suggest Anne's view is stereotyped, it is merely her perspective and is it positive to see Anne is holding herself accountable for having an impact on the overall wellbeing of the child. Leah (extract 3.3.4, 3.3.5) also discussed the influence of parents' feedback within the triangular relationship and how some parents would question Leah's role. In this example, Leah is describing some parents' reactions to craft activities she has carried out with her group. These occurrences typically occur at parent pick-up times, when the child typically presents the parent with his/her craft.

Parents first of all start [complaining]... they don't see their work, but I don't care what parents say... for example [painting] a tree... if they did it blue "*why didn't you do it green*" [the parents ask]... others would say "*no it doesn't matter if he wanted it blue, let him*" ...but there are parents [who say] "*you don't tell him? You don't teach him that the tree is green.*"

(Leah extract 3.3.4)

Do you think that has changed over the years you have been in early years education?

(Researcher)

Yes, it's not all the majority of parents, it's not, maybe 2 out of the 6.

(Leah extract 3.3.5)

Despite Leah acknowledging that her parents' expectations for the "perfect" craft have lessened over the years, however, Leah acknowledges that this continues to be part of some of the challenges she faces with her parents. However, Leah acknowledges that it does not have a direct influence on the quality of the practitioner-child interaction. This is an important point as Leah is an experienced practitioner, thus if a less experienced practitioner was in the same position, perhaps s/he would feel a sense of pressure to ensure the child "produced" the perfect craft, or be tempted to complete the task on the child's behalf.

3.4 Sub-category Four: Influence of practitioners' overwhelm on quality interaction

The fourth sub-category of the centre context refers to practitioners' feelings of stress and being overwhelmed as influencing the quality of their practitioner-child interactions. Practitioners' professional stress manifests in all areas of their role (Elfer, 2007; Elfer & Page, 2015; Page et al., 2013; Seaman & Giles, 2021). As previously discussed the ECEC sector is typically marginalised and practitioners' well-being is frequently overlooked (Tadeu & Lopes, 2021; Yarrow, 2015). This is further compounded by fewer professional working benefits, low remuneration and the emotional and physical exhaustion of working with very young children takes its toll. As Grant et al., (2019) found practitioners who found the practitioner-child interaction and forming relationships challenging were more likely to reconsider their ECEC role. Although practitioners in this study did not articulate notions of leaving the ECEC sector, being overwhelmed is still featured as part of their reflections.

The main sources of stress came from practitioners' environments and having larger numbers of children where practitioners, namely Maria (extract, 3.4.1) at times felt overwhelmed when her group wanted to do different activities and when she was required to split her attention.

I feel a little bit overwhelmed sometimes because the thing is one of them takes the crayons and starts crayoning on the floor or the wall... you have to keep an eye on them and be alert... or maybe he put it in his mouth, this one, he's a very young one.

(Maria, extract 3.4.1)

Sometimes I do get stressed, and I realise because I can see it in the children, then I say to myself '*I need to calm down*'.

(Lucia, extract 3.4.2)

Sometimes there is pressure... it's true, because of time, because in an hour's time you have to move. After all, the other groups are coming in.

(Anne, extract 3.4.3)

Despite practitioners' positive intrinsic motivation for the work they do alongside children, feelings of overwhelm and stress feature part of the practitioners' perspective. Lucia's (extract 3.4.2) awareness and self-regulation infer that she remains committed to her role and motive towards making a difference for her children despite the intrinsic challenges she faces. Therefore, it remains important to openly discuss the practitioners' subjective views as speaking without fear of judgement would be progressive steps toward lowering staff turnover and feelings of being ineffectual.

Section IV Theoretical Category Six: Practitioners' Emotionality

Once the final conceptual categories had been constructed during the write-up of the findings, I felt that something was missing. In response to this feeling, I revisited the conceptual categories and found participants' feelings and emotions were present throughout their reflections. I refer to APA's (2022c) definition of emotionality as the

term used to identify practitioners' expression and presentation of their emotions. This final category is typically referred to as a "theoretical" category (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser, 1978) or a "core" category (Birks & Mills, 2015, p. 111) as it demonstrates a higher level of grounded theory coding and enables the study to propose relationships between the existing conceptual categories. Charmaz (2014) states that theoretical codes are "integrative" implying that the theoretical category (practitioners' emotionality) combines the conceptual categories (practitioners' repertoire, beliefs, episodes, identity and centre context) to form an interpretation of how practitioners approach quality interaction with their children.

As previously discussed (Chapter IV, Section 3) emotions and feelings form an integral part of social relationships and existing research claims that practitioner-child relationship quality is the main indicator of ECEC quality (Degotardi & Pearson, 2009; Elfer et al., 2012; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Therefore, understating the emotional state of practitioners becomes integral to understanding how they perceive and respond to the emotional state of their children and, thus, relationship quality. However, before discussing how practitioners' perspectives is metaphorically held together by practitioners' emotions, it is necessary to differentiate between emotions and feelings as both terms are frequently used interchangeably.

The following discussion of emotion may feel like part of the literature review, however, the intention is to demonstrate how practitioners' perspectives sits within an existing early years pedagogical context. To position the findings it is necessary to return to the existing literature and present new ideas at this stage of the thesis which is common practice with CGT methodology (Charmaz, 2014). Furthermore, it sets the stage for inviting a much-needed discussion concerning practitioners' emotionality which is

typically absent from vocational ECEC training and policy discourse (Fairchild & Mikuska, 2021; Vincent & Braun, 2013). Moreover, how practitioners' emotionality was interpreted in this study suggests modifying the existing view of practitioners' emotions in a childcare setting.

According to the APA (2022d), a *feeling* is associated with conscious bodily reactions and forms part of the emotional reaction to a stimulus (which can be either a person, object, memories or environment). Therefore, feelings are subjective sensations that are rooted in emotional experiences and are typically positioned on a negative-to-positive continuum. The range of feelings is said to correspond with the sensations we experience (for example, pain and/or temperature) (APA, 2022d). Whereas, *emotion* is far more complex and is typically recognised as a subjective internal experience and response to a stimulus, that enables humans to engage with the social and physical world around them (APA, 2022b). However, as Adolphs (2017, p.27) discusses, emotions are also recognised as "brain and psychological states" that are diverse with different purposes and are ultimately programmed for human survival. For example, humans repeatedly behave in emotional states (such as crying, and laughing) and can conceptualise the emotional state of others (and self), furthermore, humans can specifically describe an emotion from experience (Adolphs, 2017). Therefore, emotions are interconnected subjective internal experiences that are important when considering how we perceive and respond to situations, objects and/or memories. Furthermore, research suggests that those who are more attuned to their emotional states, (perceptions and concepts) and who can differentiate between subtle emotional differences are significantly better at identifying the emotional expressions of others (Israelashvili et al., 2019). Consequently, research supports the importance of recognising the subtlety and presence of practitioners'

emotions as they are vital components to interacting well with young children (especially preverbal children) in childcare.

Although this study did not set out to explore practitioners' emotions per se, their presentation of emotions (that were triggered by experience and memories whilst reflecting on the VSDs) became an integral part of how they presented and conceptualised quality interaction with their children. Therefore, I interpreted the practitioners' interaction approach as an emotional one. To explain this further, the remaining part of this section revisits several data extracts (which are numerically identified) from the earlier conceptual categories (presented in both Chapter VIII and IX) to highlight where practitioners' emotionality was presented. In addition, practitioners' last comments concerning their view of the PCI are included in this section to further support my interpretation that practitioners' interaction approach is embedded in practitioners' emotionality.

Practitioners' emotionality was found to be central to all five conceptual categories (repertoire, beliefs, cognitive episodes, identity and centre context) and was constructed from interpreting practitioners' responses. Whilst the implications of these findings are discussed in the preceding discussion (Chapter X), for the time being, it is important for the remaining sections of this chapter to be viewed through a social justice lens. A lens that accounts for the practitioners' rights to voice their diverse range of emotions that form part of, and are influenced by their day-to-day role of working alongside children in childcare. If practitioners' emotionality remains unrecognised, then I propose that this would be an injustice to the practitioners (who not only took part in this study) and, furthermore, to the wider childcare labour workforce. A further discussion addressing the fairness of practitioners' emotionality is presented in the preceding discussion chapter.

4.1 Presenting Emotionality

Despite participants not being directly asked to comment on their emotional states whilst interacting with children, through reflecting on their pre-recorded interactions every participant referred to their feelings and recollections of emotional experiences at different points of their VSDs. Practitioners' emotions ranged from negative (for example disappointment) to positive emotions (for example, enjoyment) and are now discussed whilst referring back to the previous conceptual categories.

4.2 Presenting Negative Emotions

At different points of the VSD practitioners alluded to negative emotions that were associated with their immediate working environment and recollections of past emotional experiences from their childhood. As previously discussed (in this chapter, section 2.1) Mary (extract 2.1.4) and Leah (extract 2.1.2, 2.1.3) commented on their memories of feeling excluded as children, which was interesting to see how both Mary and Leah presented examples of how their past emotional experience as children remains part of their current emotional responses to conceptualising the PCI. In particular, Mary's response (extract 2.1.1) evoked notions of *disappointment* when recalling her experience of being labelled by her colleagues and memories of feeling excluded as a child (extract 2.1.4). This experience may have resulted in Mary feeling inadequate for not meeting the expectations of others as a child. An emotional state that could have re-emerged since experienced similar emotions in response to her colleagues' inferences of 'inadequacy'. As part of her final comments, Mary articulated the following;

I enjoy seeing the bond with them [*referring to the pre-recorded interaction*]... and I tell myself... keep that, don't let anyone [*colleagues*] get into your head...they're [*the children*] worth it...and I'm going to keep at it because we're friends...I will keep doing it for them... because that's what I want to be doing, it's worth seeing them happy.

(Mary's final comment)

Whilst Mary infers the emotional impact of her colleagues labelling her, she was determined to minimise any negative impact this may have on her interaction approach. It is evident that Mary internalised her emotions and showed ways of coping with her negative emotions by reflecting on her role with her children and her belief that friendships with them are important to her (Chapter VIII, Section 2.2, extract 2.2.2). Therefore, in Mary's case, this reiterates the emotionality that is involved with not only forming relationships with children but also coping with hostility between colleagues which cannot be disregarded. It is assumed that Mary's experience with children has so far shown her that her approach has worked in the past, despite how her approach may be interpreted by a colleague. This reiterates that the practitioners' perspectives are unique, individualised and influenced by practitioners' emotionality. Furthermore, in her final comment, Mary shows determination to continue with her approach to quality interaction as she respects the relationships she has with her children and acknowledges the influential role she has in her children's overall development. Mary's last comments demonstrate that she is emotionally invested in her professional role with her children and in order to continue with her responsibilities she will "not give up" on the friendships she has with her children. In agreement with Fairchild and Mikuska (2021), practitioners' emotions are internalised and practitioners' emotional experiences can manifest in their personal lives. Put simply, emotional experiences that occur within the day-to-day role of the practitioner are never left at the end of the working day. Practitioners will return to their personal lives and continue to reflect on the events of the day, which may/not influence their perception of work-life balance. From a mental health perspective, this

would be a recommendation for future research, in view of the burn-out rate of practitioners within ECEC childcare settings.

In this chapter (section 3.4) Maria (Extract 3.4.1), Lucia (extract 3.4.2) and Anne (extract 3.4.3) collectively articulated negative feelings of *overwhelm* and professional *stress* when reflecting on their interaction approach. Their sources of stress/overwhelm were an emotional reaction to dividing their attention across the group of children and the pressure to conclude the timed sessions. Although the environmental triggers of stress can be addressed easier than deep-rooted emotions from one's past experiences, having said this, practitioners may not feel confident in approaching management to address their immediate causes of stress and overwhelm. Therefore, practitioners may be more likely to accept stressors as “part of the job” which can be a precursor to professional burnout. Although Lucia (extract 3.4.2) was the only practitioner who specifically articulated a level of self-awareness and regulation when reflecting on negative emotions. It is therefore important that practitioners (where the engagement in reflective practice is typically neglected) are encouraged to reflect more deeply on their emotions, to determine how they influence their behaviour during their PCI. This is because negative feelings may influence the quality of practitioners' participation within the practitioner-child dyad. This demonstrates the need for professional reflective practice within all ECE sectors as it provides practitioners opportunities to understand the root cause of their negative emotions. Whether that be from past experiences as a child to environmental stressors that can be modified, reflecting on emotions could act as an intervention to preserve the quality of their (role) communication with their children. Moreover, it is worth recognising that under the conditions of this study, (as the researcher I felt that) practitioners were hesitant to make negative comments about their position and setting

context. Therefore, the fact that they articulated negative emotions and recollections of their past emotions, conveys that their emotions form part of the PCI. The influence of practitioners' emotions (whether negative or positive) on the PCI is, therefore, a recommendation for future research.

4.3 Presenting Positive Emotions

In addition to the negative emotions presented by practitioners, positive emotions were articulated and were interpreted as *enjoyment*, *satisfaction* and *love* whilst reflecting on the PCI. In Chapter VIII (Section, 1.3) Daniella (exact 1.3.1) stated that she enjoys her role and greatly benefits from seeing her children engaged. Leah (Chapter IX, section 2.2 extract 2.2.3) confirmed that she too enjoyed being part of her group and being accepted as "one of them". Practitioners' feelings of enjoyment came from perceiving the positive feedback from their children, which then created a positive emotional response from practitioners as articulated by Leah's last comment:

I have loved seeing me with them, I've loved it, I've never seen [myself] with them... I feel happy that I'm seeing it because I'll do it, I'll be more conscious now that it really works... if you sit down with them... I'm seeing it now and I'm hearing it.

(Leah's final comment)

This infers that if practitioners observe the children enjoying themselves, so do practitioners (and vice-versa), resulting in a positive feedback loop. A positive emotional experience is shared between the practitioner and the child. Therefore, the opposite is also plausible, a negative emotional response (from either an adult or child) would be more likely to result in a negative feedback loop. This would impact the quality of the practitioners' perspectives. This supports Karjalainen et al., (2019) who found that moments of "joy" between practitioners and young Finish children were "emotional sharing" rather than an individualised experience. It was also interesting to see how in her

last comment (above) Leah recognised the value of reflecting on her interactions with her children and that she would (in the future) be more mindful of taking the time to sit with her children to interact. Leah's final comment demonstrated a level of self-awareness that I inferred was the first time she had reflected on her approach, which was interesting given that she had been working alongside young children for the majority of her working life. From my perspective, this was a curious observation and demonstrated the lack of encouragement for professional reflective practice in this sector.

Practitioners also presented feelings of *surprise* and *satisfaction* which together added to practitioners' positive emotional response. In this chapter (section 1.2) Daniella (extract, 1.2.6) expressed surprise at an activity she had chosen to complete with the children as they remained focused for longer than she had anticipated. It was the child's level of engagement and enjoyment that Daniella observed that surprised her. As her last comment (below), Daniella summarised her sense of professional satisfaction when summarising how she perceived the "results" of her children towards the end of term:

When they start off in September, they are still like little babies... then you'll see them grow over the term...my favourite term is the last term because you get the results of what you've put in the last two terms, in the third term, and then you see them, you see the result...it's nice just to persevere with them, see the results at the end. I like seeing them as babies. I always tell them the story of the butterfly...I say to them, "*When you start with me, you're like little caterpillars and then by the time summer comes, you will be like a butterfly*" because they are usually out of nappies, by the time, the summer comes and then they're ready for the next stage ...they get their shoes on and all, and they're quite independent I do quite a lot by the end of the term...this age group I love it.

(Daniella's final comment)

Daniella's last comment (above) reflects not only a positive emotional response to her children's developmental journey but also how she perceives her role. As the practitioner, she does "quite a lot" with her children in order for them to reach the

milestones she perceives are important for them to proceed to the next stage of their development. From my perspective, I felt that Daniella's story of her children transforming from "caterpillars to butterflies" captured her emotional perspective of her role. This further supports the role of practitioners' emotionality in fostering quality interaction.

Anne (this chapter section 3.3, extract 3.3.1) also commented on notions of satisfaction that were attributed to positive parental feedback. Furthermore, Anne (Chapter IX, Section 1.3, extracts 1.3.3) commented on the positive feedback she gains from having her children "around" her as a way of harnessing reciprocity and positively benefiting from the children's feedback. Therefore, both Daniella and Anne expressed feelings of satisfaction that were dependent on the feedback from their children and parents. This is an interesting point, as it suggests that practitioners' positive emotional response is partly mediated by the positive feedback they receive from those they serve and not necessarily from those they are employed by. Therefore, positive emotions related to professional satisfaction become part of the practitioners' perspectives. Based on the premise that if practitioners are part of the positive feedback loop, then they are more likely to internalise this as a positive emotional state and respond favourably. This positive feedback loop becomes practitioners' validation to continue with their PCI.

Notions of professional *love* are additionally featured as part of the positive feedback loop, as suggested by Mary, (Chapter IX, Section 2.1, extract 2.1.1) and Daniella (Chapter IX, Section 2.1, extract 2.1.3). In their extracts, both Mary and Daniella explicitly stated that they simply "love" their children and believed that expressions of loving care were important parts of the PCI. This was important to practitioners as their children would be able to perceive and respond to their loving responses, thus reinforcing

the positive feedback loop. Anne's final comment (below) concerning her view of professional love captured the presence and importance of professional love as part of her approach:

Love show them, love, show them warmth and be disciplined...for me, those are the most important things, to make them feel [safe]... if you show them love you need to make them feel secure... and lots of hugs, reassure them because Mummy is coming soon...Mummy is not going to leave you over here all day long, talk to them about their family as well... so they know [they're] not forgotten, and [they're] not put over here and [their] family has not forgotten about [them].

(Anne's final comment)

Anne's final comment re-emphasised the importance she attributed to demonstrating acts of professional love as part of her approach. Love in this context is therefore interpreted as a positive emotional response that contributes to making her children feel safe, cared for and seen as an individual who may be responding to their own emotional state.

During the VSDs, (as the researcher I was aware that) practitioners spoke about their *determination* to maintain quality interaction with children through developing bonds, as emphasised by Lucia's last comment:

First of all bond with the children, that is the most important thing, before teaching them...and you follow them, all of the time and you go round with them all of the time.

(Lucia's final comment)

In her VSD, Lucia continuously stated her beliefs in establishing relational bonds which included the idea of "following" her child's lead. Despite the presence of challenging behaviour and/or regulating her own emotional state, Lucia's final comment suggests she was always determined to keep the "bonds" at the forefront of her approach. Similarly, Mary's (this chapter, section, 3.3, extract 1.35) expressed determination when she stated that she "won't give up" when faced with challenging behaviour despite the

negative emotional responses from children. The question here is what makes Mary sure that her determination and repeated attempts to establish a positive interaction with the child will work? Whilst this would be an interesting area for future research, it can be assumed that Mary has in the past reflected on similar experiences, thus, relying on previous experience which has over time fostered Mary's confidence and determination. This idea that past emotional experiences shaped participants' interaction approach, also resonated with Leah's (this chapter, section, 2.1, extract 2.1.2). Leah recalled her memories of being ignored as a child, she also conveyed that she feels determined to ensure that none of her children would experience similar emotions. Similarly, Mary (this Chapter, Section, 2.2, extract 5.1.1) and Anne (Chapter IX, Section 1.3, extract 1.3.3) were determined to ensure that every child had their fair share of quality time and interaction whilst attending the centre. Therefore, practitioners' determination was an emotional part of practitioners' perspectives that motivated practitioners to continue with working alongside young children.

Practitioners presented *empathy* as an emotional response. Maria (Chapter IX, Section 2.4, extract 2.4.1 to 2.4.4) expressed empathy for her children when she spoke about feeling "sorry for" children. During the VSD, I was surprised at Maria's emotional state when we discussed how her children must feel arriving at the setting. Maria's response during the VSD was a surprising one, as it demonstrated that she was not only attuned to the child's perspective but also revealed her own sensitive emotional state. Once more, further exploring the emotional states of practitioners would be important for further research as it would provide insight into different ways to better support practitioners emotionally. On the other hand, whilst Lucia (this chapter, section, 3.2, extract 3.2.3) expressed concerns about the environment, she was empathic towards how

the environment stimulates certain emotional responses in her children. She felt that calming the setting environment would benefit the children, as she too felt sensitive towards unnecessarily panicking the children and this also made her feel sensitive.

Practitioners also expressed emotional *gratitude*. Both Mary (this chapter, section 2.2, extract 2.2.1) and Daniela (this chapter section, 2.2, extract 2.2.4) frequently commented on the influence of their upbringing and how the emotional experiences of her mother's parenting (from her perspective) contributed to her confidence in working alongside young children and being responsive to the needs of emotional behaviours young children can exhibit. Emotional gratitude was typically associated with maternalism, on one hand, practitioners were thankful for their upbringing (or being a parent) and on the other hand, practitioners were appreciative of the role they played in supporting their children throughout the academic year.

Chapter Summary

The findings presented in this second part of the findings chapters introduce the remaining three conceptual categories and the final theoretical category, which together shape practitioners' perspectives of quality interactions. In this study practitioners' perspectives of quality interaction suggests that they approach the practitioner-child interaction from an emotional stance that is rooted in the social relationships they share with their children and families. Their interpreted reflections and stories are one of the first steps towards acknowledging the practitioners' thoughts and feelings concerning their interactions which are under-discussed in ECEC policy and curriculum discourse (Davis & Dunn, 2018). The practitioners' perspectives of quality interaction (discussed in the following chapter) were constructed from the categories presented here and provide a

window to a more fruitful understanding of practitioners' subjective experience of practitioner-child interactions.

Chapter X Discussion

Chapter Introduction

This discussion chapter interprets the study findings from Chapters VIII and IX that were guided by the research questions: What are practitioners' perspectives of quality interactions, and how do they enact these interactions with young children in a Maltese ECEC setting? The study employed an inductive approach in line with Charmaz's (2014) Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) methodology (Chapter VI). Through this approach, five key conceptual categories were identified: practitioners' repertoire, beliefs, cognitive episodes, identity, and centre context. These categories led to the development of the theoretical sub-category of practitioners' emotionality, which represents a more advanced level of theoretical abstraction. Practitioners' emotionality integrates the five conceptual categories, providing an understanding of how practitioners perceive and implement quality interactions with young children.

Chapter Organisation

This chapter is divided into three main sections. The first section organises the conceptual and theoretical categories (from Chapters VIII and IX) into a framework that illustrates practitioners' perspectives of quality interaction. This section includes a diagram (Figure 13) that shows how the categories are interconnected and embedded within practitioners' emotional responses to the pre-recorded Practitioner-Child Interactions (PCI). The final section explores the broader implications of the findings, addressing their practical significance by responding to the "so what" question. This section introduces six reflective cards as a potential next stage for further research.

Section I An organised collection of ideas

1.1 A collection of ideas, rather than a 'theory'

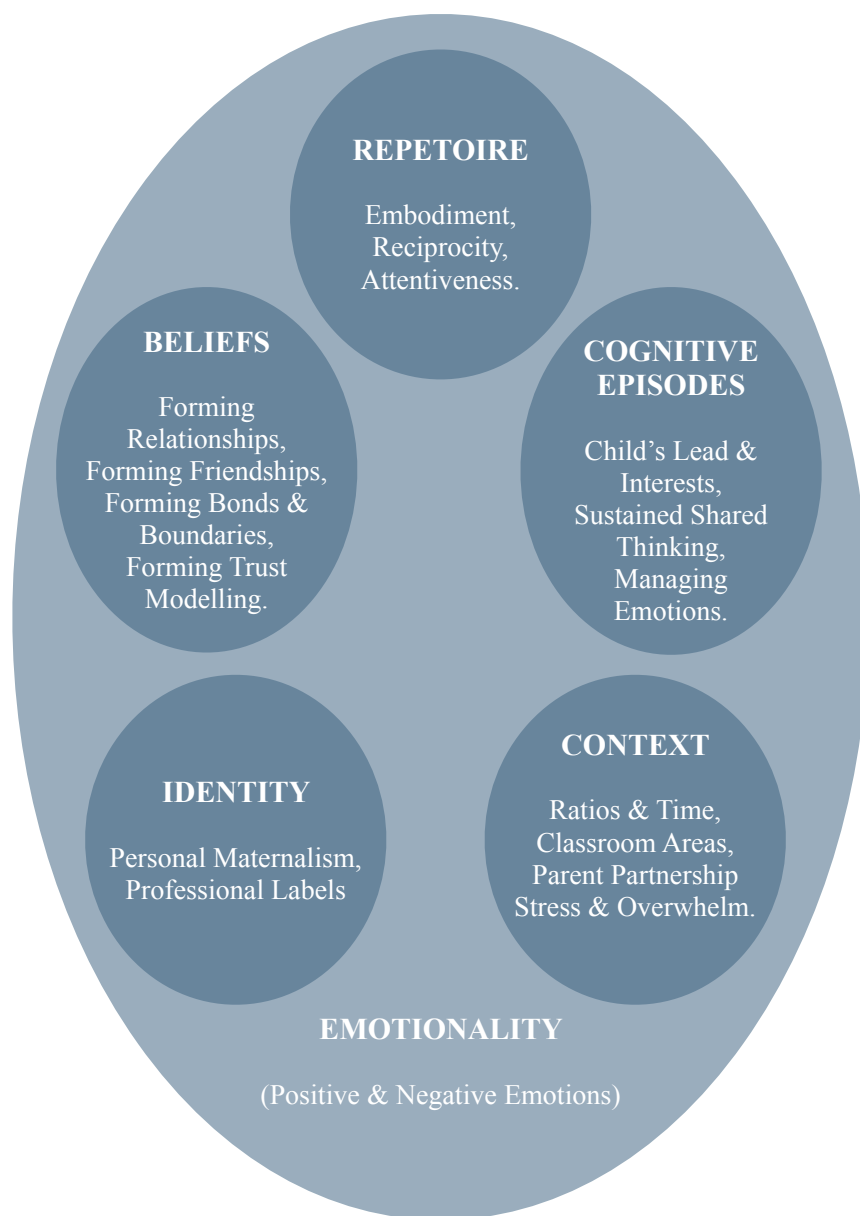
When I selected Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) as the study's methodology, I expected the coding process to lead to a substantive theory, as Glaser (2005) suggests. However, as the analysis progressed, I realised that calling my interpretation a "theory" would have been overstated. This led me to question whether we were constructing a theory or simply developing a collection of ideas about practitioners' perspectives of quality interaction. Charmaz (2014) notes that theory, from an interpretivist stance, is more abstract and indeterminate than traditionally explanatory or predictive. Similarly, Korsgaard (2019) highlights the confusion between pedagogy practice and theory. This insight helped me distinguish between conceptualising practitioners' understanding of their practice versus forming a pedagogical theory. This realisation prompted me to make their ideas more tangible and accessible to the reader. To enhance clarity, I created a visual representation of the conceptual categories and their relationship to the theoretical sub-category (as illustrated in Figure 13), ensuring the findings were both comprehensive and easily understandable for future dissemination.

1.2 Visualising practitioners' perceptions of quality interaction

The visual representation in Figure 13 was my first step in understanding how the conceptual and theoretical categories related to each other. I chose to cluster the categories separately to clarify practitioners' responses, though, in reality, the data was far messier, with participants often jumping between categories during the VSD sessions. The diagram reflects this complexity by showing the categories coexisting. The conceptual categories (practitioners' repertoire, beliefs, cognitive episodes, identity, and context) coexisted simultaneously and were deeply intertwined with practitioners'

emotionality. Although the repertoire was usually the starting point, as we delved into the VSDs, the interconnectedness of these categories became more apparent. To better represent these relationships, I adopted an Euler diagram, which, according to Sun-Joo et al. (2018), effectively shows “syllogistic reasoning” and “spatial relations” using circles. In this diagram, the five conceptual categories are represented by smaller circles within a larger circle representing practitioners' emotionality. This layout captures how the categories stem from and are encompassed by emotionality, offering a clear visual of the complex relationships at play. I found this pictorial view (Figure 13) especially fitting to communicate the abstract nature of practitioners' ideas about quality interaction. My goal was to provide a visual that could be easily understood by my audience and could serve as a starting point for future research recommendations, which will be discussed in the final conclusion chapter.

Figure 13
Practitioners' perspectives of quality interaction



Note An Euler illustration of the categories presented in the previous findings chapters.

The Euler diagram, used to illustrate these relationships, offers a way to visualise how these categories intersect and interrelate. Emotionality emerged as an overarching category, influencing and being influenced by the other five categories. Practitioners' perspectives highlighted that emotionality was integral to their professional experiences,

shaping how they perceived and engaged with children. This suggests that practitioners place significant value on the emotional aspects of interaction, especially in their ability to form secure relationships with children. In this context, quality interaction is seen as one that involves not only cognitive engagement but also emotional attunement, trust-building, and nurturing relationships.

Section III Aligning with Existing Research

In Chapter II, I reviewed the key global-North ECEC thinkers, including Reggio Emilia, Steiner, Dewey, and Montessori, who all emphasise a balance between care and cognitive engagement. When examining my findings in light of these perspectives, some gaps and tensions arise. In the Reggio Emilia context, the findings align with its focus on relationships and emotional well-being, but there is less emphasis on the cognitive engagement that Reggio emphasises through inquiry and collaborative learning. This suggests that Maltese practitioners may need to integrate more intentional learning provocations. Similarly, in the Steiner (Waldorf) approach, the focus on emotional care is consistent with my findings. However, Steiner's emphasis on imagination and creativity reveals a potential gap, as Maltese practitioners did not highlight structured imaginative or cognitive engagement in their interactions. From Dewey's perspective, while the emphasis on relational and emotional dimensions matches his view of education as inherently social, Dewey also stresses reflective thinking and problem-solving, which were less evident in my findings. The study suggests that Maltese practitioners could incorporate more intentional cognitive challenges within their interactions. Finally, the Montessori approach, which supports both emotional and cognitive independence, highlights a similar tension. While care is evident in the findings, Montessori's structured approach to fostering intellectual growth suggests that Maltese ECEC could benefit from

a more balanced focus on cognitive development through self-directed learning. In summary, while the findings resonate with the emotional and relational aspects of these global-North perspectives, they problematise the limited evidence of cognitive engagement, pointing to a need for a more integrated approach in Maltese ECEC settings.

In Chapters III and IV, I reviewed the literature concerning the concepts of ECEC relational pedagogy, drawing on the work of Martin Buber, Nel Noddings, and Jools Page. The findings from this study resonate with these theoretical perspectives, particularly in how practitioners describe their interactions with children, which are deeply rooted in emotional connections and care. Martin Buber's concept of dialogue and meaningful human relationships aligns with the practitioners' emphasis on forming genuine, reciprocal connections with children. Practitioners in this study described their interactions as opportunities to engage with children in a personal and meaningful way, seeing them as individuals rather than objects of care. This relational depth reflects Buber's idea of authentic dialogue, where both participants are fully present and connected in the moment. The practitioners' focus on the emotional quality of their interactions echoes Buber's vision of relationships that transcend mere tasks or responsibilities, focusing instead on mutual understanding and emotional engagement.

Similarly, the findings strongly reflect Nel Noddings' ethics of care, which centres on the importance of nurturing and attentive relationships. Practitioners in this study highlighted care as the foundation of their interactions with children, often prioritising emotional well-being over structured cognitive engagement. This aligns with Noddings' view that care should be the core of educational practice, where the emotional and relational needs of the child take precedence. The practitioners' nurturing approach also mirrors Noddings' concept of maternalism, as they viewed their role in terms of providing

emotional support and protection, which further underlines the emotional dimension of their professional practice. The findings also resonate with Jools Page's concept of professional love, where care and emotional investment are seen as essential to the practitioner-child relationship. Practitioners expressed that their work involved deep emotional bonds with children, which were both fulfilling and demanding. This aligns with Page's notion of love labour, where emotional care is central to the practitioner's identity and work. The practitioners' reflections on the emotional rewards and challenges of forming these relationships highlight how professional love is pivotal in their definition of quality interaction, reinforcing the importance of care and emotional engagement in early childhood education. However, while the concept of love labour emphasises the emotional fulfilment practitioners derive from their work, it also brings to light the significant expectations placed on them. The demand to consistently provide emotionally rich, caring interactions can result in the form of emotional labour that may be both physically and emotionally taxing. Practitioners in this study hinted at feeling overwhelmed, reflecting the emotional burden that often comes with love labour. This raises important questions about the sustainability of these expectations and the potential for emotional exhaustion in a profession where love and care are central to practice. While emotional care is essential, the findings suggest a need for greater recognition of the emotional demands placed on practitioners, as well as support structures to help them manage the pressures associated with love labour. This opens a broader discussion about whether current systems adequately support practitioners, or if the emphasis on care may unintentionally create unrealistic expectations, leading to burnout.

3.2 Problematising the Findings

The findings revealed that practitioners' sense of professional accomplishment and satisfaction often stemmed from their ability to establish close bonds with the children. They shared personal narratives of interacting with children, focusing on forming friendships and emotional connections and how these relationships fostered a sense of belonging for both the children and the practitioners. This finding suggests that Maltese practitioners prioritise affective and relational aspects over cognitive dimensions in their day-to-day interactions with children. However, this does not imply a complete absence of cognitive engagement. The findings also highlight moments when practitioners recalled cognitive episodes, such as addressing children's curiosity or engaging them in problem-solving situations. Still, these were framed more as incidental occurrences rather than central aspects of their interaction. Whilst the findings reflect a strong emphasis on care, there is comparatively less evidence of structured cognitive engagement in the interactions described by the practitioners. This imbalance raises important questions about the role of education in Maltese ECEC settings. The care-oriented perspective presented by practitioners largely focuses on emotional and relational quality, which, while important, potentially overlooks the cognitive and educational components essential for children's holistic development.

This predominance of care in practitioners' narratives can be understood as a reflection of their role in providing a nurturing environment for young children, but it may also suggest a gap in practitioners' ability or confidence to integrate cognitive and educational content into their interactions. Cognitive episodes (moments where practitioners engaged children in thinking) were noted, but they were less frequently highlighted compared to the emotional and relational aspects. This suggests that while

cognitive development is acknowledged, it is not always actively pursued as a primary quality interaction goal.

The emphasis on care over cognitive engagement within the findings aligns with the broader national context of ECEC in Malta. Traditionally, the Maltese ECEC has prioritised the care aspect of early childhood (as previously discussed), which has often placed more value on ensuring children's well-being, safety, and emotional comfort over structured educational activities. This focus can be seen in how Maltese ECEC practitioners conceptualise their role, primarily as caregivers rather than educators.

This care-focused approach is deeply embedded in the cultural and institutional framework of Maltese early childhood services (as previously discussed in the literature). In practice, the emphasis is placed on forming secure, attachment-based relationships with children, fostering social-emotional development, and providing a warm, supportive environment. While these are crucial components of quality interaction, this study's findings raise the question of whether there is a need to strike a better balance between caregiving and cognitive development in Malta.

The limited attention to cognitive engagement could also be linked to the training and professional development opportunities available to practitioners (as previously discussed). If the training they receive emphasises the caregiving role without equally stressing the educational and cognitive development aspects, this may lead to a disproportionate focus on care in their daily practices.

3.3 Critique of National Standards

The findings of this study present an opportunity to critique the Maltese ECEC standards (MFED, 2022). As previously discussed, these standards advocate for a holistic approach to early childhood education that incorporates both care and education,

recognising the need for cognitive development alongside emotional and social well-being. However, the findings of this study suggest that there may be a disconnect between these national standards and the actual practices within Maltese ECEC settings. The standards emphasise the importance of creating environments where children can thrive emotionally, socially, and cognitively. Yet, the practitioners' perspectives gathered in this study indicate that, in practice, the cognitive dimension is often sidelined. This suggests that while the standards theoretically endorse a balanced approach, the reality in Maltese ECEC settings leans more heavily towards care, with a less structured focus on education and learning.

This gap between policy and practice could be due to several factors, including the level of training and support practitioners receive in implementing cognitive and educational content. Moreover, the standards may not provide sufficient guidance or resources to enable practitioners to integrate education into their caregiving routines effectively. Whilst practitioners in this study demonstrated a strong commitment to providing quality care and forming secure emotional bonds with children, the findings suggest a need for greater emphasis on cognitive engagement within daily interactions. The Maltese ECEC system may benefit from re-evaluating how national standards are translated into practice, ensuring that the cognitive needs of children are met alongside their emotional and social development.

Section IV Study Contribution

This section addresses the relevance of the study findings by asking the critical academic question, "So what?". According to Selwyn (2013), this question demands self-awareness and focus when communicating the significance and contribution of research. As I reflect on the earlier stages of this study, I distinctly remember grappling with the

purpose of making a meaningful contribution to the wider research field and its potential impact on pedagogical practice. Initially, this felt daunting, but as I engaged more deeply with the study, I found myself repeatedly asking, “So what?”, which helped me stay focused on the importance of my interpretations and the claims I sought to make in the findings and discussion sections of this thesis. Whilst not groundbreaking, the findings contribute to an organised understanding of practitioners’ perspectives of quality interaction. By asking, “So what?” I considered the relevance of these findings and how they could enrich the discourse on ECEC in Malta, where the care-education dichotomy remains an issue. This led me to explore the broader implications of the study and its contribution to the understanding of practitioners’ roles in fostering quality interaction.

At its core, the purpose of this study was to provide insight into how ECEC practitioners in Malta perceive and enact quality interaction with young children. By documenting their perspectives, this study offers a reflection on how the emotional and relational aspects of care are prioritised, often at the expense of cognitive engagement. This reflects the broader care-education dichotomy within Maltese ECEC, where caregiving roles are deeply ingrained, while cognitive and educational components may be less emphasised.

The significance of this study lies in its potential to facilitate professional reflection among practitioners, encouraging them to rethink the balance between care and education in their practice. By highlighting this imbalance, the study provides an opportunity for practitioners to consider how they might better integrate cognitive and educational activities into their emotionally driven interactions. This reflection not only serves the practitioners themselves but also indirectly benefits the children they work with, as more balanced interactions can lead to more holistic developmental outcomes.

The findings of this study are particularly relevant in the context of Malta's ongoing discussion about the care-education dichotomy in ECEC. While Maltese National Standards (MFED, 2022) advocate for a more integrated "edu-care" approach, in practice, there remains a stronger emphasis on caregiving over cognitive development. This research surfaces these tendencies, showing that practitioners excel at providing emotional care and building secure relationships with children, yet often lack a structured focus on promoting cognitive growth through their daily interactions.

By asking "So what?", this study challenges existing ECEC practices in Malta and contributes to the discourse on how the care-education balance can be improved. It aligns with broader discussions in the literature, such as Rentzou (2019), who calls for greater documentation of how ECEC professionals understand and implement holistic pedagogical approaches that integrate both care and education. The findings highlight that while practitioners are adept at fostering emotional security, there is a need for more deliberate cognitive engagement within their practices.

In asking "So what?", the contribution of this study becomes clear, it reveals a significant aspect of Maltese ECEC practice, the dominance of care over education, and the need for a more balanced approach. This study not only provides insights for practitioners but also serves as a reflective tool for enhancing the integration of cognitive engagement within emotionally driven practices. Ultimately, the findings contribute to both the well-being of practitioners and the children they work with, offering a way forward for more holistic early childhood education and care in Malta.

4.1 Introducing self-reflective interaction cards for Practitioners

While the purpose of this study was not to develop practical tools or interventions, the findings led me to consider how they might inform reflective practices in early

childhood settings. Reflective practice (as discussed earlier in the literature review), is a key professional skill that encourages individuals to think critically and deeply about their actions, decisions, and assumptions in their work (Bassot, 2016). In fields such as education, reflective practice enables professionals to challenge their pedagogical reasoning and navigate complex situations (Pella, 2015). Reflective cards have been cited as resources that empower practitioners by enhancing their awareness and promoting responsibility for their own professional development (Hughes et al., 2009).

Inspired by these concepts, I developed a set of six self-reflective cards as a potential tool to prompt ECEC practitioners to reflect more holistically on the quality of their interactions with children. The cards correspond to the six conceptual categories explored in the study (repertoire, beliefs, cognitive episodes, identity, context, and emotionality). These cards are intended to encourage practitioners to reflect on their perspectives of interaction, rather than focusing solely on what they do during their practice. However, it is important to emphasise that these cards are not the intended outcome of this research, and they have not been tested for effectiveness or practical use. As such, I cannot make any claims about their current applicability or impact in real-world settings. The cards are offered as a starting point for future research in this area, rather than a solution or resource for immediate implementation. Further research would be needed to assess how these cards could be integrated into professional development programs and whether they effectively support practitioners in enhancing the quality of their interactions with children. Potential studies could explore their use in both physical and digital formats, in peer mentoring, team training, or individual reflection sessions. These cards are simply a proposal at this stage, and their role in promoting reflective practice remains an open area for future exploration and evaluation.

Figure 14
Reflective interaction card 1: repertoire

1 THINKING ABOUT YOUR
PROFESSIONAL REPERTOIRE
 IN YOUR ECEC CENTRE

WHAT IS REPERTOIRE?

Repertoire is defined as a diverse range of interactive behaviours that you demonstrate when interacting with children in your centre.

REFLECT

- How do you communicate with young children in your groups?
- Why is interaction with your children important?
- List some of the ways you communicate with young children.
- How do you feel when you reflect on your interaction with your children?
- In what ways can you communicate with a child who is not familiar with the Maltese or English language?

CONSIDER YOUR INTERACTION WITH YOUNG CHILDREN

REFLECT

- How do you communicate with young children in your groups?
- Why is interaction with your children important?
- List some of the ways you communicate with young children.
- How do you feel when you reflect on your interaction with your children?
- In what ways can you communicate with a child who is not familiar with the Maltese or English language?

WHAT IS EMBODIMENT?

Apart from verbal communication, the term **embodiment** also includes the physical actions you make during an interaction. It is the way you move your body. These actions may include listening, eye contact, gaze, touch and facial expressions.

REFLECT

- Why are your physical actions important when interacting with a baby/infant?
- Describe some of the features of your physical movement.
- What are some of the reasons why you act the way you have described during your interaction?

WHAT IS ATTENTIVENESS?

Attentiveness describes the way you attend to the needs of young children. This can be the level of sensitivity, warmth, and intimacy you demonstrate during your interaction.

REFLECT

- How would you describe the way you respond to a young child?
- Describe some of the ways you encourage a child to interact.
- How do you feel when responding to the needs of your group?

WHAT IS RECIPROCITY?

Reciprocity is the two-way process, the forward and backward nature of your interaction with young children. For reciprocity to exist in your interactions, the child is equally responsible to communicate back with you. Even if they are pre-verbal, they can show signs of reciprocity.

REFLECT

- What are some of the ways children show you that they are engaged?
- Why is it sometimes difficult to recognise reciprocity when interacting with young children?
- How do you feel when a young child will not interact with you?
- What are some of the ways you can help children reciprocate during your interaction?

REFLECT

- What are some of the ways children show you that they are engaged?
- Why is it sometimes difficult to recognise reciprocity when interacting with young children?
- How do you feel when a young child will not interact with you?
- What are some of the ways you can help children reciprocate during your interaction?

Further information, references & contact details are provided separately

Note Card content formed from the conceptual categories

Figure 15
Reflective interaction card 2; beliefs

2

THINKING ABOUT YOUR **INTERACTION BELIEFS** IN YOUR ECEC CENTRE

WHAT ARE YOUR BELIEFS?

A **belief** is something that you consider to be true. As a practitioner what are your beliefs about quality interaction with young children in your centre?

CONSIDER YOUR RELATIONSHIPS WITH YOUR CHILDREN

REFLECT

- How do you form a relationship with young children in your groups?
- Why are relationships with your children important?
- List some of the ways you form a relationship with young children.
- How do you feel when you reflect on your relationships with your children?
- In what ways can you develop a relationship with a child who may be finding it difficult to interact with you?



WHAT IS A PRACTITIONER-CHILD RELATIONSHIP & FRIENDSHIP?

Relationships are central to your pedagogy and describe the partnership you share with your children. It is the interconnectedness between you and the child that forms the relationship. A **friendship** describes a partnership and is often based on mutual trust, reciprocity and respect.

REFLECT

- How would you describe your relationship with your children?
- How do you feel about your practitioner-child relationships?

WHAT IS A PRACTITIONER-CHILD BOND?

Relationship **bonds** are the relations connections you share with your children in your group and are based on the experiences, interests, and feelings you share with your children.

REFLECT

- How would you describe the bond(s) you have with the children in your group?
- How do you build relationship bonds?
- How do you feel when thinking about the bonds you share with your children?

WHAT ARE PRACTITIONER-CHILD BOUNDARIES?

Relationship **boundaries** are seen to be the limits in which the relationship bond you share with children in your group exists.

REFLECT

- How would you describe the boundaries of your relationship with the children in your group?
- How do you create relationship boundaries?
- What do you see as the potential barriers to forming relationship boundaries?

WHAT IS FORMING TRUST & MODELING BEHAVIOUR?

Trust is described as the reliability and sincerity of the practitioner. **Modeling** behaviour is an essential part of moral education and is recognised as the act of demonstrating caring prosocial behaviour (e.g mutual respect), in the hope to influence a child's prosocial development.

REFLECT

- What are some of the ways you build a trustworthy relationship with your children?
- Describe moments when you believe you have modelled prosocial behaviour in front of your group.
- How do you know when a young child trusts you?
- Why is modelling positive behaviour important?

Further information, references & contact details are provided separately

Note Card content formed from the conceptual categories

Figure 16
Reflective interaction card 3: cognitive episodes

3

THINKING ABOUT YOUR **COGNITIVE EPISODES** IN YOUR ECEC CENTRE

WHAT ARE COGNITIVE EPISODES?

Cognitive episodes are moments in time when you are aware of supporting a child's learning through action and dialogue. It is those moments when you feel a "click" with a child.

CONSIDER YOUR COGNITIVE MOMENTS OF INTERACTION WITH YOUR CHILDREN



REFLECT

- How do you form interactions with young children in your groups?
- Why are interactions with your children important?
- How do you feel when you reflect on your interactions with your children?
- In what ways can you develop meaningful interactions with a child who may be finding it difficult to interact with you?

WHAT IS FOLLOWING THE CHILD'S LEAD & INTERESTS?

Following the child's lead/interests refers to those moments in time when you encourage a child to engage in play-based learning. For example a child-initiated project-based emergent approach.

REFLECT

- What is the difference between a practitioner-led activity and a child-initiated activity?
- How do you define the emergent approach in your setting?
- How do you foster a child's curiosity and interest?

WHAT IS SUSTAINED SHARED THINKING AS A COGNITIVE EPISODE?

Sustained shared thinking is the "ah-ha" interactive moment you share with children. It is a cognitive episode where you are both in tune and work together to problem-solve or complete a task through shared interaction.

REFLECT

- How would you describe the way you "click" with a child, or share an "ah-ha" moment?
- How do you know when a child has learned a new skill?
- How do you feel when a child demonstrates progression?

WHAT IS MANAGING EMOTIONS AS A COGNITIVE EPISODE?

Managing a child's emotional regulation is achieved by creating boundaries, routines and clarifying your expectations in an age-appropriate manner. The goal is not to control children's emotions, rather it is about creating opportunities for young children to express their emotions within a safe space.

REFLECT

- What are some of the ways children demonstrate emotional dysregulation?
- How do you feel when faced with challenging behaviour?
- Why is it sometimes difficult to understand the cause of challenging behaviour?
- What are some of the ways you can help children to regulate their emotions?

Further information, references & contact details are provided separately

Note Card content formed from the conceptual categories

Figure 17
Reflective interaction card 4: Identity

4

THINKING ABOUT YOUR **IDENTITY** IN YOUR ECEC CENTRE

WHAT IS IDENTITY?

Identity refers to your sense of self. How you identify will be a combination of external social factors and internal psychological factors. Part of your identity as a practitioner is based on how you see yourself as a professional and how your lived experience shapes that image.

CONSIDER HOW YOUR IDENTITY INFLUENCES YOUR INTERACTIONS WITH CHILDREN

REFLECT

- How does your identity influence your interactions with young children in your groups?
- Why should you think about how your identity influences your interactions with your group?
- How do you feel when you reflect on your identity within your group context?
- In what ways can you share your identity during meaningful interactions with a child?

WHAT ARE IDENTITY LABELS?

Identity labels are typically verbal categories that are assigned to people to indicate group membership. Labels can have both positive and negative impacts on the individual.

REFLECT

- Describe how others (children, colleagues, parents, management) describe you.
- Are there certain labels you give yourself?
- How do you feel about labels that are associated with your identity?
- In what ways do you feel connected to your group/colleagues/centre?

WHAT IS MATERNALISM?

Maternalism describes the way an individual responds in a loving and caring manner. It is sometimes referred to as "motherliness" and is not dependent on whether you have your own children, as maternalism is also modelled to us when we are young children.

REFLECT

- How would you describe maternalism?
- Reflect on your own experience of maternalism, what comes to mind?
- Describe how you're experience of maternalism influences your approach to quality interaction with your children.
- Do you consider maternalism part of your professional role with children in your group?

Further information, references & contact details are provided separately

Note Card content formed from the conceptual categories

Figure 18
Reflective interaction card 5: context

5

THINKING ABOUT YOUR ECEC CONTEXT IN YOUR ECEC CENTRE

WHAT IS CONTEXT? ✨

Your ECEC setting **context** is the working environment of your ECEC setting. It is the physical space you share with those children attending the setting. It can be the outdoor and indoor areas.

CONSIDER HOW YOUR ECEC SETTING INFLUENCES YOUR INTERACTIONS WITH CHILDREN



REFLECT

- How does your environment influence your interactions with young children in your groups?
- Why should you think about how your setting influences your interactions with your group?
- How do you feel when you reflect on the working environment?

WHAT ARE RATIOS? ✨

A **child-to-practitioner ratio** is a number that indicates the size of your group of children and includes you. For example, if your group includes six children, then your ratio would be 1:6 (1 adult to 6 children).

REFLECT

- In your opinion, do group ratios impact the quality of your interactions with children?
- What are your thoughts and feelings concerning the required ratios?
- If you have a smaller group of children, how does this influence your interaction with children?

WHAT IS CLASSROOM SPACE? ✨

The **classroom space** is the physical space around you when you are interacting with your group of children. This includes a designated classroom, outdoors, and other areas of your setting.

REFLECT

- Is there anything in your environment that interrupts your interactions with your children?
- How do you feel about your classroom environment?
- If you could change aspects of your environment, what would they be?

WHAT ARE STRESS & OVERWHELM? ✨

Stress refers to feelings of being worried and tense as a result of a situation. Whereas, **overwhelm** refers to the feeling when you think something is too challenging to manage. Both overwhelm and stress are linked and can have a direct effect of your well-being.

REFLECT

- From your experience, what are some of the triggers to feeling overwhelmed when interacting with children?
- How do your feelings of stress/overwhelm effect the quality of your interaction with children?

WHAT IS PARENT PARTNERHIP? ✨

Parent partnership refers to the relationship you share with the parents of the children in your group. These relationships are important for the overall well-being of the child and their sense of safety whilst they attend the setting.

REFLECT ✨

- What are your thoughts about working in partnership with your parents?
- How does parent partnership influence the quality of your interactions with your children?
- What kind of feedback do you receive from parents? How does this make you feel?

Further information, references & contact details are provided separately

Note Card content formed from the conceptual categories

Figure 19
Reflective interaction card 6: emotionality

6

THINKING ABOUT YOUR EMOTIONALITY IN YOUR ECEC CENTRE

WHAT IS YOUR EMOTIONALITY?

Your **emotionality** is the term used to describe your expression and presentation of emotions. Your emotionality is an important aspect of the social relationships you have and the interaction you share with your children.

CONSIDER HOW YOUR EMOTIONALITY INFLUENCES YOUR INTERACTIONS WITH CHILDREN



REFLECT

- How do your emotions influence your interactions with young children in your groups?
- Why should you think about how your emotions influence your interactions with your group?
- How do you feel when you reflect on your emotions that are related to your professional practice?

WHAT ARE NEGATIVE & POSITIVE EMOTIONS?

A **negative** emotion typically refers to an unpleasant emotion that leaves you feeling unhappy, disappointed, or even dissatisfied. Whereas, **positive** emotion refers to pleasant emotions that you feel joyful, satisfaction, and love.

All emotions can significantly impact your professional well-being. Negative emotions contribute to professional stress and feelings of overwhelm, whereas, positive emotions can impact a sense of belonging and satisfaction in your work.

Therefore, it is useful to reflect on your emotions and to understand where they may be coming from and how they are impacting your role within the practitioner-child interaction.

REFLECT

- Describe your current negative and positive emotions.
- What aspects of your role and responsibilities influence these emotions?
- Are there any poignant times when you feel either negative or positive experiences impacts;
 - Your **repertoire** with your children (being attentive, engaging in reciprocal interaction, showing a full range of embodiment actions - *refer to Card 1*).
 - Your professional **beliefs** about quality interaction (your belief in forming friendships, relationships, bonds, boundaries, trust and modeling prosocial behaviours - *refer to Card 2*).
 - Your cognitive episodes that you share with your children (following your child's interests, sharing moments of sustained shared thinking, and managing the children's emotions - *refer to Card 3*).
 - Your **identity** influencing your quality interactions with your children (your experience of maternalism and identity labels - *refer to Card 4*).
 - Your workplace **context** influencing your quality interactions (your group ratios, time constraints, classroom areas, relationships with parents and feelings of stress and/or overwhelm - *refer to Card 5*).
- What other parts of your emotionality shows up here, whilst you reflect on all aspects of your quality interactions?

Further information, references & contact details are provided separately

Note Card content formed from the theoretical category

As illustrated in Figures 15 to 20, the six reflective cards are designed to encourage practitioners to reflect on each of the six conceptual categories (repertoire, beliefs, cognitive episodes, identity, context and their emotionality) prior to, during or after their practitioner-child interaction. The cards provide a tactile experience that compliments the subjective experience of practitioners' quality interactions. Every card is designed in a similar manner and the content was disseminated from the findings (Chapters VIII and IX).

To illustrate the step-by-step process in which the cards were developed, the first card "repertoire" is broken down (Figure 21, 22) and explained below. On every card, the first box provides an introduction and definition of the card category, prior to offering a few plenary reflective questions about the category as illustrated below in Figure 20, Card 1 - Repertoire.

Figure 20

The introductory section of the reflective card (Card 1 Repertoire)

<p>WHAT IS REPERTOIRE? </p> <p>Repertoire is defined as a diverse range of interactive behaviours that you demonstrate when interacting with children in your centre. </p>	<p>CONSIDER YOUR INTERACTION WITH YOUNG CHILDREN </p> <p>REFLECT</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do you communicate with young children in your groups? • Why is interaction with your children important? • List some of the ways you communicate with young children. • How do you feel when you reflect on your interaction with your children? • In what ways can you communicate with a child who is not familiar with the Maltese or English language?
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The introductory section (Figure 20) provides a simplified definition of the category and accompanying open-ended questions that focus on it more generally. This encourages practitioners to reflect on what they understand as the main conceptual category before focusing on its subcategories.

After the first section of the card, each subcategory (of the main categorical category, as presented in Figure 13) is presented with accompanying reflective questions designed based on the findings. All questions are purposefully open-ended to encourage practitioners to think about their own individualised experiences, views, and feelings.

Figure 21

The middle section of the reflective card (Card 1 Repertoire)

<p>WHAT IS EMBODIMENT?</p> <p>Apart from verbal communication, the term embodiment also includes the physical actions you make during an interaction. It is the way you move your body. These actions may include listening, eye contact, gaze, touch and facial expressions.</p> <p>REFLECT ✨</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why are your physical actions important when interacting with a baby/infant? • Describe some of the features of your physical movement. • What are some of the reasons why you act the way you have described during your interaction? 	<p>WHAT IS ATTENTIVENESS?</p> <p>Attentiveness describes the way you attend to the needs of young children. This can be the level of sensitivity, warmth, and intimacy you demonstrate during your interaction. ✨</p> <p>REFLECT</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How would you describe the way you respond to a young child? • Describe some of the ways you encourage a child to interact. • How do you feel when responding to the needs of your group?
<p>WHAT IS RECIPROCITY?</p> <p>Reciprocity is the two-way process, the forward and backward nature of your interaction with young children. For reciprocity to exist in your interactions, the child is equally responsible to communicate back with you. Even if they are pre-verbal, they can show signs of reciprocity. ✨</p>	<p>REFLECT ✨</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are some of the ways children show you that they are engaged? • Why is it sometimes difficult to recognise reciprocity when interacting with young children? • How do you feel when a young child will not interact with you? • What are some of the ways you can help children reciprocate during your interaction?
<p>Further information, references & contact details are provided separately</p>	

For example, referring to the first card (Figure 21), the subcategories embodiment, attentiveness, and reciprocity are defined and have accompanying reflective questions that were developed following a dissemination process. This involved taking our co-constructed interpretations and turning them into reflective questions for the cards, as illustrated in Table 8.

Table 8

Disseminating findings to reflective cards (Card 1 Repertoire)

Sub-category	Practitioners responses & my interpretation	Reflective Questions on Cards
Embodiment (Chapter VIII, Section 1.1)	Importance of “getting down to their level” “listening” “making eye contact” Gaze, touch, hug, language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why are your physical actions important when interacting with a baby/infant? • Describe some of the features of your physical movement. • What are some of the reasons why you act the way you have described during your interactions?
Attentiveness (Chapter VIII, Section 1.2)	Feelings of being “engrossed” “using space for discussions” “uniting” “democratic discussion” “showing genuine interest” “share joy” “patience & firmness”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How would you describe the way you respond to a young child? • Describe some of the ways you encourage a child to interact • How do you feel when responding to the needs of your group?

<p>Reciprocity</p> <p>(Chapter VIII, Section 1.3)</p>	<p>Reliant on feedback from child, can be “challenging” with pre-verbal children</p> <p>Feedback reliant on level of engagement.</p> <p>“Copying behaviour”</p> <p>Feeling defensive as a lack of feedback from child</p> <p>“Physical space” “being close” “acceptance”</p> <p>“closeness”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are some of the ways children show you that they are engaged? • Why is it sometimes difficult to recognise reciprocity when interacting with young children? • How do you feel when a young child will not interact with you? • What are some of the ways you can help children reciprocate during your interaction?
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In reality, the cards would include additional blank cards for those using them to write and reflect on their own ideas concerning their repertoire (and the other conceptual categories). The questions would likely evoke different ideas and perspectives that may not necessarily fit into embodiment, attentiveness or reciprocity subcategories.

Furthermore, as a pack, there would be an introductory guide to using the cards which would include additional resources, accompanying references to related literature and contact details for local mental health support services (for example Richmond Foundation which is the national NGO) as a mental health safeguarding measure.

Chapter Summary

This discussion chapter has explored how the co-constructed interpretation of practitioners' responses, as presented in Chapters VIII and IX, has led to an organised cluster of ideas describing Maltese ECEC practitioners' perspectives on quality interaction. Through a visual representation of the six conceptual categories, the diagram (Figure 13) illustrated the relationships within practitioners' responses, highlighting that their approach to quality interaction is primarily driven by emotionality. Reflecting on the

broader implications of these findings, I have proposed a set of professional reflective cards based on the categorical data. These cards are intended to serve as a potential resource for practitioners to use before, during, or after their practitioner-child interactions (PCI). While the cards remain at the proposal stage and are not yet tested, they offer a starting point for future research into reflective practice and its role in enhancing process quality, specifically in interactions. The cards aim to foster deeper self-awareness and stimulate meaningful conversations about interaction quality among ECEC professionals.

Chapter XI Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal that Maltese ECEC practitioners place a strong emphasis on emotionality and relational depth in their perspectives and enactment of quality interaction. Practitioners consistently prioritise forming deep, meaningful bonds with children, often focusing on the emotional and nurturing aspects of their roles. This perspective aligns with various theoretical frameworks, including Martin Buber's concept of dialogue, Nel Noddings' ethics of care, and Jools Page's ideas of professional love, all of which highlight the centrality of care, relational engagement, and emotional connection in educational contexts. However, the study also uncovers a potential imbalance in the practitioners' approach, with cognitive engagement playing a lesser role compared to the emotional aspects of care. This reflects a broader cultural and institutional emphasis in Maltese ECEC settings, where care and emotional well-being have historically taken precedence over structured educational practices. This may suggest a need for further development in balancing care and cognitive engagement to provide a more holistic approach to children's development.

Whilst emotional care is highly valued, the concept of love labour raises concerns about the emotional demands placed on practitioners. Without adequate support or recognition of the strain this can create, the expectations for continuous emotional care point to the risk of emotional exhaustion and burnout. This highlights the need for greater attention to the well-being of practitioners, ensuring that systems are in place to support them in managing the emotional complexities of their work.

This study highlights the vital role of emotionality and relational care in Maltese ECEC. It also suggests the importance of developing more balanced practices that

incorporate cognitive engagement and stronger support structures for practitioners as they navigate the emotional challenges of their profession. These findings open pathways for future research and professional development initiatives that could enhance both the quality of interactions and the sustainability of emotional labour within Maltese early childhood education settings.

Limitations

Despite efforts to ensure the quality and rigour of this study, all research faces limitations (Ross & Bibler Zaidi, 2019). As the researcher, it is my responsibility to acknowledge these limitations, ensuring transparency and honesty throughout the research process. This section outlines the boundaries within which the findings should be considered, specifically addressing participants' prior experience with Video-Stimulated Discussion (VSD) and the emergence of the reflective cards, which were not originally intended as part of the study.

First, this study reflects how early years practitioners interpreted their approach to quality interaction through the use of VSD, a reflective tool that enabled them to observe and discuss their pre-recorded practitioner-child interactions (PCIs). While VSD has gained popularity as a professional development tool (as discussed in Chapter VI, Section 5.3), it can be challenging for practitioners unfamiliar with it. Some participants, although not overtly expressing anxiety, appeared nervous or uncertain at the start of their VSD sessions. As the researcher, I found myself needing to ease certain participants into the process more than others. This difference in comfort levels may have influenced the depth of their reflections, as some participants seemed more focused on finding "the right answer" rather than openly exploring their true thoughts. Although I reassured them that

the aim was not to assess their competency but to encourage reflection, the initial hesitancy may have affected how they articulated their emotions and views.

The lack of prior experience with VSD among participants represents a limitation of the study. Without familiarity with this reflective tool, participants may have felt less confident in critically reflecting on their interactions. This could have shaped their responses, potentially limiting the depth of their pedagogical reflections. Offering participants a trial experience with VSD prior to data collection may have alleviated some of their hesitancy and enabled more profound insights into their practices (Consuegra et al., 2016). While the post-study feedback suggested that practitioners ultimately found value in the process, expressing satisfaction and a deeper awareness of the reciprocal bonds with children, their initial hesitancy raises questions about whether the method allowed for equally deep reflections across all participants.

The second limitation pertains to the emergence of the reflective cards, which were developed during the final stages of the analysis (Chapter X, Section 3.2). These cards were not part of the original research design or intended outcomes, and therefore, they were not discussed or tested with the participants. While creating the cards felt like a natural and creative extension of the findings, inspired by Janesick's (2001) view that qualitative research allows for intuitive and creative steps, the cards have not been validated for practical use. As a result, their effectiveness and applicability in practice remain unknown, and their use would require further research and evaluation before any claims about their impact could be made.

In conclusion, while this study offers valuable insights into the reflective practices of early years practitioners, these limitations must be considered when interpreting the findings. Participants' unfamiliarity with VSD may have influenced the depth of their

reflections, and the reflective cards, while promising, are merely a proposal at this stage and require further investigation.

Recommendations

This section outlines recommendations for advancing future research, aimed at expanding on the findings of this study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Based on the research limitations, particularly that practitioners had no prior experience with Video-Stimulated Discussion (VSD) before participating, several areas for further exploration are suggested.

First, it is recommended that future research using VSD to conduct interpretative studies assess practitioners' understanding of the VSD process before data collection begins. A pre-data collection trial of VSD could improve self-awareness among practitioners and enhance their understanding of the value of reflective practice. This might lead to more profound insights into their approach to quality interaction and reduce any apprehension they might feel about being recorded and evaluated. A trial phase could help practitioners feel more comfortable, potentially leading to deeper reflections and more authentic responses during the formal data collection.

Additionally, expanding reflective spaces nationally across the 174 early childhood centres in Malta could provide valuable insights into how to better support practitioners' communicative actions and emotional well-being. This is particularly significant in light of evidence that early years practitioners often experience negative emotionality, with some early signs of mental health concerns (Cumming & Wong, 2018; Moxley, 2022). Research at a national level could examine how reflective practices might mitigate these issues and support practitioner well-being more effectively.

Given that the data collection for this study was conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic, another area of future research could explore how practitioners' perspectives

on their interactions with children may have evolved due to the pandemic. Social distancing measures and other restrictions likely forced adaptations in embodied communication and overall interaction styles. It would be insightful to explore whether these changes, coupled with potential increases in stress or overwhelm, have reshaped practitioners' repertoires, beliefs, cognitive episodes, identities, and emotional approaches to quality interaction. Understanding the long-term effects of these adaptations could inform strategies for supporting practitioners during future national crises, such as preparing for similar constraints in practice.

Lastly, the reflective cards developed during the final stages of this study (Chapter X) present an opportunity for further research. Developing this tool into a larger, practice-based study would provide insights into its usefulness, application, and potential long-term effects on practitioners' self-awareness and perspectives on quality interaction. Conducting a large-scale, longitudinal study to evaluate the cards' impact could reveal whether they significantly influence reflective practice and whether practitioners find them beneficial over time. I plan to share the reflective cards with the local ECEC community as part of my ongoing professional consultancy work. Through this process, I hope to gather feedback and further explore their potential, with the ambition of creating the first independent platform in Malta to amplify the voices of practitioners in the sector.

Section III Originality & Final Reflection

The aim of a PhD is to contribute to the existing body of research by either challenging established theories, applying innovative research methods, or offering fresh perspectives (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p.25). While this study employed conventional inductive methodologies, to the best of my knowledge, it is the first interpretive study in Malta that has used VSD to explore practitioners' perspectives of quality PCI within an ECEC setting. Although the core themes found in this study align with existing literature, the use of CGT analysis enabled a systematic organisation of ideas that are specifically relevant to the Maltese context, offering a distinct perspective on process quality, particularly in relation to PCI.

This study has made a valuable contribution to the Maltese early years sector by amplifying the perspectives of a small cohort of practitioners and delving into their subjective perspectives. The findings demonstrate that practitioners approach quality PCI from an emotional and individualised stance, providing a renewed understanding of interaction quality within Maltese ECEC.

Throughout this thesis, I have frequently referred to myself as the novice researcher experiencing a research apprenticeship. This journey has provided not only a modest insight into practitioners' perspectives of quality interaction but has also offered a significant opportunity for personal and academic growth within the ECEC field. Over nearly ten years of working in the education sector, this PhD experience has given me the confidence to launch one of the first private consultancy practices for early-years practitioners in Malta. While this professional milestone brings satisfaction, I recognise it as the beginning of a long research journey, especially in navigating future inductive research. Conducting this Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) study was challenging,

particularly in balancing interpreting practitioners' responses with maintaining procedural rigour. I have endeavoured to adhere to the core principles of CGT (as discussed in Chapter VII), but as Birks and Mills (2015) highlight, developing expertise is a long-term process. This experience has tested and enhanced my research skills, from data gathering to co-constructing shared understandings with participants. It has been as much a learning process for me as it has been about the findings, offering insights into my growth as a researcher.

Undertaking this study during a global pandemic while being a long-distance PhD candidate added significant challenges. Disruptions to my career and personal life, combined with the isolation of the pandemic, often made it difficult to stay focused on the labour-intensive CGT process. There were moments of doubt and isolation, but through increased reflective practice, journaling, and reading, I found ways to make the findings relevant in a post-COVID world. This study has inspired me to further explore professional development tools, such as reflective cards, to contextualise learning for adult practitioners within the Maltese ECEC community. I aim to continue supporting the childcare sector by providing learning opportunities that acknowledge practitioners' expertise while addressing their well-being in a challenging working environment (Rao et al., 2022).

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Appendix I UREC Ethical Approval



Downloaded: 07/09/2020
Approved: 08/10/2018

Georgina Fardoe
Registration number: 150215549
School of Education
Programme: EDUR33 PhD/Education (Malta)

Dear Georgina

PROJECT TITLE: Developing a Responsive Reciprocal Care (RRC) concept to support the Maltese Early Years Practitioner (EYP) pedagogy.

APPLICATION: Reference Number 015864

On behalf of the University ethics reviewers who reviewed your project, I am pleased to inform you that on 08/10/2018 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 015864 (form submission date: 26/09/2018); (expected project end date: 01/05/2019).
- Participant information sheet 1039768 version 4 (26/09/2018).
- Participant information sheet 1049598 version 3 (26/09/2018).
- Participant consent form 1039769 version 5 (26/09/2018).

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/1.6710661/file/GRIPPpolicy.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 II ECEC Setting Information, Correspondence & Permission

University of Sheffield
School of Education EDUR33 - Malta

Appendix 1

Georgina Fardoe
Malta Cohort 7

Developing a Responsive Reciprocal Care (RRC) concept to support the Maltese Early Years Practitioner (EYP) pedagogy.

Centre Introductory Letter

[Corresponding Centre Address]

Dear Head of School/Centre Manager,

I am currently undergoing my PhD in Early Years Education with The School of Education and The University of Sheffield. I am looking to conduct a study in the early years education sector, namely out-of-home childcare.

The aim of my study is to explore and understand early years practitioner's social reality of the two-way interaction between the infant/child and practitioner that is often referred to as professional *responsive reciprocal care* within a 0-4 years provision. It is hoped that by the end of this study, I will formulate a Responsive Reciprocal Care (RRC) concept which can be used to inform all Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) stakeholders about how RRC can be conceptualised in practice, specifically here in Malta. Moreover, it is hoped that this concept can be used to further develop practitioners knowledge of RRC, based on the assumption that a tangible RRC concept will facilitate in-house Continuous Professional Development (CPD) strategies. In providing centres with the opportunity of experiencing a cohesive professional environment, practitioners will collectively work in partnership to enhance and develop *quality* early years infant-carer communication.

The study will be divided into two sections; the first phase will be the recording of several observations of the infant/child and practitioner interaction, whilst the second phase will be a series of short individual interviews with the same practitioners as described below in the following table;

Study Question	Study Phase Objective	Duration of the Phase	Participant Requirement
Phase 1 <i>What are the features/ characteristics of responsive reciprocal care concept in practice?</i>	The Phase 1 objective is to observe and record the interaction between the practitioner and the infant/child in the group. The aim is to explore the characteristics of the infant-practitioner interaction.	Each observation will be recorded for a duration of no more than 45 minutes depending on the amount of natural occurring interaction between the practitioner and the infant/child.	The practitioner will be requested to interact and act as natural as possible within setting, whilst being recorded.

e: gafardoe1@sheffield.ac.uk

t: +(356) 77480450

University of Sheffield
School of Education EDUR33 - Malta

Appendix 1

Georgina Fardoe
Malta Cohort 7

<p>Phase 2 <i>How do practitioners describe and articulate their own notion of responsive reciprocal care within their own early years setting?</i></p>	<p>The objective of Phase 2 is to interview the same practitioner about their experience and knowledge of professional caregiving. The aim of the interview is to understand how the practitioner experiences the child-carer interaction. During the interview, myself and the practitioner will discuss sections of the recorded interaction (from Phase 1) as a method of checking that the correct inferences have been made.</p>	<p>Each interview will take approximately 20-30 minutes. Practitioners will be asked open-ended questions and they will be reassured that there is no right or wrong way of answering the questions. Moreover, their disclosure will not in any way effect their position and/or role as an employee.</p>	<p>Practitioners will be requested to discuss responsive reciprocal care, and what it means to them in practice. The idea is to elicit meaning from the practitioners voice and not to "measure" their performance in any way.</p>
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I kindly request two separate Study Briefing Meetings with respective practitioners and parents in order to clearly inform them all of the study aims, objectives and ethical considerations prior to completing their respective Participation Information/Consent documents.

Kindly refer to the attached copies of both the practitioner and parents information/consent sheet which clearly informs all participants of their right to withdraw, what is expected from them and ethical issues that are related to the gathering of video and audio recordings.

Should participating in the current study be of interest to you and your centre, kindly contact me on the provided contact details at your convenience.

I wish to thank you for your time and consideration and hope to hear from you in due course.

Yours sincerely



Georgina Fardoe

From: [REDACTED]
Subject: Re: Hello Ms [REDACTED]
Date: 27 August 2018 at 19:53
To: Georgina <gfardoe13@gmail.com>, [REDACTED] <[REDACTED]>

Dear Georgina,

[REDACTED]

Re [REDACTED] you have our permission. I am copying in Ms. [REDACTED] so that you can take up the conversation with her regarding a meetings and best timing etc.

Thanks

Ms. [REDACTED]

Head of School & Director of the [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

"A good head and good heart are always a formidable combination. But when you add to that a literate tongue or pen, then you have something very special."

- Nelson Mandela

From: Georgina <gfardoe13@gmail.com>
Sent: 25 August 2018 11:24:45

To: [REDACTED]
Subject: Hello Ms [REDACTED]

Good morning Ms [REDACTED]

I hope this email finds you well rested and enjoying your summer time. I thought I would touch-base with you a bit.

[REDACTED]


Secondly, I would like to confirm that I have permission to carry out my study in [REDACTED] once the children resume and settle (mid October) as previously discussed. I am currently going through the final stages of Ethics (which has been delayed slightly due to summer breaks), therefore as soon as it is approved I have my formal letter to send you. I have spoken briefly already to Ms [REDACTED] about it and I wish to suggest that I come in to speak with her more thoroughly before briefing the carers as a group about their participation should they wish to be involved - this shouldn't take more than 30 minutes. Perhaps at some point during the staff days would be a good time time for you all?

In the meantime, enjoy the rest of your summer, take care,

Kind regards,

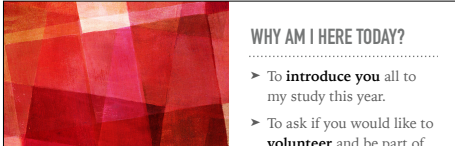
Georgina

Appendix III Participant Presentation, Information & Consent



EARLY YEARS STUDY

The University of Sheffield - School of Education
Georgina Fardoe - PhD Student



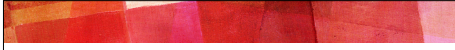
WHY AM I HERE TODAY?

- > To **introduce you** all to my study this year.
- > To ask if you would like to **volunteer** and be part of this research project, once I have told you what it is about.
- > To ensure you are aware of all the details, so you can make an **informed decision**.

WHY HAVE I CHOSEN TO STUDY EARLY YEARS?

WHAT WILL I BE INVESTIGATING?

- > Sector needs **recognition, support and current research**. I wish to contribute towards **knowledge** whilst **raising awareness of the needs of the sector here in Malta**.
- > My study aims to explore and define what we mean by **RESPONSIVE RECIPROCAL CARE** in Early Years Education and Care - Why?
 - > responsive reciprocal care is the **key to helping infants/children develop and learn**;
 - > there is **no clear exiting definition** what reciprocal care means; and
 - > there is **no clear way of informing or guiding students/practitioners** working with children about reciprocal care.




WHAT WILL THE STUDY LOOK LIKE?

<h5>Part One</h5> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Spend time with you and your group so we can become familiar. > Observe interactions between you and a child in your group <i>(once consent has been granted by parents)</i>. > Video record examples of interactions, which are examples of reciprocal care in a Maltese context. > I am not looking for right or wrong types of interaction - I am looking to explore what reciprocal care looks like in practice. 	<h5>Part Two</h5> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Individual interviews with me. > Only take 20-30 minutes and will be voice recorded. > We will discuss a small section of the video recording from part one, so you can verify my interpretation. > We will discuss together some points about early years reciprocal care here in Malta. > I am not looking for right or wrong answers - I want to know what your thoughts/opinions/experiences are.
---	---

MY ETHICAL DUTY AS A RESEARCHER

- > I am duty bound by **The University of Sheffield's Ethical Approval Board** to protect every individual who volunteers in this project;
 - > Provide clear information so you can make an **informed decision**.
 - > Taking part in this study is **voluntary and will not affect your position at School in any way**.
 - > You, School and the identity of all **participants will remain anonymous**.
 - > You have a **right to withdraw** at any stage of the study.
 - > The **data collected will remain confidential** and will not be shown/duplicated/ submitted to any third parties (including your colleagues, your manager, your employer, or your respective parents).
 - > The only individuals who are permitted to view the raw data will be, those participating, myself (as Lead Researcher), my Supervisor (from the University) and (if requested) the University's examination board as part of the examination process.
 - > All **raw data will be destroyed**, once I have graduated January 2020 and will not be used in any future publications/lectures.



WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF YOU VOLUNTEER?

- > You will be seen as a **Co-researcher** throughout the study, who participates in generating data and contributes to existing knowledge.
- > You will be asked to read through a detailed **Participant Information Sheet**.
- > You will be asked to acknowledge and sign a **Participant Consent Sheet**.
- > You will be **contacted by me** personally to confirm your participation and plan the next stages.
- > I will **brief your parents** personally. You will not be obliged to communicate with them about any part of the study. They will be informed to contact me directly.
- > The study process will begin **end-November** once groups have settled.
- > Once the study has finished, you and other participants will be **invited to attend a presentation of the main findings** of the research.

**Understanding responsive reciprocal care concept to further improve quality in
Early Years Educational Care.**

Practitioner Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form

You are formally invited to take part in the current research project. Before you decide whether or not you would like to take part, it is very important for you to understand why the research is being conducted and what the study will involve. Kindly take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others should you wish to do so. Should you have any questions, then feel free to ask me (the Principal Investigator) if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like further information. Take your time to decide whether or not you would like to take part, participation is voluntary. Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet.

What is the purpose of the study?

The aim of this research is to explore the interaction between Early Years Practitioners (EYPs) and infants/children aged 0-3 years whilst placed in an out-of-home provision, namely childcare. I wish to study the interaction between you and the children under your care. I will record observations of you, the practitioner and infants/children within your group. I will then kindly ask you to take part in a semi-structured interview, where we discuss a small clip of the video from the first part of study. The aim of the study is to conceptualise the notion of *reciprocal responsive caregiving* within early years provision. A further aim of the research is to propose how this concept can then benefit practitioners pedagogy and improve quality early years education and care.

Do I have to take part?

The choice of taking part in this study is entirely your choice and your choice will not affect your position as an employee at School. If you do decide to take part, you will be requested to acknowledge and sign a participant consent form at the end of this information sheet. Should you choose to take part in this study, then you have the right to withdraw your participation at any time during the study period (October 2018 - May 2019) and you will not be asked to give a reason. Taking part in this study is entirely your choice, it is voluntary and that refusal to agree to participate will not involve any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled to. In order to complete and submit the study, participants who wish to withdraw from the study will be allowed to up until the first draft submission deadline which is 1st May 2019. After this date, participants will not be allowed to withdraw their data.

What will happen to me if I take part? What do I have to do?

If you do decide to take part, you will be involved in two parts of the study. The first part will include being observed within your group setting, interacting as you normally do with the children under your care. I will be the only researcher present observing your group and I will be taking

Appendix IV Parent/Child Information & Consent

University of Sheffield
School of Education EDUR33 - Malta

Appendix 2b

Georgina Fardoe
Malta Cohort 7

Understanding responsive reciprocal care to further improve quality in Early Years Educational Care.

Parent Information Sheet and Consent Form

Dear Parent/Guardian,

Your child is formally invited to take part in the current research project. Before you decide whether or not you would like your child to take part, it is very important for you to understand why the research is being conducted and what the study will involve. Kindly take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others should you wish to do so. Should you have any questions, then feel free to ask me (the Principal Investigator) if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like further information. Take your time to decide whether or not you would like your child to take part, participation is voluntary. Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet.

What is the purpose of the study?

The aim of this research is to explore the interaction (communication) between Early Years Practitioners (EYPs) and infants/children aged 0-3 years whilst placed in an out-of-home provision, namely childcare. I wish to study the interaction between the practitioner and your respective child whilst attending their childcare centre. **I will video record short observations of your child interacting with his/her assigned practitioner, with the aim conceptualising and developing a tangible concept of reciprocal responsive caregiving. Parents are kindly requested to note that the focus of the study is not to measure the performance of respective children with their practitioner.** A further aim of the research is to propose how this concept can then benefit practitioners repertoire and improve *quality* early years education and care in Malta. It is hoped that by the end of the study, the results from this study can contribute towards supporting the Maltese Early Childhood Educational Care services.

Does my child have to take part?

The choice of your child taking part in this study is entirely your choice and your choice will not affect you, or your son/daughters position at School. If you do decide for your child to take part, you will be requested to acknowledge and sign a participant consent at the end of this information sheet. Should you consent for your child to take part in this study, then you have the right to withdraw your son/daughter at any time during the study period (October 2018 - May 2019) and you will not be asked to give a reason. Taking part in this study is entirely your choice, it is voluntary and that refusal to agree to participate will not involve any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled to. In order to complete and submit the study, participants who

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EDUR33 - Malta

Appendix 2a

Georgina Fardoe
Malta Cohort 7

Developing a Responsive Reciprocal Care (RRC) concept to further improve the Maltese Early Years Practitioner (EYP) repertoire.

Name of Principal Investigator: Georgina Anne Fardoe

Participant Identification Number for this project: _____

Attended Participant Study Brief Meeting: YES NO

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the Practitioner Participant Information Sheet dated (_ / _ / _) for the above project and I have had the opportunity to ask the Principal Investigator questions.
2. I confirm that as a Practitioner I have been briefed about the study and have been provided with clear information sufficient to make an informed decision.
3. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason. In the event of withdrawing my participation, I will inform the Principal Investigator via telephone and/or by email; 77480450, gafardoe1@sheffield.ac.uk.
4. I understand that the video and audio recording of my participation will be anonymised before analysis. I give permission for the Principal Investigator and Principal Supervisor to have access to the video and audio recordings of my participation.
5. I agree to take part in the above research project.
 - I have been working in Early Years education for _____ (months) _____ (years).
 - I am a certified Early Years Educator, holding _____
(*most recent Childcare qualification and Level*).
 - I am ___ 18-25 ___ 26-35 ___ 36-45 ___ 46-65 years.
 - I am ___ Male, ___ Female, ___ Prefer not to say.

Name of Participant

Date

Signature

Name of Principal Investigator

Date

Signature

Appendix V Maltese Route to Qualified ECEC Practitioner

Maltese Route to Qualified ECEC Practitioner

To qualify as an Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) Educator in Malta at MQF Level 4, candidates must meet specific academic and professional entry requirements.

1. Academic Qualifications:

- A minimum of 5 SEC/O-Level subjects, which must include Mathematics, English (Language and/or Literature), and Maltese. These three subjects must be achieved at a grade 4 or better.
- Additionally, candidates must obtain a grade 6 or better in any other two O-Level subjects.

2. Alternative Qualification Pathways:

- Successful completion of a related MQF Level 3 Foundation or Certificate Qualification in fields such as; Health and Social Care, Art and Design, Sports or Performing Arts

3. Mature Student Pathway:

- Candidates who are 23 years or older at the start of the academic year may qualify as mature students.
- Mature students are subject to proficiency or aptitude tests to assess their readiness for the program.
- Admission may also include an application interview to ensure candidates possess the necessary aptitude for the childcare field.

Once enrolled, students will undergo theoretical and practical training designed to develop core skills in child development, health and safety, and planning effective learning experiences. Practical placements are typically a vital part of the program, offering hands-on experience in childcare settings.

Graduates of this program are qualified to work as childcare educators for children aged 0 to 3 years and are well-equipped to meet Malta's national standards for Early Childhood Education and Care services.