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Inquiry-Based Emergent Curriculum using a Transdisciplinary Approach to the Visual Arts in Early Childhood Education and Care: Implications for Policy, Education and Practice

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Inquiry-Based Emergent Curriculum using a Transdisciplinary Approach to the Visual Arts in Early Childhood Education and Care: Implications for Policy, Education and Practice

Evelyn Egan

A thesis submitted to Cork Institute of Technology in fulfilment of the requirement for the award of Doctor of Philosophy

Supervisors: Professor Margaret Linehan and Dr Judith Butler
Submission Date: June 2020
Abstract

This research aims to investigate current approaches used by practitioners in the design and delivery of visual arts curricula for children availing of the Irish Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Scheme (DCYA, 2019). The study rationale is borne out of an interest in establishing what constitutes good practice in this domain. The focus of the study is to provide an extensive review of national and international literature debating approaches to visual arts curricula for young children and to establish how this translates into practice through a field study methodology within the Irish ECCE context. Underpinning the research is the amalgam of theoretical and experiential knowledge and expertise, in designing and operationalising an inquiry-based, emergent curriculum using a transdisciplinary approach to the visual arts. A transdisciplinary approach is one whereby subject boundaries are broken down and art permeates all areas of learning by transcending the confines of individual subject disciplines. The field study cohort is a selection of ECCE practitioners (n=30) and support personnel including authors, researchers, mentors and academics (n=10). Qualitative methodology is employed and data collection is by in-depth, semi-structured interviews to garner participants lived experiences.

Findings from the extensive literature review and supported by the field study identify a confluence of factors which mitigate against inquiry-based learning (IBL). The arts and creativity are accorded low status in the majority of third-level Early Years Education (EYE) programmes. The resulting deficit in initial professional education (IPE), ill-prepares practitioners to implement child-centred, developmentally appropriate, visual arts curricula, on entering the workforce. The majority of practitioners describe visual arts opportunities which they provide for children as being adult-led and product-orientated. This approach limits the creative process as children assume a passive, often spectatorial role which is at variance with an IBL emergent curriculum. Another salient finding is the imbalance between theoretical and practical art training experiences in third-level programmes. Minimal emphasis on IBL extends to the content of continuing professional development (CPD) initiatives. There is a disconnect between rhetoric and practice, as well as low self-efficacy among practitioners. As a consequence of a lack of experiential engagement with art processes during training, practitioner confidence in their ability to fulfil the requirements of Síolta (CECDE, 2006), the National Quality Framework and Aistear (NCCA, 2009), the National Curriculum Framework is evident. Additionally, respondents voice confusion regarding the regulatory bodies and requirements in inspecting and evaluating the quality, range and appropriateness of experiences offered to children. This confusion influences approaches to the visual arts curriculum implementation, which is further compounded by perceived parental expectations. Children are facilitated to engage in adult-led, template-based, seasonal art activities as evidence of learning for parents. The underlying ethos and philosophy of an ECCE centre also determines approaches to visual arts experiences.

One of the main research recommendations emerging from the research is to locate the arts centrally within IPE degree programmes in EYE and make available CPD opportunities specific to IBL using a transdisciplinary approach to the visual arts. Emerging from these findings, two resources to assist Higher Education Institutions in IPE and CPD for practitioners have been devised. These act as a strategic drive to address research findings, in a practical sense, to equip current and future personnel with the requisite knowledge, skills and expertise, to effectively implement an emergent, inquiry-based, visual arts curriculum, using a transdisciplinary approach, in the pursuit of good practice.
Declaration

I hereby certify that the material which is submitted in this thesis for the award of Doctor of Philosophy in Early Childhood Education and Care is entirely my own work except where otherwise accredited and that this thesis has not been submitted for an award at any other institution other than for the fulfilment of the award named above.

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To my children, Michael Owen and Alanna.

May you always be filled with curiosity, creativity and a love of learning.
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Glossary of Abbreviations

ACP    Association of Childhood Professionals
AEP    Arts in Education Online Portal
AIT    Athlone Institute of Technology
AIEC   Arts in Education Charter
BS     Better Start
CCC    City and County Childcare Committees
CECDE  Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education
CIT    Cork Institute of Technology
CPD    Continuous Professional Development
DES    Department of Education and Skills
DCYA   Department of Children and Youth Affairs
DCU    Dublin City University
DIT    Dublin Institute of Technology
DKIT   Dundalk Institute of Technology
ECCE   Early Childhood Care and Education
ECEC   Early Childhood Education and Care
ECI    Early Childhood Ireland
ELC    Early Learning and Care
EYE    Early Years Education
EYIE   Early Years Education Inspection
FETAC  Further Education and Training Awards Council
GT     Grounded Theory
IBL    Inquiry-Based Learning
IBEC   Inquiry-Based Emergent Curriculum
INTO   Irish National Teachers Organisation
IoT    Institutes of Technology
ITB    Blanchardstown Institute of Technology
ITT    Tralee Institute of Technology
LIT    Limerick Institute of Technology
LYIT   Letterkenny Institute of Technology
MFW    Model Framework
MI     Multiple Intelligences
MIC    Mary Immaculate College
MKO    More Knowledgeable Other
NAEYC  National Association of Education of Young Children
NCCA   National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NUIG   National University of Ireland Galway
OECD   Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
OMEP   World Organisation for Early Childhood Education
PBL    Project-Based Learning
PISA   Programme for International Student Assessment
RE     Reggio Emilia
SP     Support Personnel
STEM   Science Technology Engineering and Mathematics
STEAM  Science Technology Engineering Arts and Mathematics
TDA    Transdisciplinary Approach
UCC    University College Cork
UL     University of Limerick
UNESCO United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UN     United Nations
USNAEA United States National Arts Education Association
VA     Visual Arts
WIT    Waterford Institute of Technology
ZPD    Zone of Proximal Development
Glossary of Terms

Aistear (NCCA, 2009) is the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework to promote quality learning experiences for children aged from birth to six years, in all environments. Aistear stresses the importance of knowledge, understanding, attitudes, values and dispositions essential to the development of the very young. The framework also provides guidelines on supporting children’s learning through interactions, play, assessment and partnership with parents. It proffers ideas on how best to foster learning through four interconnected themes: Well-being, Identity and Belonging, Communicating, and Exploring and Thinking.

Aistear and Síolta Practice Guide (2015) is an online resource to assist teachers, practitioners\(^1\) and parents in using Aistear, (NCCA, 2009) and Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (CECDE, 2006)\(^2\) in combination, to develop curriculum and facilitate learning and development. Resources enable critical reflection on practice to improve curriculum design and implementation. Both Aistear (NCCA, 2009) and Síolta (CECDE, 2006)) strive to promote the importance of play-based, high quality, hands on experiences, driven by inquiry to build on the emerging interests of the child.


Better Start Quality Development Service (2015) of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) and hosted by Pobal on behalf of the DCYA, strives to establish an integrated national approach to developing quality in early years education and care. It works collaboratively with City and County Childcare Committees and National Childcare Partnerships.

\(^1\) In the context of this thesis, the term teacher refers to a Primary School teacher and practitioner denotes an educator working with children during the Early Years.

\(^2\) Throughout the document the shorter terms of Síolta (CECDE) and Aistear (NCCA, 2009) will be used.
Voluntary Organisations to promote quality services for the very young. Better Start is supported by Síolta (CECDE, 2006), Aistear (NCCA) and the Aistear Síolta Practice Guide (2016).

City/County Childcare Committees (CCCs) are government funded local agents for the DCYA who work in an administrative capacity for Early Years Education and Care programmes. CCC’s provide information for matters relating to early education and childcare and offer support services and training for ECEC providers, including childminders. CCCs also offer services to parents, such as providing information on local childcare facilities and information on parent networks.

Craft, for the purpose of this thesis, refers to identical, topic-based products which are pre-determined by the adult as in seasonal, commercially generated ‘craft’ as distinct from ‘crafts’ in the traditional sense i.e. Pottery Textiles and Woodwork.

Emergent Curriculum is a teaching philosophy and method of curriculum design which focuses on children’s interests in order to provide meaningful learning experiences. It is the curriculum philosophy promoted by the two national frameworks Síolta (CECDE, 2006) and Aistear (NCCA, 2009).

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) is an educational entity in its own right and is not a component of the formal education system. It is representative of a variety of private, community and voluntary interests, to include; pre-schools, crèches, nurseries, play-groups, day-care services and Naionraí (through the medium of Irish). An ECEC centre often subscribes to a particular educational philosophy, e.g. Montessori, Rudolf Steiner, HighScope or Reggio Emilia, and some establishments are exclusive to children with special educational needs. Government funding is provided, primarily, by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA). It is a sector which has grown significantly in Ireland over the past decades, and caters for children from birth to six years old. Additionally, it includes children under the age of six who are in the junior and senior infant cycle of Primary School (DES, 2019).

Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme/Programme (DCYA, 2019) is an Irish Government initiative whereby all children, countrywide, between the ages of two
years and eight months and five years and six months, are eligible to avail of free education and care in an early years setting for three hours a day, five days a week, 38 weeks annually. All children are entitled to two full academic years on the ECCE scheme.

**Early Years Education Inspection (EYEI)** is a regulatory body to evaluate the nature, range and appropriateness of early educational experiences for children availing of the ECCE scheme (DCYA, 2019). It is a model based on a quality framework informed by Aistear (NCCA, 2009) and Siolta (CECDE, 2006) as well as international research related to early childhood education inspection.

**Initial Professional Education** is the current term used to describe third-level training in early years education, available at institutes of technology and universities, nationwide. This most recent appellation has ‘emerged from extensive consultation with the Early Learning and Care sector’ (DES, 2019:6) and supersedes all others.

**Inquiry-Based Learning** is a multi-faceted educational approach, whereby children explore the environment and construct knowledge based on experience. Thereby, the learner takes ownership of the learning process as an active participant rather than a passive consumer.

**The Arts** is the term which refers to the domain encompassing arts subjects, including Dance, Drama, Media Arts, Music and Visual Arts, Transient Art.

**The National Siolta /Aistear Initiative (2016)** is funded by the DCYA and provides the main support (for) and coordination (of) Siolta (CECDE, 2006) and Aistear (NCCA, 2009) development and application in the early years sector.

**Transdisciplinary Learning** is an approach to learning which transcends the boundaries which ordinarily confine discipline areas and allows for deeper, more meaningful understanding of real-life issues or problems to emerge. Furthermore, it is an exploration of relevant concepts by integrating perspectives from multiple disciplines, approached holistically. Topics of study are not divided into discrete
categories, rather is the relationship between fields of study explored from a central point of questioning.

**Visual Arts.** generally termed ‘art’ relates to a variety of art forms: drawing, painting, sculpture, textiles, ceramics and print, encompassing art which is primarily visual in nature. It is that art form which can be appreciated by the eye and not by the ear, as in music.

**Provocation:** A provocation can be defined as ‘a suggestion and invitation, a place to begin that engages the imaginations of both the child and the teacher.’ (Gandini *et al.*, 2015:180). Images of visual arts provocations are located in the Appendices section of this thesis (See Appendix, 2, 3 and 4).

**Síolta (CECDE, 2006)** is the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education developed by the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE, 2006) to provide a national quality framework for the full range of early childhood settings in Ireland and previously included a Quality Assurance Programme (QAP) (no longer operational). This quality framework serves to define, assess and support quality practice in ECEC settings which cater for children aged birth to six years.
Chapter One

Introduction
1.1 Introduction and Background

This chapter provides an introduction and background to the research, which is set in the context of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in Ireland. The study focus is an investigation of current approaches used by practitioners in the design and delivery of a visual arts curriculum for children availing of the Irish Government Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme (DCYA, 2019).

Interest in the research has been prompted by a variety of factors. Firstly, it springs from an amalgam of theoretical and experiential knowledge and expertise in designing and operationalising an early years, inquiry-based, emergent curriculum using a transdisciplinary approach to the visual arts. Secondly, the researcher is cognizant of differing approaches being adopted by practitioners when presenting creative learning opportunities to children in the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector. Finally, despite an awareness of the importance of creativity in the overall holistic development of children, there appears to be a disconnect between what practitioners propound in theory, and the visual arts experiences which they offer children, in practice. Indeed, this disconnect between rhetoric (on the one hand) and what transpires in practice (on the other) has been exhaustively debated by researchers and academics, alike (Seyhan and Karaby, 2018; Terreni, 2016; Stott, 2011; Christensen and Kirkland, 2010; Kelly and Jurisich, 2010). It is envisaged that putting the foregoing areas of concern under formal research scrutiny, will provide lucidity and add credence to perceptions, observations and anecdotal evidence. Findings should yield valuable insights to enable identification of attendant challenges, which inhibit the implementation of an emergent, inquiry-based, curriculum, as promoted by the National Curriculum Framework for Early Years, Aistear (NCCA, 2009).

To establish a clear understanding of the confluence of factors which may mitigate against ‘good practice’ it is important to first establish the status which the arts are accorded in Initial Professional Education Early Years Education programmes at universities and institutes of technology nationwide. Theorists highlight the importance of training in the arts at undergraduate and continuing education level(s) if the aspirations of delivering an inquiry-based emergent curriculum are to be met (Hipp and Sulentic-Dowell, 2019; Lindsay, 2017, Garvis et al., 2011). Thereafter,
practitioners’ lived experiences are garnered through in-depth interviews, with a representative sample of those employed in the early years sector nationwide. To increase validity and bring about triangulation, support personnel are also included in the study, to enlist their expert knowledge and perspectives as mentors, authors and researchers.

The theoretical underpinning for the field study is based on Dewey’s (1938) Theory of Constructivism, whereby children explore their learning environment and construct knowledge accordingly, based on lived experiences. Essentially, constructivism suggests that children must interact with their environment in order to optimise learning, develop holistically and indeed adapt to the world about them, in the sense that constructivism is based on the interaction between the human being and the world (Dennick, 2016). Moreover, the current research also draws on the Piagetian (1972) inspired holistic approach to education, which encompasses the development of a rich understanding of the world through active, hands-on, experiential, child-centred processes. Essentially, visual arts pedagogy in early years is of paramount importance and it has been widely documented down through the centuries, from Rousseau (1712-1778) to the present day, how engaging experientially in creative activities contributes to the overall development and well-being of the young child (Hamilton et al., 2019, Schulte et al., 2018, Christakis 2017, Lindsey, 2017, French, 2013, Vecchi, 2010, Wright, 2003).

There has been a paradigm shift over the past 20 years from childcare on an ad hoc basis towards a well-established Irish Early Childhood Education and Care sector. Furthermore, there is an increased advocacy for excellence in child-centred curriculum implementation within the Irish context. In this regard, there are demands for high quality, meaningful art experiences to be offered to children and the Irish National Curriculum and Quality Frameworks (Aistear NCCA, 2009; Síolta CECDE, 2006) strongly support an inquiry-based learning process approach to the visual arts. However, despite such laudable aspirations and initiatives, the question remains as to whether the rhetoric or the theoretical knowledge propounded, actually matches reality in practice. It is widely accepted that the foundation laid during the early years prepares the child of today to be the adult of tomorrow (OECD, 2018; NCCA, 2009). High quality educational experiences during early childhood are now well recognised as
playing a significant role in a child’s lifelong learning trajectory (Van Huiezen and Planteng, 2018). Furthermore, pedagogues and theorists alike stress the importance of the arts in the development and education of the young (Hamilton et al., 2019; Barton, 2015; Wright, 2012; McArdle and Wong 2010; Craft, 2008). The role of both child and adult in the creative process is important and central to the current research. This study has the potential to improve visual arts pedagogy in ECEC contexts by offering research-informed guidance for professional reflection on visual arts pedagogy, which is hitherto lacking in the Irish ECEC context.

1.1.1 Terms Defined

All terms integral to the study are detailed in the glossary of terms. However, the key terms in the research title are briefly defined as follows to facilitate readability.

*Inquiry-Based Learning* is a multi-faceted educational approach, whereby children’s questions, ideas and observations are placed centrally within the learning process (Haslip and Gullo, 2018, Makar and Fielding-Wells, 2017).

*Transdisciplinary Learning* is an approach to learning which transcends the boundaries which ordinarily confine discipline areas and allows for deeper, more meaningful understanding of real-life issues or problems to emerge (Bain et al., 2019; Jimenez-Eliaesen, 2017, Leavy, 2016, Nicolescu, 2014).

*Visual Arts* is what is generally termed ‘art’ and relates to a variety of art forms which are primarily visual in nature (Schneider-Adams, 2018; Lindsay, 2017).

*Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)* is an Educational and Care sector catering for children from birth to six years old (Oireachtas Report, 2014).

*Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme* (DCYA, 2019) is an Irish government initiative, which entitles children (aged two years and eight months to five years and six months) to two full academic years’ free education in early years settings for three hours a day, five days a week (DCYA, 2019:np).
Emergent Curriculum is a type of curriculum design which focusses on the child's interests. It is concerned with where these interests may lead, in order to promote meaningful learning experiences. The adult's interests are also relevant and serve to introduce the child to potential areas of interest to spark curiosity (Thompson, 2019; Miller et al., 2019; Nimmo, 2017; Jones, 2012).

The following section examines approaches to curriculum delivery in the visual arts in the context of the foregoing terms.

1.2 Approaches to Visual Arts Curriculum Delivery in Early Childhood Education and Care

Approaches to visual arts curriculum implementation has been the subject of much debate in recent years (Siegesmund, 2019; Christakis, 2017; Lindsey, 2016; Tutchell, 2014; McArdle and Wong, 2010; Wright, 2010). Central to the discourse surrounding art opportunities offered to young children are the product-approach (traditional approach) and the process-approach, which is synonymous with inquiry-based learning (Pecaski-McLennan, 2010). Simply stated, the product model focuses on the final outcome, whereas, the process model places emphasis on the experience of art in the making. It is widely accepted that authentic visual arts experiences which are child-led (process-based) rather than adult-directed (product-driven) allow for the generation of new ideas, promote creativity and develop meta-cognition and the ability for children to self-regulate (Saracho, 2012). The role of the adult has been identified as being key to channelling children’s interests during the creative process, by providing them with suggestions and the means by which to achieve desired outcomes. Evidently, then it is suggested that when working with children in early childhood services, adults should adopt a guided approach whereby the practitioner assumes the role of facilitator and guides or scaffolds (Bruner, 1978) the child through the process of art making (in McArdle and Wright 2014). Noteworthy, the process approach in an emergent curriculum is advocated by Aistear (NCCA, 2009).

In recent years, the establishment and continuing development of the Aistear and Síolta, Practice Guide (2015) is particularly relevant to the current research. As a
three podcasts have been created by this researcher to guide practitioners on how to place the visual arts central to learning, by designing and implementing an inquiry-based emergent curriculum. (IBEC) (NCCA, 2017). Moreover, these resources are now available as a component of the recently developed on-line CPD opportunities, offered by the National Síolta Aistear Initiative, under the topic heading: 'Supporting opportunities for creativity in early learning and care settings’ (NCCA, 2020). All podcasts can be accessed through the following link: https://www.aistearsiolta.ie/en/cpd/birth-6-years/creative-arts-birth-6-.pdf

1.3 Significance of the Study

From a scholarly perspective, this study is significant for a number of reasons. It may be considered as a pivotal or landmark study as, hitherto, comprehensive qualitative research on approaches adopted by practitioners to the visual arts curriculum in ECCE has not been conducted in Ireland. An extensive review of existing literature is the primary focus of the study, followed by field research, which is conducted to garner practitioner and support personnel lived experiences, through in-depth interviews. It is envisaged that the research findings will provide valuable insights to inform current and future initial professional education. The findings will also assist continuing professional development, as well as future policy making and curriculum and sector development. The following section addresses the research aims.

1.4 Research Question, Aims and Objectives of the Study

The main aim of this research is to establish approaches used by ECCE practitioners in the design and delivery of a visual arts curriculum in early years education. A secondary aim is to establish the status of the visual arts in initial professional education training institutions, as well as approaches adopted (and promoted) in the design and delivery of a visual arts curriculum.

In order to address the purpose of the study, the following questions guide the data collection and analysis. They are further allied to subordinate research questions.
1.4.1 Primary and Subordinate Research Questions

The overarching primary research question is: What approaches do Early Childhood Care and Education practitioners use when designing and implementing a visual arts curriculum for children who avail of the ECCE scheme (DCYA, 2019)? Evolving from this general query, the following subordinate research questions are also posed:

- What constitutes good practice in the design and delivery of a visual arts curriculum in Early Childhood Care and Education?

- What are the views of a sample of ECCE practitioners and support personnel in relation to good practice in the visual arts?

To address the research questions and overarching aim of the study, an examination of the lived experience of ECCE practitioners and experts working in the ECCE sector is a vital component of the study objectives which aim to:

- Provide an in-depth study of ECEC practitioner and professional perspectives on the design and implementation of the visual arts curriculum in Irish Early Childhood Care and Education services.

- Determine what is good practice in relation to visual art curriculum design and delivery.

- Identify perspectives on initial professional education and continuing professional development requirements in order to support the training requirements of professionals.

- Explore challenges as well as merits of implementing a visual arts curriculum in ECCE.

- Contribute to the extant body of literature in relation to the implementation of the visual arts curriculum in ECEC, with the objective of influencing policies surrounding the training of practitioners and in relation to the design and delivery of the visual arts curriculum in ECCE.
In order to accrue essential data to address the research objectives, both primary and secondary research was conducted for this study. Secondary research is presented in the format of a literature review, while primary research was obtained through the identification, and analysis of a number of thematic areas. The following section sets out the content and structure of the thesis.

1.5 Structure of Thesis and Chapter Content Outline

The structure and content of all chapters within this thesis are outlined in this section. The study comprises five chapters, which are diagrammatically represented in Figure 1.1.

Chapter 1: Introduction
This chapter provides an overview of the context and rationale for this study. It defines terms inherent to the study and highlights the discourse on various approaches to visual arts curriculum delivery. The chapter poses the research questions and identifies the main objectives of the study, as well as outlining subsequent chapter content.

Chapter 2: Literature Review
This chapter provides an extensive review of the current literature relating to the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector in Ireland. It also discusses theories of eminent philosophers and pedagogues and reviews existing literature relating to educational theory and good practice in approaches to the visual arts in ECEC. Finally, it examines challenges to visual arts inquiry-based emergent curriculum (IBEC) implementation.

Chapter 3: Field Study Methodology
This chapter describes the research framework adopted in the current research. It explains the ethical considerations, validity and sampling methods utilised. It also examines how qualitative inquiry aids the researcher in garnering ECCE practitioner and support personnel views and insights, through open-ended questioning on approaches to the visual arts in ECCE. The choice of study design is influenced largely by the research questions. This study is rooted in both phenomenology and Grounded Theory. Phenomenology concerns objectively studying the subjective and, in the
context of the current research it explores the various key concepts; inquiry-based learning, emergent curriculum and Transdisciplinarity. Phenomenological studies lend themselves well to qualitative data collection approaches, ‘as a research methodology, phenomenology is uniquely positioned to help learn from the experience of others’ (Neubauer et al., 2019). The in-depth interview is therefore employed as a data collection instrument, being best placed to garner individual responses on the experiences of ECCE practitioners (n=30) and support personnel (n=10) with regard to approaches to design and delivery of visual arts curricular for children availing of the ECCE scheme (DCYA, 2019). Depth, rather than breadth, of participant experience is sought for this study.

Chapter 4: Findings and Analysis
This chapter presents a discussion on the findings, analysis and subsequent themes which emerge from the in-depth interview process conducted with ECCE practitioner and support personnel

Chapter 5: Conclusion and Recommendations
This chapter consists of an overarching discussion and provides a final conclusion to the research study. The proposed recommendations are derived from an analysis of the key findings in direct relation to: visual arts in initial professional education (and in-service training level), partnership between ECCE practitioners and parents, resources to build visual arts pedagogic knowledge, Aistear (NCCA, 2009) and Siolta (CECDE, 2006) and, monitoring and evaluation of visual arts curriculum.
Inquiry Based Emergent Curriculum using a Transdisciplinary Approach to the Visual Arts in Early Childhood Education and Care: Implications for Policy, Education and Practice

Chapter One: Introduction

• Introduction
• Rationale
• Objectives
• Chapter Content

Chapter Two: Literature Review

• ECEC sector in Ireland
• Educational Theory and Practice
• Approaches to the visual arts in ECEC
• Challenges to visual arts IBEC implementation

Chapter Three: Field Study Methodology

• Primary and Secondary Research
• Qualitative Research
• In-depth Interviews

Chapter Four: Findings and Analysis

• Discussion of key themes and research findings

Chapter Five: Conclusion

• Main conclusions
• Recommendations for practice and for future research
1.6 Conclusion

This introductory chapter contextualises the research, by outlining a number of key areas pertinent to the study. It presents the rationale for the research and justifies why there is a professional imperative to conduct research to improve practice, in the pursuit of excellence. Observations, perceptions and anecdotal evidence, all need to be put under scrutiny by adopting formal research methodology to draw conclusions and present recommendations based on research findings. The introductory chapter also includes the significance and scope of the research. Key terms central to this study are defined at the outset, and research questions and objectives are also identified. Finally, the thesis chapter structure is highlighted by illustration. The following chapter focuses on a comprehensive literature review and expands on the theoretical frameworks which shape this inquiry.
Chapter Two

Literature Review
2.1 Introduction

This chapter is a review of both national and international literature pertaining to the many aspects of visual arts education in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), as they apply to this research. In order to set the research in context, a brief historical account of the growth and development of the ECEC sector in Ireland will be provided. This will be followed by a debate on the importance of the arts in early childhood education and the integrated nature of child development and how children learn. In so doing, the work of eminent educational philosophers, pedagogues, researchers and psychologists will be discussed.

The status of the visual arts in initial professional training will be reviewed, as will the literature on the perennial debate surrounding various approaches to curriculum design and implementation. The didactic product model versus the process (child-centred) approach to curriculum design and delivery, will be discussed at length. The nature of ‘play’ and ‘creativity’ will be examined. A debate will ensue, on the role of the practitioners involved in facilitating children’s creative expression in early years education, i.e. the practitioner who is trained in the art of teaching and the artist in residence who is trained in the specialty of art. Both specialists are involved in nurturing children’s creative expression, and the individual role and function of each one will be the subject of debate.

Furthermore, the chapter outlines various Irish Government and other creative-experience initiatives and resulting emerging research and findings. The importance of establishing a creative learning environment, which optimally promotes and facilitates IBL and TDA will be reviewed. Finally, an overview of, Aistear (NCCA, 2009) and Siolta (CECDE, 2006), which advocate IBL and promote an emergent curriculum within ECEC, will be provided. Whilst the current national and international literature pertaining to all of the foregoing aspects of the research will, in the main, be presented under discrete headings, some aspects are integral to the debate and not presented as stand-alone sections, in this Literature Review chapter.
2.2 Inquiry-Based Learning: A Journey of Discovery

Learning-by-doing was promoted by the renowned American educational reformer and philosopher John Dewey (1934). Under his influence, inquiry-based learning (IBL) was then widely adopted by schools and teachers in the 1970s (Sponken-Smith, 2012). In his *Theory of Constructivism*, Dewey (1938) propounded that IBL is a multifaceted educational approach, whereby, children explore the environment and construct knowledge, based on experience (in Haslip and Gullo, 2018). The learner takes ownership of the learning process as an active participant rather than as a passive consumer (Borovay, 2019). In the ensuing decades, and particularly since the new millennium, other learning theorists have striven to define IBL and to elucidate on what ‘learning-by-doing’ entails and its benefits. Bruner (1978) a staunch advocate of *discovery learning* believed that rather than offering children solutions to problems, practitioners should encourage them to figure things out for themselves. As a result, Bruner’s theory laid the foundation stone for process-led learning (in Chiappetta, 2008).

Spronken-Smith (2007) identifies four key characteristics of IBL, namely; inquiry, student-centred, active, (and) independent. In her view, the first two combined characteristics of inquiry and student-centred, in turn, promote active and independent learning. Another theorist, Harlen (2014) describes how IBL builds on children’s personal interests and instills a love of learning, thus, providing young people with the necessary life skills to contribute positively to society in the future. This is also reflective of claims made by Savery (2015) who emphasises that knowledge is triggered by the innate curiosity of the child and is constructed, not transmitted. With regard to the impact of IBL on education in general, Roach-O’Keefe (2013) and more recently, Niken and Harun (2019) explain how IBL improves the quality of education, by moving towards a more student-directed interactive method, which focuses on the learning process. Notably, this notion has roots in Lawson’s (2010) thesis that IBL enables creativity and stimulates the intelligence through mental processing of information, ideas and actions by involvement in, hands-on, child-centred learning processes. This sentiment is echoed by Ryan and St. Laurent (2016) who highlight that the IBL model places children’s research experiences at the heart of the learning trajectory. The interests of the child, they note, is the catalyst for the acquisition of
new knowledge and the role of the practitioner is to build on children’s curiosity, select appropriate materials which extend the child’s thought processes and allow for the ensuing questions to unfold. With regard to the IBL environment, Stacey (2018) describes how it favours a more open-ended structure, using questions, ideas, concepts and topics, as possible starting points. The role of the practitioner, she argues, is to facilitate the journey of discovery, exploration, creation and attainment of knowledge. In my opinion, adopting inquiry-based learning as the ideal learning approach, is a vexed question and contentious issue, as can be deduced from the arguments in the following section.

2.2.1 Inquiry-Based Learning: Dissenting Voices

While there are many staunch advocates of an IBL philosophy as described in the foregoing section and by the following experts, (Johnson et al., 2019, Helm and Katz, 2016; Luna-Scott, 2015; Savery, 2015; Saavedra and Opfer, 2012) there are also many opponents to this approach (Devkota et al., 2017; Linderoth, 2016; O’Brien, 2016; Kishner et al., 2006). One of the main criticisms of IBL is the unguided nature of learning-through-discovery as described by Mayer (2004) who claims that learning, based exclusively on exploration, risks hindering the understanding of the subject content and the required task. However, he does not dismiss it out of hand, but cautions that for IBL to be effective it is very much dependent on a range of factors, including: prior knowledge, subject area and age of the learner. In this vein, Ryan and St. Laurent (2016) note that IBL varies across educational systems from Early Years Education through to third-level. The fundamentals, however, they argue, are of ‘student collaboration adopting a real-world approach’ spanning all age groups (ibid: 5). However, in relation to the arts in early childhood, Ryan and St. Laurent view IBL positively. They recognise that affording young children opportunities to explore the arts, through inquiry-based learning, allows them to communicate their ideas through visual expression. These authors proceed to explain how this ability, in turn, provides practitioners with a deeper and richer understanding of the child’s intention and meaning-making through the language of visual art and ‘is facilitated by using open-ended materials, posing questions to engage children in research and dialogue’ (ibid:8) all of which are central to IBL.
In particular, reference to the Irish Educational System, O’Brien (2016) cautions against blindly embracing IBL. Although, she does perceive the role of the educator\(^3\) as that of a *guide on the side*, as in IBL, rather than a *sage on the stage*, as in the traditional/didactic model, she highlights how other educational systems question the value of IBL and like-systems, especially in relation to the Sciences. In the Swedish context, Linderoth (2016), in praise of traditional methods points out how the didactic model has been demonised and ‘the age-old form of instruction, in which someone who knows something explains it to someone who does not, has come to be associated with abuse of power and blind discipline’ (Linderoth, 2016:n.p.). Additionally, he attributes the fall in the annual Programme for International Students Assessment (PISA) rankings over the past two decades in Sweden, to the lack of focus on traditional methods of education. Findings from the Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) 2016 report on the PISA (2015) Conference, substantiates Linderoth’s (2016) claim. The report states categorically, that there is no secondary school educational system where students score higher in the Sciences, if the method of instruction has been, in the main, inquiry-based (OECD, 2016). The following section will investigate IBL *vis a vis* art making.

### 2.2.2 Inquiry-Based Learning: Inherent to Art Making

Within the context of learning through the arts, Walker (2014) believes that inquiry-based learning is inherent to art making. She argues that the process of artistic inquiry allows the learner to reflect on one’s place in the world. Moreover, it empowers individuals to move beyond an understanding of what is and, probe deeper into the realm of possibility. This, she notes, is achievable through investigation of ideas and questions, many of which may not offer any answers. However, the process of inquiry, which revolves around discovery-learning not only forms individual identity but equips the learner with the necessary skills to ‘navigate the world’ (Walker, 2014:297). Similarly, and of particular significance, is the recent, strong plea made by Thompson (2019) for inquiry to form the basis of all visual arts teaching curricula, as she stresses

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\(^3\) In the context of this thesis, *educator* is a general term which applies to individuals working in the field of education, from early years practitioners to university lecturers.
that IBL is that type of learning approach which allows children to demonstrate their capabilities and competences.

In the context of early childhood, Marian and Jackson (2017) argue that positive dispositions towards science need to be established early on in life, not later. These authors substantiate their claim by pointing out that through hands-on, active-learning and socialization in creative play, children demonstrate scientific inquiry skills, driven by their innate curiosity. This echoes findings from research by Stylianidou et al., (2018) who identify pedagogical synergies between IBL, science and creative approaches, in the early years. They enumerate a myriad of advantages, stating that IBL ‘allows for play and exploration; motivation and affect; dialogue and collaboration; problem-solving and agency; questioning and curiosity; reflection and reasoning; teacher-scaffolding and involvement’ (Stylianidou et al., 2018: 5). This leads to the concept of Transdisciplinarity, whereby, learning occurs above and beyond the confines of subject disciplines.

2.3 Transdisciplinarity: Breaking Down Subject Barriers

The word Transdisciplinarity is a term first coined by Piaget in 1970 during a university seminar on Interdisciplinarity in Nice, France (in Leavy, 2016). He defined Transdisciplinarity as, ‘a total system without any firm boundaries between disciplines’(Piaget 1972:138) meaning that learning is approached holistically whereby topics of study are not divided into discrete categories, or subject disciplines, such as Maths or History. Rather, does the acquisition of knowledge go beyond the confines of subject specific areas. This is elaborated on by a contemporary theorist Mitchell (2005) who explains how Transdisciplinarity extends beyond simply gathering ideas and concepts from separate disciplines. Instead, it establishes ‘a new framework which transgresses disciplinary boundaries’ (Mitchell, 2005:332). Through Transdisciplinarity, the learner develops a deeper understanding and knowledge of topics beyond the confines of previously established units of study (Bain et al., 2019).

The relationship between fields of study are explored from a central point of questioning. This concept is extended by Bernstein (2015) who differentiates between Transdisciplinarity and the other related disciplinarities, i.e. Multidisciplinarity and Interdisciplinarity. He explains how Multidisciplinarity involves collaboration in a
jointly beneficial project, but the disciplines remain separate in their contributions and with relatively little interaction. In other words, a number of practitioners from different areas of study collaborate on addressing a specific topic but each approaches it from the perspective of his or her own particular discipline. Interdisciplinarity analyses, synthesises and harmonises links between disciplines into a more coordinated and coherent whole. Transdisciplinarity, however, integrates the Natural, Social and Health Sciences in a humanities context, transcending their traditional boundaries and is at a higher stage and beyond interdisciplinary relationships. Namely, the rich integration of discipline areas, through a transdisciplinary approach enables solutions to complex problems to be found, as those engaged in the approach have the ability ‘to fuse knowledge from a number of different disciplines and engage with stakeholders in the process of generating knowledge’ (Wickson et al., 2006:1052). McGregor (2017) argues that in order to operationalise this idea, students should study across disciplines, but not be limited to joint and cooperative cross-disciplinary work on projects of similar interest. Learning should not only breach but transcend the traditional barriers between disciplines by an overarching, novel and richer holistic approach to knowledge, inquiry, and teaching. In concurrence, Malcom et al., (2019) note that the design of a transdisciplinary approach (TDA) centres around collaboration. Moreover, they stress that participants engaging in TDA do not limit their thinking or action to their specific skill-set, but rather work in partnership where skills and knowledge merge and discipline boundaries become blurred. They argue that it is through this merger of collective expertise that solutions to complex problems are realizable.

Hopper (2009) acknowledges the need for a transdisciplinary, holistic approach to curriculum implementation, identifying the complexities of the learning process for the young child. He stresses the imperative for early educational frameworks to reflect a pedagogical approach, which recognises the varying abilities and different starting points amongst different children. He decries the overly-prescriptive, linear systems and advocates approaches which celebrate diversity and different ways of learning. Lenz-Taguchi (2010), and more recently Dahlberg (2013) endorse this perspective also, recognising that children do not make sense of the world by exploring it through the confines of subject areas. These authors elaborate how children create meaning through their different languages and by involving all of their senses. The holistic
approach, to which the foregoing authors subscribe is a defining characteristic of Transdisciplinarity, an approach which contests the notion of separating fields of study into distinct discipline areas. Zaragoza (2001) explains that when Transdisciplinarity breaks down the traditional barriers between disciplines ‘it also conceives new ways to reconnect that which has been torn apart’ (Zaragoza, 2001:5). Therefore, when learning is viewed through the prism of Transdisciplinarity, it nurtures diversity, embraces flexibility, and lauds innovation, while allowing for autonomy, inclusiveness and co-operation (Montuori, 2008). Succinctly put, ‘Multidisciplinarity is active, Interdisciplinarity is interactive and Transdisciplinarity is holistic’ (Choi et al., 2006:351). In order to examine how this approach applies to the visual arts, it is necessary to review what is meant by the visual arts.

2.4 Visual Arts: A Brief Overview

The visual arts relates to a variety of art forms; i.e. drawing, painting, sculpture, textiles, ceramics and print. It also encompasses other art, which is primarily visual in nature, as in performance and conceptual-based processes (Lindsey, 2017). However, regardless of which visual arts discipline is being explored, be it drawing or painting, there are specific fundamental constituents, which must always be present (Hendricks, 2014). These are the seven accepted principles, otherwise known as the Seven Artistic Elements; Line, Shape, Form, Space, Colour, Texture and Value. The artistic elements are the key components, which not only define the visual, arts, but also distinguish them from the other art forms, Music, Drama, Dance and Literature (Farr, 2018). Dewey (1934) when promoting the theory of Learning-by-Doing, defines the visual arts as ‘a process of doing and making’, whereby, physical materials and tools are applied to the production of ‘something visible or tangible’ (ibid: 48). In an early childhood context, the visual arts comprise processes and techniques associated with painting, drawing, printmaking, collage and construction, clay and sculpture, textiles and crafts. Practical engagement in the visual arts has notable benefits for young children. It assists in developing skills in; communication, problem-solving, critical and creative thinking, social and emotional well-being, as well as affording them the opportunity to self-express and make meaning (McArdle and Wright, 2014) and will be discussed in greater detail later in the chapter. However, the manner in which children engage in the visual arts, the ‘process versus product’ discourse, has been the
subject of much debate (Osgood, 2019, Lindsay, 2016, Tutchell 2014, McArdle and Wong, 2010, Pecaski-McLennan, 2010, Rayme, 2006) and is the focus of the current research. The widely held notion that the art process is more important than the end product is challenged by Eisner (1975:11). As a visionary in the field of arts and education, he argues that the ‘end product’ is evidence of the ‘process undertaken’. Furthermore, he cautions that to ‘neglect one in favour of the other is to be pedagogically naïve’ (ibid: 11). The merits and demerits of both approaches as they pertain to the focus of this research, is debated later in this chapter. In advance however, it is necessary to contextualise the study by providing a brief insight into the historical origins and growth of the Early Childhood Education and Care sector in Ireland, and particularly, the status of visual arts within this sector.

2.5 Creativity in Initial Professional Education

A desk review of the modules offered by third-level ECEC degree programmes in Ireland demonstrates that some degree courses give greater prominence to creativity than others. This desk review was an important part of the research, as by identifying, collating, organizing and synthesising this information, the researcher was able to gain an understanding of initial professional education courses countrywide.

This is evident from the type and number of creativity modules on offer, and whether modules are mandatory, or elective, theoretical only, or a combination of theory and practice. Of the four universities offering degree programmes, only one has mandatory modules in creative arts and three offer ‘creativity’ modules during Year 1 and Year 2 (only) of the degree programme. Another university training course in ECEC is solely theory-based over four years, without any practical component. By way of contrast, the Institutes of Technology (IoTs) appear to place greater emphasis on the creative arts, with mandatory theoretical and practical courses in Music, Art, Drama and Dance across all IoTs which offer training in ECEC (levels 7 and 8.) However, only three IoTs offer modules in all disciplines (Music, Art, Drama) across the degree programme. It is unclear why there is a lack of standardised approach to training in the creative arts and why some third-level institutions give creativity more prominence than others, in light of the abundant historic evidence stressing its importance in child
development. All third-level training opportunities and creativity components in ECEC programmes are illustrated in Table 2.1
Table 2.1 Third-Level EYE Training Opportunities in Creativity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Awarding Body</th>
<th>Qualification Level Offered</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Mandatory Module Title</th>
<th>Elective Module Title</th>
<th>Credits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dublin City University</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Creativity in Early Childhood Education (a focus on visual arts) [Semester 1]</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Creativity in Early Childhood Education (a focus on Music) [Semester 2]</td>
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<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>/</td>
<td></td>
<td>Arts-based Education in Early Years Settings</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National University of Ireland Galway</td>
<td>7 and 8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Creative Development in Early Years Education</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Maynooth</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Supporting Creativity and Imagination</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University College Cork</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Limerick (Mary Immaculate College)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Creativity</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4 Links to Universities and Institutes of Technology websites can be found in the references.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Awarding Body</th>
<th>Qualification Level Offered</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Mandatory Module Title</th>
<th>Elective Module Title</th>
<th>Credits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Athlone Institute of Technology</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Creative Skills in Art and Drama</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institute of Technology Blanchardstown</td>
<td>7 and 8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Drama and Movement [Semester 1] Art and Music [Semester 2]</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Creative Inventions for the Personal, Social &amp; Emotional Development of Children</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institute of Technology Carlow</td>
<td>7 and 8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Creative Studies for ECCE</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cork Institute of Technology</td>
<td>7 and 8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Creative and Critical Thinking [Semester 1]</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Process-led Art in Music, Art and Drama [Semester 2]</td>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Learning through the Arts [Music, Art and Drama]</td>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Arts in an Emergent Curriculum [Music, Art and Drama]</td>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letterkenny Institute of Technology</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Creativity in Early Years Education</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awarding Body</td>
<td>Qualification Level Offered</td>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Mandatory Module Title</td>
<td>Elective Module Title</td>
<td>Credit</td>
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<tr>
<td>Limerick Institute of Technology</td>
<td>7 and 8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Introduction to Creative Studies</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Drama, Literature and Storytelling</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Arts in Early Education</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Music and Movement</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institute of Technology Tralee</td>
<td>7 and 8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Creativity in Drama and Dance [Semester 1]</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Aistear through Creativity 2 [Semester 2]</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Creativity 3</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waterford Institute of Technology</td>
<td>7 and 8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Critical and Creative Thinking Engaging Children through Play</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sligo Institute of Technology</td>
<td>7 and 8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Introduction to Creative Practice</td>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Creative Practice</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Creative Practice for Diversity and Identity</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dublin Institute of Technology</td>
<td>7 and 8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Art in Early Years Education [Semester 1]</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Drama in Early Years Education [Semester 1]</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Art or Drama in Early Years Education</td>
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<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The aforementioned degree programmes demonstrate the varying emphasis placed on creativity and the arts, at initial professional education level. The following section provides a detailed account of the Cork Institute of Technology model, which promotes inquiry-based learning using a transdisciplinary approach to the visual arts.

### 2.5.1 Inquiry Based Learning (IBL) using a Transdisciplinary Approach (TDA) to the Visual Arts (VA); the CIT model

Table 2.2 provides an overview of the arts modules, currently on offer to initial professional education students in Early Childhood Education and Care at Cork Institute of Technology (CIT). Visual examples from these modules can be found in the Appendices of this thesis (See Appendix 2, 3 and 4).
Table 2.2 Arts Modules delivered during Initial Professional Education training at Cork Institute of Technology

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year &amp; Semester</th>
<th>Module Title</th>
<th>Module Descriptor</th>
<th>Lecture or Workshop</th>
<th>Credits</th>
<th>Timetabled hours per week</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Year 1 Semester 1</td>
<td>Creative and Critical Thinking</td>
<td>This module will provide students with the theoretical underpinning of how creativity and creative development promotes and extends critical thinking in the context of the young child. Emphasis will be placed on the role of the adult in providing authentic learning opportunities through an Inquiry Based Learning approach in order to promote self-initiation and investigation in children under the age of six.</td>
<td>Lecture</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 1 Semester 2</td>
<td>Process-led Arts</td>
<td>This module aims to introduce students to the Artistic Elements within the disciplines of Music, Art and Drama. The Artistic Elements will be central to the concepts explored within experiential workshops. Emphasis will be placed on the importance of approaching the Arts as process-led rather than product/ performance driven. Appropriate learning provocations will be used to demonstrate how best to promote authentic experiences for the child birth to three and three to six. National Frameworks, Regulations and Guidelines (e.g. Aistear and Síolta) will inform the structure, delivery and assessment of the module.</td>
<td>Workshop</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 2 Semester 2</td>
<td>Learning through the Arts</td>
<td>This module will focus on how best to use the Arts as a pedagogical tool within the Early Childhood Education and Care sector. Students will devise developmentally appropriate learning opportunities for children from birth to three and three to six. Avenues of investigation and exploration, through Music, Art and Drama will be explored using an Inquiry Based Learning approach. National Frameworks, Regulation and Guidelines (e.g. Aistear and Síolta) will inform the structure, delivery and assessment of the module.</td>
<td>Workshop</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 4 Semester 1</td>
<td>Arts in an Emergent Curriculum</td>
<td>This module aims to give the student the ability to critically evaluate the role of Music, Art and Drama within an emergent curriculum. It will examine the role of the practitioner in extending learning through the Arts for children birth to three and three to six. Inquiry Based Learning using Transdisciplinary approaches will be assessed. International as well as National Frameworks, Regulations and Guidelines will be examined in relation to analysis of practice. Emphasis will be placed on effective documentation of learning opportunities within the ECEC context.</td>
<td>Workshop</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6 hours</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: Egan, 2020)
It has been my experience, that when first introduced to the arts modules, the majority of students regard the visual arts as a 'make-and-do' or 'arts and crafts' subject. They associate the visual arts with the use of commercially generated materials, with clearly defined instructions as to how to produce an end product, e.g. cut-out and colour-in templates of Santa at Christmas or the perfect love heart for Valentine’s Day. As a result, students are initially reticent to work with materials other than those where the process and the product are pre-determined. In my opinion, when these preconceived notions prevail, at the outset of the degree programme, it is vital to provide a forum for students to challenge the belief that art should be adult-directed and template-driven or indeed a time-filler activity to keep children busy.

Therefore, when embarking on the programme, students are first familiarised with the seven artistic elements; Line, Shape, Form, Colour, Textured Space, and Value, all being central to concepts which are, henceforth, to be addressed during weekly experiential workshops. Workshops are in the form of practical engagement in the exploration of the disciplines of; mark-making, drawing, painting, printing and 3 dimensional processes (See Appendix 2). Emphasis is placed on the importance of approaching the visual arts as being process-led rather than product-driven. Students are provided with learning provocations (See Appendix 2) to demonstrate how best to promote authentic, creative learning experiences for children. They are also facilitated to question their own individual perceptions of their creative and artistic ability, in order to become more connected to the process of making and discussing art. The students document and record processes in the context of how similar experiences may be provided to young children. In addition, during the module ‘Process-Led Arts’, each student commences a reflective journal, as well as a portfolio of work, to be developed over the subsequent four years. Both of these learning components provide invaluable learning and resource material, which extends beyond the course to when they enter the workforce, post-graduation.

During the module ‘Learning Through the Arts’, students explore how art permeates all areas of learning (See Appendix 3). They develop an understanding of how children learn holistically through meaningful art experiences and how this approach enables higher-order thinking, advancing cognitive development. Art processes are not viewed in isolation but as a pedagogical tool to acquire a better understanding of units of
learning; i.e. Maths, Science and Languages. Additionally, in Year 2 of the programme, students participate in arts-based research and engage in dialogue and analysis of materials, processes and techniques. They view art through a transdisciplinary lens, to draw connections and relationships between areas of knowledge and understand how these are not categorised or confined but rather transcend disciplinary boundaries. This is achieved through participation, reflection and analysis of how to promote meaningful learning through art.

During the final year of the degree programme, students are afforded further opportunity to apply theory to practice. The module entitled ‘Arts in an Emergent Curriculum’ aims to equip them with an ability to critically evaluate the role of the visual arts within an emergent curriculum (See Appendix 4). It emphasizes the role the adult plays in extending learning through the medium of art. The effective documentation of learning opportunities within the Early Childhood Education and Care context continues and students are required to plan, present, observe and evaluate a specific learning opportunity for children under six. At the planning stage, they address the following question; Does this process, a) foster curiosity? b) promote creativity? c) inspire imagination? d) enable each child to visually express individuality?

The programme culminates in an interactive exhibition at the James Barry Exhibition Centre at CIT. Over a five-day period, local pre-school children are invited to participate in interactive learning activities (See Appendix 4). Final Year students are given the autonomy to operate all aspects of the exhibition, from conception to execution. This provides CIT students with organizational and administrative learning opportunities which stand them in good stead in their future careers as practitioners and managers within ECEC centres. During the interactive exhibition, they continue to apply theory to practice. Furthermore, they are provided with a platform whereby they are autonomous and the lecturer assumes a facilitator/advisory role. Students observe and document how children engage with the provocations, the questions and narratives that emerge and the way in which individual children examine, manipulate, inquire, problem-solve and create. The module culminates in a post-exhibition period of reflection, whereby students deconstruct their documentation and record of children’s interactions and experiences, and imagine how they might
build on and extend children’s interests, learning and development. The suite of creative arts modules comes to a close having equipped students with the wherewithal to implement an inquiry-based learning approach to the visual arts, in their future practice.

2.5.2 Growth of the Early Childhood Education and Care Sector in Ireland

Evidence of organised pre-school education has been recorded in Ireland as early as the 19th century. Douglas (1994) in his *History of the Irish Pre-school Playgroups Association* (1984) draws attention to Maria Edgeworth founding her own pre-school and how she used a child-centred approach to learning as advocated by Rousseau (1712-1778). However, it was not until 1969 that the Irish Pre-School Playgroups Association (IPPA) was founded. By 1985, membership of the IPPA had grown to 1,180 and by 1987 there were 34 parent and toddler groups in the country (Douglas, 1994).

The formation of IPPA was the precursor to Early Childhood Ireland and ultimately led to the ECCE scheme/programme (DCYA, 2019) of today, laying the foundation stone for a formal Early Years Education sector. The need for a sector had become apparent in the 1970s when the *marriage bar*, a law prohibiting married women from working in the public service, was lifted in 1971 (Sheehan *et al.*, 2017). Consequently, married women were now free to seek employment outside of the home (ibid.). To illustrate its impact on the demographics of the workforce, Horgan (2001) explains that during the following decade (1971 to 1983) the total number of women at work grew by 34%. More significantly, the total number of married women employed in the labour force grew by 425% (ibid.). There has been a steady increase, over the decades, until currently the gap between the proportion of men and women in employment in Ireland, is at its narrowest ever with almost a million women now constituting part of the workforce (Bray, 2019). The entry, or re-entry, of the cohort of married women into the employment sector created an urgent need for the provision of appropriate child care (Hayes, 1995). As the phenomenon of married women at work was sudden and unprecedented, the educational needs of the child appear to have been inadequately
addressed and lacked planning in the early days. This is evidenced by the following criticism of the beginnings of Early Childhood Education and Care, ‘Descriptions of the sector read like a collection of unfinished stories, of fragmented and un-coordinated initiatives’ (Oberheumer, 2012:122).

It was not until the 1980s and 1990s that the ECEC sector was established as an educational sector in its own right (Corrigan, 2004). It has grown significantly over the past decades and caters for children from birth to six years, the age when children are obliged to enter formal Primary School Education (Oireachtas Report, 2014). Although compulsory to begin school at six, it is the norm for many children to be admitted to infant classes from the age of four. Indeed, almost 40% of four-year-old children and almost all five-year-olds are already in Junior and Senior Infant classes, which under the Department of Education and Skills form part of the ECCE structure (DES, 2020). As well as this provision for Primary and Special Needs Schools, the DES also provides funding for some pre-school services e.g. the Early Start Programme in 40 urban disadvantaged zones, for children aged three to four who otherwise may not be able to succeed in education and, the Rutland Street Project (located in Dublin inner city) which caters for an urban disadvantaged community. To add further to this discourse, the Government of Ireland (2018) proposed that Early Learning and Care (ELC) should be the standard term used to describe children’s learning and education, in Ireland, from birth to five years old.

Hayes (2008) proposes that despite the fact that the ECEC is an educational entity in its own right, it is not to be viewed as a *monocultural phenomenon* because it incorporates different underlying philosophies, e.g. An Naionra (Irish speaking) Montessori, High/Scope, Rudolf Steiner and Reggio Emilia, inspired. However, most ECEC settings do not subscribe to a particular philosophy but rather offer a play-based curriculum. Furthermore, an ECEC establishment can be privately owned, or community-based, mainstream or special educational needs (exclusively) and the system can operate through the medium of English or Irish (Hayes, 2008).

Since the origin of ECEC, and more recently during the past two decades, there have been significant government initiatives and developments within the sector, in Ireland. Historically, it was not necessary for staff members to hold an academic qualification
to work with children under the age of six. Neither was there a curriculum framework in existence prior to 2009. However, third-level training is now available for ECEC practitioners and a support system of mentoring and inspection (National Quality Framework and National Collaborative Forum) has been established at governmental level. In August 2016, it was announced that an early childhood forum would be developed for early childhood professionals to discuss a range of topics in ECEC. According to the DCYA (2016), it would facilitate discussion on issues such as policy and enable an exchange of ideas between ‘the Minister, key Department of Children and Youth Affairs officials, and key representatives of the sector’ (DCYA, 2016c).

Another agency which facilitates an exchange of ideas is the National Council for Curriculum Assessment (NCCA). The NCCA is an Irish Government statutory agency of the Department of Education and Skills, and while not an integral component of the department, it acts in an advisory capacity regarding curriculum and assessment in the different sectors of early childhood, primary and post primary education (DES, 2019). NCCA is not responsible for the implementation of the curriculum framework Aistear (NCCA, 2009). However, historically, in 2004, through a consultative process, NCCA influenced and guided the development of the Aistear Framework (Daly and Forster, 2009). When Aistear (NCCA, 2009) finally came to fruition, it marked an important milestone in early childhood education in Ireland. It was the culmination of 'many years of research, consultation, planning, and development by the NCCA in partnership with the early childhood sector in Ireland and abroad' (NCCA, 2009:3). This invaluable partnership was instrumental in developing a curriculum framework 'which reflects the experiences of practitioners, children and parents and is informed by evidence and research' (ibid.). The curriculum framework Aistear (NCCA, 2009) and Quality Framework Siolta (CECDE, 2006) are mandatory components of the Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA, 2019).

Furthermore, to monitor policy, the Early Years Education Policy Unit (EYEPU) of the Department of Education and Skills was instituted. It is located within the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) and its function is 'to ensure that policy developments in the early childhood sector are developed within an overall strategic policy framework for children’ (DES, 2019: np). The EYEPU is responsible
for the implementation of Síolta (CECDE, 2006). In addition, it also plays a role in the National Síolta Aistear Initiative (NSAI) which was established in 2016 to support the coordinated rollout of Síolta (CECDE, 2006) and Aistear (NCCA, 2009). It collaborates with the DES and NCCA and is funded by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA). It is run by a steering committee, consisting of representatives from DCYA, DES and NCCA and chaired by DES. Additionally, there is a national Síolta co-ordinator (based in the EY EPU) and a national Aistear co-ordinator (based in NCCA) to manage the initiative. Furthermore, Síolta/Aistear mentors are employed to train and mentor in early childhood settings and support the sector to implement the curriculum and quality frameworks (DES, 2018).

The recent initiative, Aistear Síolta Practice Guide (2015), is particularly apposite to the current research, as it is ‘a guide for practitioners on how to build an inquiry-based and emergent curriculum with short, medium and long-term planning aspects’ (NCCA, 2016: 4).

The Aistear Síolta Practice Guide (2015) is also used as a resource for Better Start mentors working with ECEC settings across the country. Better start is a government initiative, under the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA), which is hosted by Pobal. It was established to ensure that there is a co-ordinated approach to the quality of early years education, nationally, for children aged birth to 6 years. Essentially, it provides ‘a skilled and experienced Early Years Specialist team to work directly in a mentoring capacity with early years services, including children with additional needs and their families, on a national basis.’ (Pobal, 2019: np). Better Start is comprised of three main strands:

i. Translation of training and knowledge into practice, including promotion of self-reflection and self-evaluation of quality,

ii. Development of practices and values to implement the quality standards of Síolta (CECDE, 2006) and

iii. Support for the establishment of environments, interactions and practices which aid children’s learning and development as confident and competent individuals (NCCA, 2009).
The three pillars which facilitate this, within Better Start are City and County Childcare Committees, the National Early Years Quality Development Service, as well as National Voluntary Childcare Organisations, e.g. Barnardos, Early Childhood Ireland and the National Childhood Network (Pobal, 2019).

In a recently published book on Theories of Education, Gasper and Gasper (2020) reference the Irish Model, Better Start. These authors describe how team members in Better Start, Ireland ‘have become aware of the significant value of mentoring and coaching and have seen positive shifts in setting and practitioner organisation and practice.’ (Gasper and Gasper, 2020:156). They describe how the reflective model used by Better Start, Ireland has resulted in a more professional approach by practitioners and this approach, based on positive psychology has given individuals and teams greater confidence personally and in their practice. In recognition of this success, more resources have been made available to the initiative. Gasper and Gasper (2020) laud the Irish Model and invite the reader to ‘contrast it with the inspection processes, which tend to highlight negatives and can undermine confidence and hinder individual and team growth.’ (ibid.).

Finally, the ECCE scheme (NCCA, 2010), the focus of the current research, serves to provide children with an organised early learning experience, in a formal setting, before attending primary school. The principles of Síolta (CECDE, 2006) and Aistear (NCCA, 2009) must be applied to an appropriately structured pre-school educational programme, if childcare services wish to avail of the scheme. There is also a support network of City and County Childcare Committees (CCCs) to assist participating services in an advisory capacity. ECCE is only available through participating early years services which are on the Tusla register. The ECCE Programme was first announced in April 2009 and officially put into action when children were enrolled in 2010. It endeavours to promote optimal development for all children and is egalitarian in approach by including children from all strata of society, both advantaged and disadvantaged and is monitored by the inspectorate.

The inspectorate is not a single entity but is comprised of three regulatory bodies; Tusla (The Child and Family Agency), The Department of Education and Skills (DES) and Pobal (Department of Child and Youth Affairs). All three bodies have evolved
historically, since the Early Years Education sector was first regulated, in 1996. Pobal conducts unannounced inspection visits to ensure ECEC settings abide by Pobal’s Compliance, Audit and Risk (CAR) directorate (Pobal, 2016b). Tusla, on the other hand, is responsible for compliance with the Early Years Regulations (Tusla, 2016), which focuses on the health, safety, welfare (structural) and development (process) of children in ECEC settings (Tusla, 2018; 2016). Of particular relevance to the current research on inquiry- based learning, Tusla Quality Regulation Framework (QRF) document, states categorically that ‘open-ended materials such as loose parts, natural objects, twigs and stones should be made readily available to children at all times’ (Tusla 2018:40). Finally, the DES inspects ECCE services on process aspects of quality, under the EYEI (DCYA, 2014e). During inspections, the quality of the nature, range and appropriateness of early educational experiences for children participating in the ECCE Programme is evaluated. The main activity of an EYEI inspection is the observation, by the inspector, of the processes and practices relating to children’s learning (DES, 2018). Moreover, within the guide to EYE inspection (2018), quality processes to support children’s learning and development are identified as being informed by Aistear (NCCA, 2009). These are outlined within the document as signposts for good practice and consider the extent to which creative experiences follow an IBEC, affording children the opportunity to engage in mark-making, express creativity and individuality, reflection, judgement and decision making (DES, 2018).

The following table (Table 2.3) illustrates the significant initiatives and developments in ECEC in Ireland, (1996-2019).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Initiative</th>
<th>Summary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>Preschool Regulations</td>
<td>Directives and rules written for people charged with responsibility for implementing legislation and regulations are also for providers, in particular personnel who manage or propose to manage a pre-school service (Government of Ireland, 2019).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Equality and Diversity Guidelines</td>
<td>’Guidelines aim to support childcare practitioners, early childhood teachers, managers and policy makers in their exploration, understanding and development of diversity and equality practice’ (OMC, 2006:ix).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Síolta: National Quality Framework Early Childhood Education</td>
<td>Centre Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) and Department of Education and Skills (DES) Improve, Define, Monitor-Quality ECEC-Children 0 to 6 years (CECDE, 2006).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Childhood Education and Training Support (CETS)</td>
<td>Subsidised childcare scheme-parent(s) on training course.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>ECEC Scheme (Free Pre-School Year)</td>
<td>Pre-Primary yr. capitation grant- assist pre-school running costs (DCYA, 2019).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Child and Family Agency Bill 2013</td>
<td>Modified Part VII Child Care Act, 1991 i.e. registration and inspection process.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>ECCE Programme (Free Pre-School Year)</td>
<td>ECEC Scheme Expanded. Free pre-school- children aged 3-5 ½ (DCYA, 2019).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>Education-Focused Early Years Inspection Framework</td>
<td>Good practice -focused inspections. Síolta (CECDE, 2006) and Aistear (NCCA, 2009) implicit throughout, DES and DCYA active inspection early years services. Focus-Quality - Context, Processes, Children's</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>Aistear-Siolta Practice guide</td>
<td>Aids practitioners in making links between Siolta (CECDE, 2006) and Aistear (NCCA, 2009) in order to increase quality of early childhood programmes. Resulting in the advancement of young children’s learning and development. Provides tools to enable practitioners to engage in self-reflective practices, identify areas for improvement and establish a plan to meet these areas in need of development (NCCA, 2017; 2015).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>The Access and Inclusion Model (AIM)</td>
<td>Support Model for children with disabilities to access ECCE. Empowers pre-school practitioners to deliver inclusive pre-school experiences, so eligible children can participate in ECCE Programme and avail of quality education (DCYA, 2015b)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Leadership for Inclusion Programme</td>
<td>Government-funded special purpose award (NFQ Level 6) for practitioners who assume role of inclusion coordinator in ECEC service (DCYA, 2016) to provide access to early childhood services for children with additional needs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>National Siolta Aistear Initiative (NSAI)</td>
<td>Central support and co-ordination of Siolta (CECDE, 2006) and Aistear (NCCA, 2009) implementation. ‘Overseen by steering committee, chaired by DES, members from DCYA, DES and the NCCA. Two national coordinators to manage the initiative -Siolta Coordinator based in Early Years Education Policy Unit and Aistear Coordinator based in NCCA’ (DES, 2018:5).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Child-Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016</td>
<td>Amendments; 3 main areas: registration, management and qualification-level (Early Years Services Regulations, 2016).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Inclusion Co-ordinators Initiative</td>
<td>Dept. of Children and Youth Affairs and Dept. of Ed. and Skills-funded, Special-Purpose Award (NFQ Level 6) for 900 early years practitioners in inclusion coordinator role EYE setting (DCYA, 2016a; ECI, 2016). Aim- help children, w. additional needs to access ECEC. (ibid: 2016). Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Charter published (DCYA, 2016).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Early Years Education Focused Inspection (EYEI) Guide</td>
<td>Document set ’out the practices and procedures involved in the early years –focused inspection (EYEI) process’ (DES, 2016:2) Updated and renamed ‘A Guide to Early Years Education Inspection (EYEI): Inspectorate Department of Education and Skills’ in 2018. ‘The development of both the guide and inspectorate was informed by consultation with early childhood stakeholders. These identify the key principles underlining the DES inspections, pre and post inspection procedures as well as detailed the DES inspection model.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>National Collaborative Forum for Early Years Care and Education Sector (Early Years Forum)</td>
<td>Early Years Forum for EYE professionals to discuss range topics. DCYA (2016) facilitate discussion/exchange ideas- between DCYA officials and ECEC key reps. (DCYA, 2016).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016-2025</td>
<td>Arts Strategy: Making Great Artwork. Leading the Development of the Arts in Ireland</td>
<td>Vision for arts Ireland, grounded in a sense of people and place. Arts valued as vital feature of daily life. Ambitious and innovative artists supported to make work of excellence (Arts Council of Ireland, 2016)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Creative Ireland</td>
<td>Five-year programme connecting people, creativity and wellbeing with belief in power and creative potential of people, organizations and government departments working together, sharing expertise to catalyse ideas and action. (CI, 2017).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Professional Award Criteria and Guidelines for initial professional education (Level 7 and Level 8) Degree Programmes in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in Ireland</td>
<td>Guidelines established to develop a set of standards for Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) Level 7 and Level 8 early childhood degrees with a vision to create a unified early childhood workforce. A key objective within the guidelines was to support education institutions, quality assurance regulatory bodies and early childhood practitioners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Document Title</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Quality Regulatory Framework (QRF)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Tusla – Child and Family Agency’s Early Years Inspectorate Annual Report</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019-2028</td>
<td>First 5: A Whole Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(DES, 2019) in ‘clarifying the values, knowledge(s) and practices of a Level 7 or Level 8 ECEC graduate’ (Fillis, 2018:2)

Tusla in collaboration with the DCYA developed the Quality Regulatory Framework (QRF). ‘The QRF aims to support registered providers in achieving compliance with the regulations and enhance the safety and care of children who attend these services (Tusla, 2018a)

Publication of the annual report for the Tusla inspectorate and early childhood services. Key statistics and findings regarding compliance with the Early Years Services and Regulations (2016) in early childhood services were detailed in the report (Tusla, 2018b)

National strategy for children/family outlined in document with five key objectives; parental scheme (to provide parents greater time to spend with their child/ren) development of a DCYA-led parenting department, focus on child health and early childhood education and care- renamed: early learning and care (ELC), break poverty cycle from early childhood (Government of Ireland, 2018).
As the Early Childhood Education and Care sector has grown and developed, over the decades, so has the need for third-level training courses for ECEC practitioners. The following section is a review of many initiatives including a model framework and third-level training opportunities available in Ireland, with special reference to the status of the arts at initial professional, undergraduate training level.

In contrast to the *ad hoc* approach of former times, where one generally learned ‘on the job’ or through trial and error, formal educational training opportunities in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) became available at third-level Institutions, as the ECEC sector grew. Currently, the National Universities (NUI) and Institutes of Technology (IoTs) offer courses at Degree, Master, and PhD level (Oberhuemer et al., 2012). However, these vary significantly in areas such as learning outcomes, modules delivered, and length of the programme (Greene and Hayes, 2014). Furthermore, as an incentive to employ well-trained, quality staff, the services offering the Early Childhood Care and Education scheme (DCYA, 2019) are entitled to a higher government capitation fee directly related to the training level and experience of personnel. Practitioners with a Level 7 (or higher) major award /qualification and who have three (or more) years’ experience are entitled to a higher capitation for delivering the scheme (Committee on Children and Youth Affairs, 2017). An establishment with more highly qualified staff is eligible for additional financial assistance (Department of Childhood and Youth Affairs 2015) and a pre-school leader who has a nationally accredited major award in ECEC (Level 7) on the National Framework of Qualifications (DCYA 2015: np) is eligible to apply.

The Model Framework (MFW) for Education (2002) *Training and Professional Development* sets out the occupational profiles and core skills of workers in the Irish ECEC sector. It addresses how these can inform educational and training- programme development, leading to nationally awarded and recognised qualifications. This framework outlines the diversity of practice within the ECEC sector in Ireland and focuses on six core- knowledge areas in which there is a sequence of competency levels, which determine education, training and qualifications for the ECEC profession (Fig. 2.1). Competency levels are designated as follows: awareness, acquisition, application, assessment and extension, and are all deemed of equal importance, interrelated, and not mutually exclusive.
It is widely recognised that there is substantial correlation between high-quality service and the training experience of staff working within the ECEC sector, although it cannot be assumed that training alone is responsible for quality within a service (Manning et al., 2017). In this regard, Mahony and Hayes (2006) point to the overarching ethos of an ECEC setting and claim that it can influence quality. Moreover, initial professional education programmes are paramount to ensure the maintenance of quality early childhood education and care settings. When ECCE practitioners are well trained, there is a high probability that the experiences children have will positively impact learning, development and wellbeing. This will occur not only in childhood but will augur well for the future (DES, 2019).

Research has well established that students currently on degree courses in early years can relay accounts of very variable training experiences depending on which third-level institution they attend (DES, 2016; Urban, Robson and Saatchi, 2017). As a result of this realisation, the Professional Awards Criteria and Guidelines for Initial Professional Education was developed with the objective ‘to ensure that all awards offered in Ireland as initial professional education for Early Childhood Education and Care practitioners will have the capacity to prepare graduates for the complex and,
Urban *et al.*, (2017) identifies; knowledge, practices and values as being central to the core profile of the Irish early childhood profession. The following table (2.4) outlines the essential programme content for professional awards in early childhood education and care as featured in the Professional Awards Criteria and Guidelines for Initial Professional Education (DES, 2019):

**Table 2.4: Essential Programme Content for Professional Awards in ECEC**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Knowledge (s)</th>
<th>Practices</th>
<th>Values</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Knowledge of various developmental aspects of children from a holistic perspective (cognitive, social, emotional, creative)</td>
<td>• Building strong pedagogical relationships with children, based on sensitive responsivity</td>
<td>• Taking into account children’s needs in order to promote their full potential and their participation in the life of ELC institutions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Observing and assessing children in order to identify their developmental needs</td>
<td>• Planning and implementing a wide range of learning experiences that respond to children’s needs supporting their holistic development</td>
<td>• Adopting a holistic vision of education that encompasses learning, care and upbringing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Planning and implementing a wide range of learning experiences that respond to children’s needs supporting their holistic development</td>
<td>• Documenting children’s progress systematically in order to constantly redefine educational practices</td>
<td>• Committing to inclusive educational approaches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Documenting children’s progress systematically in order to constantly redefine educational practices</td>
<td>• Identifying children with ELC needs and elaborating strategies for their inclusion</td>
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<td>• Identifying children with ELC needs and elaborating strategies for their inclusion</td>
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<td>Knowledge(s)</td>
<td>Practices</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Knowledge of children’s different strategies of learning (play-based,</td>
<td>• Creating and organising effective learning environments</td>
<td>• Adopting a child-centred approach that views children as competent, active agents and as protagonists of their own learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>social learning, early literacy and numeracy, language acquisition and</td>
<td>• Providing and presenting learning opportunities that foster children’s creativity, aesthetic awareness,</td>
<td>• Understanding learning as a co-constructed and open-ended process that ensures children’s successful social</td>
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<td>multilingualism)</td>
<td>making and imagination</td>
<td>engagement and encourages further learning</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Knowledge of children’s different strategies of learning (play-based,</td>
<td>• Arranging small-group learning opportunities based on children’s interests (inquiry-based learning)</td>
<td>• Adopting a cross-disciplinary approach to learning</td>
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<tr>
<td>social learning, early literacy and numeracy, language acquisition and</td>
<td>• Encouraging children’s personal initiatives</td>
<td>• Adopting a multilingual approach that encourages learning in contexts of diversity</td>
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<td>multilingualism)</td>
<td>• Supporting children’s symbolic play through appropriate provision of structured and unstructured materials</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Generating an appropriate curriculum that stimulates and promotes</td>
<td>• Promoting language acquisition from a multilingual perspective (recognising children’s home language and</td>
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<tr>
<td>positive learning dispositions, emergent literacy, maths and science</td>
<td>supporting second language acquisition)</td>
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<tr>
<td>skills</td>
<td>• Offering more personalised and individual learning support to children with special educational needs</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Knowledge in relation to the health, care and wellbeing of young</td>
<td>• Implementing appropriate practices in relation to children’s safety, hygiene and nutrition</td>
<td>• Commitment to welfare and well-being for all adults and children in ELC settings</td>
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<tr>
<td>children</td>
<td>• Ensuring that all measures in relation to child protection are in place and operational</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Knowledge in relation to ensuring the well-being and safety of children</td>
<td>• Commitment to welfare and well-being for all adults and children in ELC settings</td>
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<td>and adults in an ELC environment</td>
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<td>Knowledge(s)</td>
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</table>
| • Knowledge of team working (interpersonal communication and group-work dynamics) | • Building up support for ELC services within local communities  
• Establishing collaborative relationships with other professionals (e.g. health and social services)  
• Continuously reviewing practices individually and collectively  
• Sharing and exchanging expertise with colleagues in team meetings  
• Engaging in discussion and learning from disagreement  
• Developing educational practices together with colleagues through joint work  
• Co-constructing pedagogical knowledge through documentation and collective evaluation of educational practices | • Adopting a democratic and critically reflective approach to the education of young children                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| • Knowledge of working in contexts of diversity (anti-biased approaches, intercultural dialogue, identity) | • Developing inclusive practices that facilitate the socialisation of children and families within a plurality of value systems and proactively address discrimination  
• Facilitating intercultural dialogue within ELC services and in the wider community through parents’ involvement  
• Dealing with unpredictability and uncertainty  
• Elaborating a pedagogical framework that sustains inclusive practices within ELC services | • Adopting a democratic and inclusive approach that values diversity                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Knowledge(s)</th>
<th>Practices</th>
<th>Values</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Knowledge of the historical and current situation of ELC in the broader local, national and international context</td>
<td>• Engagement with other professionals and professional organisations in support of children’s learning, well-being and development</td>
<td>• Rights-based approach to ELC that promotes children’s and families’ active citizenship, solidarity and lifelong learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Knowledge of being a professional Early Childhood Educator</td>
<td>• Provision of ELC that is respectful of the historical, philosophical and cultural context in which it is located</td>
<td>• Adopting a democratic and critically reflective approach to personal professional development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Knowledge of leadership and management in Early Childhood Education and Care</td>
<td>• Actively engaging with local communities in promoting children’s and families’ rights and participation</td>
<td>• Commitment to continuing professional development as a core attribute of the professional Early Childhood Educator</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Networking with other professionals (e.g. professional associations, trade unions) and engaging in local political consultation</td>
<td>• Ethical, democratic leadership that promotes sustainable development</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Self-reflection and self-Evaluation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Knowledge(s)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
| • Knowledge of leadership and management in Early Childhood Education and Care | • Implementation of effective and democratic organisational structures and processes.  
• Implementation of innovative, evidence informed policies provision and practice.  
• Effective communication with all stakeholders and partners in the learning well-being and development of children.  
• Support and supervision of all staff and students in support of their personal and professional development  
• Respectful engagement with evaluation, monitoring and accountability processes | • Ethical, democratic leadership that promotes sustainable development                                                                         |

Source: (DES, 2019: 16-23)

Of particular relevance to the current research, the Professional Award Criteria and Guidelines (PACG) highlight the need for provision of learning opportunities to foster and cultivate children’s creativity, aesthetic awareness, meaning-making and imagination, within initial professional education courses (DES, 2019). Furthermore, the PACG suggest that practice should reflect an inquiry-based approach, be holistic in nature, and respond to a range of learning needs which demonstrate how to build and extend learning, based on children’s interests. Additionally, it is highlighted within the essential course content that value be placed on the use of open-ended processes, which are cross-disciplinary to promote successful social engagement (Urban, 2017).

However, the guidelines do not outline essential programme content related specifically to the arts, or the necessary knowledge, practices and values which underpin the arts. Neither are the means by which to operationalise the above criteria identified to enable initial professional practitioners to deliver high quality arts experiences, in practice. This is of particular significance because initial professional
education programmes are ‘critical in ensuring that ECEC settings in Ireland are of the highest quality, thereby increasing the likelihood that children’s experiences will positively contribute to their learning, well-being and development in the present and future’ (DES, 2019:7). Moreover, Aistear (NCCA, 2009) and Siolta (CECDE, 2006) are reflected in the criteria and guidelines as it is recommended are ‘incorporated in the knowledge element of initial professional education courses’ (DES, 2019:11). In relation to the impact of professional training on practice, Garvis and Riek (2010) highlight how poor quality initial professional training directly affects practitioner capacity to deliver quality arts education. They identify two main factors which impact quality: (1) insufficient time allocation to art education within initial professional education and (2) a low level of confidence in the arts amongst initial professional education students. They also point to the dearth of research on the curriculum and pedagogy of arts education within initial professional education, confirming the importance and timeliness of this current research on inquiry-based learning. Theoretical knowledge on the integrated nature of child development and how children learn should be given prominence in any early years training programme. Various educational philosophies have been propounded on the interconnectedness of child development and learning and will be discussed in the following section.

2.6 Integrated Nature of Child Development and Learning

Down through the centuries, eminent educational philosophers and pedagogues have reconceptualised the understanding of education by propounding new theories on how children learn and examining the nature of child development (Hirsch, 2016). In the Age of the Enlightenment, Rousseau (1712-1778) stressed that learning needed to be child-centred and located within the child’s natural environment (Curtis and Boulwood, 1977). Furthermore, the adult should facilitate the learning process and adopt a non-didactic role, which according to Savery (2015) and Roach-O’ Keefe (2013) is effectively the very essence of inquiry-based learning. Mc Bain (2014), in discussing how children learn, emphasises the importance of recognising and paying attention to seminal figures, such as Rousseau, who have contributed to the development of current pedagogical philosophies and practices.
Pestalozzi (1746-1827) embraced the idea that education develops the powers of head, heart, and hand and expands on many of Rousseau’s pedagogic ideas. Pestalozzi advocated *empirical* learning, meaning a child learns through the senses, acquiring competencies in observation, assessment and reasoning (Ornstein *et al*., 2015) all of which are at the core of the inquiry-based learning approach. Froebel (1826), the founder of the Kindergarten system, and also the model educator Marie Montessori (1912), both stressed the significance of *activity* in a child’s learning and the impact it has on the child’s development.

Piaget (1956) put forward the *Theory of Cognitive Development*, a comprehensive understanding of the nature and development of human intelligence and described how children gradually come to acquire, construct and use knowledge. In direct relation to the subject of this research, he argued that children’s first visual expressions of mark-making and how drawing reflect cognitive competencies, as children advance from making initial marks to recognisable forms. Lowenfeld (1957), who was influenced by Piaget (1956) *Theory of Cognitive Development*, acknowledges how young children use the visual arts as a vehicle to release emotions and sensibilities. He adds that children respond initially to creating marks across a surface in a pleasurable act of movement, a sensorial experience without purpose, beyond the act of doing and then gradually progress to recognisable visual representations. Kellogg (1969) concurs with Lowenfeld (1957) and suggests that as children develop, they demonstrate more command of marks and make identifiable shapes within these marks, due to the development of motor skills and a greater desire to reflect the world around them. Chapman (1978) also recognises that children’s art contributes to their understanding of the world and how, this in turn, extends their developmental growth and learning. According to Malin (2019) children’s drawings are reflective of their cultural context and act as a means by which they can illustrate their evolving views and experiences. Einarsdottir *et al*., (2009) note the importance of recording these narratives and representations during the process of drawing, as ideas, thoughts and feelings about why and what the child is drawing, emerge. Implicit to the above list of claims is a criticism of the *product* approach, as put succinctly by Einarsdottir *et al*., (2009) ‘much of the attention to children’s drawings has been on the finished product and the labelling of that product’ (ibid:219).
Although many theorists subscribe to the Piagetian theory of Cognitive Development, there are also many counter arguments. Both Piaget (1956) and Lowenfeld (1957) have been criticised by Alter-Muri (2002) who tested their hypotheses of the artistic stages of development and observed that development can occur at different rates and in different areas or domains. Roland (2006) also contests the theories that describe children’s scribbles as acts, which are sensually pleasing to the young child. Instead, he suggests that even very young children recognise the relationship between their movements and mark-making. They quickly gain control of their marks and begin to make connections between marks; as in line, shape and form, concurrent with their developing motor and perceptive skills. Longobardi et al., (2015) criticise the Lowenfeld (1957) thesis, claiming that it neglects to acknowledge the developmental capacity of a two-year-old child and they indicate that during the second year of a child’s life, mental representations have already begun to emerge. In addition, they propose that these representations are linked to meaning-making for the child and are far more complex than the simple outcome of physical actions. Such reflections suggest the hypothesis that the perceptual development of even the very young child is facilitated through art.

Brooks (2009a) is another researcher who disputes the Piagetian Developmental Framework, claiming there is an inherent reluctance to engage in any meaningful dialogue with children and their drawings and this conflicts with contemporary socio-cultural learning theories. Anning and Ring (2005) accept that mark-making and drawing are the child’s first form of visual expression and further develop the idea, claiming that drawing is in fact a language. It is that process in which the child’s ideas and thoughts are explored, discussed and further developed and is a language by which complex notions are communicated. They interrogate the relationship between the child’s drawing and thought, as they consider the complexities of meaning-making through imagery and dialogue. They propose that when the child engages with drawing, it is functioning at a higher cognitive level. Their conclusion is that drawing should be recognised as a metacognitive tool, by which the child is encouraged to expand on initial ideas through experimentation, reflection and exploration of how sequences are structured logically.
Alford (2015) endorses this notion, stressing the importance of providing children with a smorgasbord of diverse opportunities and choices. She claims that cognitive development is enhanced when children are afforded the chance to reflect on, and discuss their drawings, which is in keeping with inquiry-based learning (IBL). Barnes (2015) however, recognises that adults often misinterpret these early scribbles and regard them as meaningless marks. This approach is contrary to IBL, where the adult should act as facilitator of the child’s creative expression and not stand in judgement. Barnes (2015) believes this adult involvement to be wrong and argues that each mark is unique to the child who creates it, noting that the process of drawing is fundamental to the child’s overall development. Drawing is a form of expression, which records, documents and makes visible children’s perceptions, observations, sense of awareness and growth (Lee and Wright, 2017). Moreover, it is evident that the role of imagination, play and creativity are all integral to the child’s holistic development (Leggett, 2017).

A snapshot of the various philosophies, concepts and educational practices from Locke (1632-1704) and Rousseau (1712-1778) in the Age of Reason and Enlightenment, to Pestalozzi and Froebel in the 18th and 19th Centuries, to Dewey, Piaget and the Post-Structuralists of the mid Twentieth Century, is captured in Table 2.5
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theories</th>
<th>Key Theorist</th>
<th>Concept</th>
<th>Educational Practice</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rousseau (1712-1778)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Pestalozzi (1746-1827)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Froebel (1782- 1852)</td>
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<td>Montessori (1870-1952)</td>
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<td>Piaget (1896-1980)</td>
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<td>Gardner (1943- )</td>
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<td>Bruner (1915-2016)</td>
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<td>Bronfenbrenner (1917-2005)</td>
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<td>Dewey (1859-1952)</td>
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<td>Malaguzzi (1920-1994)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Watson (1878-1958)</td>
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<td>Skinner (1904-1990)</td>
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<td>Bandura (1925- )</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Habermans (1929- )</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Post-Structuralist</strong></td>
<td>Foucault (1926-1984)</td>
<td>Many forms knowledge-no absolute truth</td>
<td>Practitioner- explores/questions power-relationships, powerful assumptions that privilege one child over another. Deconstructs ideas/ experiences. (MacNaughton, 2005).</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bourdieu (1930-2002)</td>
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The foregoing educational philosophers and psychologists recognise the importance of play in child development. Indeed, down through the centuries many theories have been propounded by eminent figures in the field of psychology, education and research on how creativity, play and development are inextricably bound. A review of the historical research on their interconnectedness, and theories of what constitutes play and creativity, will form the basis of discussion in the following section.

2.6.1 Play and Creativity in Child Development

A number of significant figures have identified the power of play as a process in promoting a child’s development (Froebel, 1826, Freud, 1964, Piaget, 1962, Erickson, 1963, Vygostky, 1933). Notably, Froebel (1826) within the formal pre-school educational context, stressed the potent influence of creative and imaginative play on development. He viewed the process of education as the means by which the child becomes through play and experience. Fundamentally, Froebel advocated that child-centred education was necessary to ensure that learning would not be empty and mechanical (Froebel, cited in Wyse and Ferrari, 2015). He further believed in the importance of child-led and practitioner-facilitated interactions, a philosophy at the very core of inquiry-based learning (Savery 2015). Like Pestalozzi (1746-1827), Froebel promoted the idea of the child as an active rather than passive participant and adopted the Pestalozzi method of engaging in research linking his educational philosophy to his teaching.

Saracho and Spodek (1998) in praise of Froebel’s theory on Turn-taking (and the importance of children working positively to resolve conflict, apply rules and share materials) stress how vital play is to children’s social development and emotional maturity. Isenberg and Jalango (2018) concur and recognise that while experts who study ‘play’ may disagree on some aspects, there is a general consensus among them that play differs from other forms of human behavior. This can be attributed to its singular characteristics; play is human, voluntary and intrinsically motivated. It is also symbolic, meaningful and transformational. Importantly, it involves people, has rules and is pleasurable (Isenberg and Jalengo 2018). In this vein, Wright (2010) proposes that because the arts possess play-orientated characteristics, engaging in them is central to development during the early years. Wright (2010) illustrates her claim by
demonstrating how ‘drawing’ in an uninhibited and playful way in childhood, later promotes mastery of literacy and numeracy. In a later study, McArdle and Wright (2014) concur with this view, highlighting how children construct knowledge through art and play. Indeed, this can be achieved through the development of symbols, through drawing and is a means of visual expression, which in relation to children ‘captures their sensory modes in emotional and embodied ways’ (McArdle and Wright, 2014:21). However, play as an entity involves different categories as elaborated upon in the following section.

**2.6.2 Categories of Play**

There are two different categories of play according to Lillard (2013): free and guided. She defines *free play* as being a spontaneous pursuit often involving peers, centred around fantasy and imagination and with little adult involvement or input. *Guided play* on the other hand involves direct adult input, often employing specific materials and tools to stimulate the child’s natural curiosity. She focuses on the role of play in learning and considers that ‘authentic learning’, which is child-centred, practical and constructivist, as in inquiry-based learning, should be recognised as ‘playful learning’, encompassing both guided and free play. Skolnick-Weisberg *et al.*, (2013) are in agreement with this claim, as they recognise that guided play includes adult-scaffolded learning objectives but is directed by the child. Wood (2015) drawing on 30 years of research on play in education, observes how children sometimes deviate from what is expected and planned by the adult and become involved in free play which is not always in accordance with the adult master-plan and expectations. Wood points to the important educational value of this type of play, regardless of children not keeping to the adult script. Play is the very antithesis of product-based learning and ‘is flexible, extremely creative, sometimes messy and always under the control of the learner' (Broadhead *et al.*, 2015: forward).

Fundamentally, it is generally accepted that ‘play’ is synonymous with early childhood, that period in one’s life which Gardner (1982) the founding father of Multiple Intelligences Theory, describes as the *Golden Age of Creativity*, when children naturally demonstrate and express their creative potential. He draws on the cognitive
approach and acknowledges the link between creativity, intelligence and the child’s mental ability to problem-solve. In agreement, Silvia (2015) also observes close links between creativity and intelligence, identifying a number of studies (Primi, 2014; Benedek et al., 2013; Nusbaum and Silvia 2011) which draw a direct correlation between the two concepts. The link between creativity and cognitive ability is evident in those individuals who undertake intellectual pursuits (logical reasoning) with ease and who also achieve well in creative endeavours (divergent thinking) (Silvia, 2015).

Research by Glâveanu (2011) and Toivanen et al., (2013) on childhood creativity, subscribe to Gardner’s theory that creative thought has its very roots in play and they describe children, metaphorically, as the very embodiment of human creativity. If Early Childhood is indeed the Golden Age of Creativity as described by (Gardner, 1982) and children are the very essence of human creativity (Toivanen et al., 2013 and Glâveanu 2011) it begs the question: What constitutes Creativity?

2.6.3 Categories of Creativity

Kaufman and Beghetto (2009) propose that, as in the case of ‘play’, there are also two categories of ‘creativity’, which they refer to as ‘Big C’ and ‘Little c’. ‘Big C’ focuses on eminent creativity, the kind of creativity generally associated with genius or greatness, as, for example Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519). ‘Little c’ is concerned with everyday creativity, those actions and activities in which the average person participates daily. Craft (2000) defined ‘Little c’ as the ability to cope with the challenges of life in the 21st century and she, like Kaufman and Beghetto (2009) also separates ‘Little c’ from the creativity of genius and greatness. ‘Little c’ she suggests, is based on possibility thinking, or in a mode which refuses to be confounded by events or circumstances, but in imagining ways to cope with or circumvent problems. Negus and Pickering (2004) strongly criticise the notion of ‘Little c’, stating that creativity is not synonymous with everyday life and that only some everyday experiences involve creativity. They refute the claim that all daily actions are somehow creative, dismissing it as an exercise in rhetoric or polemics. They assert that the argument should focus on eliciting the intrinsic connections between creative practice and daily life. Furthermore, they observe that great moments of creativity are always connected to the habitual, to the daily routine, and we should be reminded that a particular art piece may
capture our attention in the midst of ordinary life as it unfolds. Some viewpoints on children and creativity are explored in the following section.

2.6.4 Children and Creativity: in Praise of Inquiry-Based Learning

Csikszentmihalyi (2013) the distinguished professor of psychology and expert on children and creativity, argues that it is unclear, if indeed, children are creative or exhibit creativity, stating that creativity involves changing ways of doing or seeing things. This, he posits demands being accomplished in formal methods of doing and thinking. He is adamant that children cannot function in this way, regardless of how precocious they are. However, he does suggest that creativity can be enhanced by exposing children, at an early stage, to the wealth and variety of life, triggering creativity and curiosity. The adult plays a key role in encouraging the pursuit of knowledge and instilling in children the intellectual discipline to acquire problem-solving and coping skills, which foster innovation and creative thinking, all of which are integral to the inquiry-based learning (IBL) environment.

Furthermore, he indicts educational systems by claiming that most schools have no bearing on the lives of creative people. Instead, they appear to quench that interest and sense of wonder, which burns within the child outside of the institution. He lauds the educator who enables creativity to flourish, who recognises the child’s creative potential and who strives to support, nurture and appropriately direct individual children’s interests. If one subscribes to Csikszentmihalyi’s (2013) viewpoint, one can deduce that the IBL environment is best suited to fostering curiosity and promoting creativity, as children explore, investigate and engage in the inquiry process (Ontario, Ministry of Education, 2010).

Sawyer (2011) discusses children’s behaviour and actions, which are often interpreted by adults as being ‘creative’, original, imaginative and unconventional. He points out that these actions, are indeed not examples of creativity, but could be attributed to, and interpreted as, children ignoring the rules or being unable to keep to the rules. This viewpoint is congruent to some extent with that of Weisberg (2006) who proposes that...
if something novel is brought about by accident, it does not qualify as creative, no matter how worthwhile the outcome.

Despite these opposing viewpoints, the arts are synonymous with creativity in the general psyche. However, involvement in the arts extends far beyond being a means of creative expression but is integral to the holistic development of the child, as is discussed in the following section.

2.6.5 The Arts in the Holistic Development of the Child

The United Nations (1994) recognises the value of the arts in the affective, cognitive and psychomotor or holistic development of the child. At the UNESCO Salamanca Meeting (1994) a statement was issued, claiming that the arts contribute immeasurably to the number and quality of ways in which children convey feelings, express their natural creativity and thus hasten their academic achievement. Notably, Eisner (1998), a powerful voice in the arts-in-education discourse, is a strong advocate of inquiry-based learning and promotes widely the message that arts teach children that there is more than one solution to a problem and more than one answer to a question. In considering the holistic development of the child, Eisner, like the United Nations, encourages educators to use art because of its major contribution to the cognitive, affective and psychomotor development of the child. He recognises how the child’s learning trajectory is richly informed by the arts and cautions educators that there are consequences to be faced, if the arts are neglected (Eisner, 1998). Over the next decades, eminent scholars writing on the importance of art in child development, make a plea for art to be awarded its true status. Duffy (2006) a recognised expert on the role of creativity and imagination in young children’s learning, and Anttila (2018) a contemporary author, both stress how exposure to the arts, at an early age, contributes powerfully to the holistic development of the child. Additionally, these scholars link the arts to the acquisition of essential knowledge, attitudes and skills needed for lifelong learning. This is exemplified in the acquisition of problem-solving and negotiation skills, (as in IBL) which facilitates the ability to think latterly and conceptually.
2.6.6 Cognition and Creativity in Child Development

The following theorists dwell on the intricacies of brain function vis-à-vis creativity and learning. Interestingly, Tyler and Likova (2012) explain that there is a cross-cognitive transfer involved in creativity and learning and this indicates a common neural substrate. Learning through the visual arts functions through a complex system, which involves perception, cognition and motor skills. Englebright-Fox and Schirrmacher (2008) and later Schlegel et al (2014) also highlight how engagement in the visual arts and sensory stimulation improve the neural circuitry in the brain. A contemporary researcher, Danko-McGhee (2016) contributes to the debate, pointing out that as a baby's brain is developing, the arts stimulate the senses and the limbic system induces aesthetic responses from the infant, which in turn, modulates its emotional reactions and biological needs. In this regard, she echoes Gardner (1982) who proposes that ‘drawing’ is fundamental and is perhaps the unique way by which young children can effectively express emotions.

In making a plea for early exposure to the arts for children under three years, Speedie (2013) states that when a baby is born it has trillions of synaptic connectors in the brain, which connect in a multitude of ways, once there is the context of knowledge and meaning. Furthermore, he highlights that there is an imperative on all stakeholders involved in the education of young children, (practitioners, managers, policy-makers and artists) to recognise ‘the importance they place on making a difference to early childhood development using creative and cultural processes’ (ibid: n.p.). Additionally, Cutcher and Boyd (2018) detail how exposure to the arts, not only directly impacts development, but also enhances: motor skills, dexterity, language, divergent and critical thinking, visual learning, inventiveness, cultural awareness, and cognition. French (2013) also recognises the various influences on the holistic development of the child. She stresses that the physical, cognitive, social, emotional and linguistic threads are intrinsically linked and interdependent, so that the development of one area impacts on another. Yogman et al., (2018) concur and underscore the importance of the early years, arguing that during this phase of development, children acquire (with increasing rapidity); language, motor skills, a sense of self and an understanding of their world. With specific regard to exposure to the arts and inquiry-based learning, French (ibid.) asserts the need to nurture the
inquiring mind of the child and stresses how meaningful art-experiences enable higher-order thinking and advanced cognitive development. This is especially evident, when children are engaged in dialogue and analysis as in; comparing, negotiating, hypothesizing and problem-solving, all being constitutive of inquiry-based learning.

Fundamentally, much has been stated and debated about creativity and cognitive development, but a seminal voice in what actually constitutes ‘intelligence’ is that of Gardner (1982) who pioneered the theory of Multiple Intelligences (MI) based on cognitive research. ‘Thinking’ according to Gardner (2010) is not a standard process, it is not the same for all individuals, as people think differently and each mind is unique. It is a fallacy, therefore, to claim that all students understand, memorise, learn and perform in the same way. He proposes that there are eight ‘intelligences’ which account for a broader range of human potential in children and adults: Linguistic, Logical/Mathematical, Spatial, Bodily Kinesthetic, Musical, intrapersonal and naturalist ‘intelligence(s)’. Pertinent to the current research, Gardner (2010) significantly identifies findings from studies carried out by Project Zero on child development and the arts. Early childhood is a time when sensory and perceptual abilities develop most rapidly and learning traverses multiple domains of neural functioning. Art creates a culture of thinking, which catalyzes and nurtures creativity, enhancing understanding across all school subjects. Project Zero is a Harvard Graduate School of Education research group in education. Its main function is to understand and enhance learning, thinking and creativity in the arts and humanities, both formally and informally and at individual and group levels (Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2019: n.p.). Moreover, and of particular relevance to the current research, Robinson (2007) makes the claim that creativity infuses all areas of learning and development and is not to be confined to distinct subject areas. French (2013) points out how early years education and its practitioners should provide the opportunity to embrace and enable creative processes across learning domains. She highlights how the educational experience of the very young is unlike all others, in that it is not defined by segregated subject areas.

The foregoing debate on the integrated nature of child development, creativity and imaginative play as well as the concept of multiple intelligences, all point to the
importance of Early Years Education. The educator plays a pivotal role, as in all other educational experiences of children (Csikszentmihalyi, 2013). Similarly, Robinson (2007) describes how traditionally, the educator assumed a didactic role and was often perceived as the font of all knowledge and wisdom. Furthermore, he notes that this is no longer the case and stresses that the role of the educator needs to be revised, as educators and education enter the new and complex reality of the 21st century. Baraldi (2019) highlights how affording children agency in their educational trajectory provides them with autonomy, self-determination and choice, while bridging the adult-child divide. He further opines that when children are seen as agents in their own lives, the hierarchical role structure is diminished and the realm of possibility, exchange and autonomy in the adult-child relationship, is extended. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is of particular relevance to the current research. The UNCRC (1989) states unequivocally that children’s agency is essential to early learning and that children are entitled to autonomy in order to fully participate in and influence matters which concern them. This is reminiscent of the renowned social theorist of the 1970’s, Albert Bandura, who claimed that affording children agency provides them with the self-determination to reach their full potential. They become ‘agents of experiences, rather than simply undergoers of experiences' (Bandura, 2011:4). Furthermore, Article 31 of the UNCRC convention declares that children of all ages have the right to access and fully participate in cultural and artistic life. Indeed, the rights of the child are at the very core of Síolta (CECDE, 2006) philosophy, which propounds that children’s individuality, strengths, rights and needs are central, in the provision of quality early childhood experiences. Regulation (5) in the Irish preschool regulations, highlights children’s rights to participation, to be actively listened to and the need to incorporate their views into the culture and running of ECEC settings. Moreover, practitioners must ‘ensure that each child’s learning, development and well-being is facilitated within the daily life of the service through the provision of the appropriate opportunities, experiences, activities, interaction, materials and equipment, having regard for the age and stage of development of the child and the child’s cultural context.’ (GOI, 2006:6).

In light of the abundant evidence on the importance of children's involvement in their educational trajectory, as highlighted in the foregoing examples, the challenge lies in identifying how practitioners might optimally promote children’s agency, in practice.
Therefore, the role of the educator in facilitating children’s learning and development, will form the basis of discussion in the next section.

2.7 Role of the Educator in Facilitating Children’s Learning

2.7.1 Practitioner as Scaffold

During the 20th century there has been an effort to move away from the didactic mode of curriculum implementation. Now, the weight of evidence in the first decades of the millennium strongly favours the practitioner as facilitator of a child’s education and development. The prime movers in this expanding domain include the following; Montessori (1912) founder of the Montessori Method, Vygotsky (1978) a pioneer developmental psychologist, Bruner (1978) an educational and cognitive psychologist, and, Malaguzzi (1993) the founder of the Reggio Emilia Approach. Another contemporary figure, Eisner (1998) champions the arts in education and argues that the practitioner should be a facilitator of a child’s learning. The practitioner should actively provide enriching opportunities to maximise a child’s intellectual growth. Montessori (1912), Vygotsky (1978), Bruner (1978), Malaguzzi (1993) and Eisner (1998) are of one voice as to the link between practitioner and child being crucial to healthy development. Vygostsky (1933 cited 1978) in his concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) refers to the difference between the child’s ability to carry out tasks independently and those which are guided, by a practitioner. The ZPD, is essentially the area between the child’s actual developmental level, and the child’s potential developmental level, which can be achieved with the assistance of a more experienced peer or an adult. Vygostsky (ibid.) stresses that within the ZPD, the learner is most receptive to instruction as it represents the next logical step in development and allows the child to build on new skills using already established knowledge.

Bruner (1978) builds on Vygotsky’s ideas and postulates that children learn best in social environments where they are enabled to construct meaning through interactions with others. He uses the metaphor of practitioner as scaffold, which is progressively removed as the child gains in confidence and ability. Scaffolding, he explains consists of ‘steps taken to reduce the degrees of freedom in carrying out some task, so that the
child can concentrate on the difficult skill he is in the process of acquiring' (Bruner, 1978:19). The metaphor of scaffolding, as a concept for describing the role of the adult, or the more knowledgeable other, in facilitating children’s learning and development, has been adopted by a number of educators and researchers (Krause et al., 2003; Hammond, 2002; Stone, 1998). Stone (1998:358) claims that it highlights one of the key features of children’s learning, namely, that ‘it is often guided by others, who strive, explicitly or implicitly, to structure learning opportunities’. It can be reasonably argued that the role of the educator is not limited to imparting knowledge, but also to facilitating the student-learning process (Dewey, 1938). Such a vision encourages children to identify the relationship and interconnectedness of information and become active rather than passive learners by constructing their own knowledge (Savery, 2015). The didactic model is also challenged by Hattie (2009) as she explicitly decries the Banking Model of Education as first described by Freire (1993). The Banking Model views the mind as a receptacle and quality as being equated to the volume of knowledge deposited. The rejection of the Banking Model idea also resonates with Dewey’s (1938) Constructivist Theory, which claims that education is built through practical experience from which all knowledge emerges. Learners construct new ideas or concepts, based upon their current or past knowledge through hands-on participation (Kolbe, 2014).

Hanna (2014) debates the ideas of the aforementioned important educational theorists such as Pestalozzi (1746-1827), Froebel (1826), Dewey (1938), Montessori (1912) Vygotsky (1978). She draws attention to their strong influence on the very progressive, internationally renowned Reggio Emilia Approach to Early Years Education. The Reggio Emilia approach offers children a unique experience of self-exploration embedded in the arts and while there is no set curriculum in the design, the arts are used as a vehicle for learning and self-expression (Aden and Theodotou 2019). This approach is facilitated by (what is entitled in Italian) the ‘atelierista’ meaning the experienced and qualified artist (Nutbrown and Abbott, 2009) who works within an ‘atelier’, or art studio. Here children can express their artistic character such as ‘painting, drawing, and working in clay—all the symbolic languages’ (Vecchi, 1998:141).
2.7.2 Reggio Emilia Approach: Image of the Child

‘The Reggio Emilia approach to education is a world-renowned, child-initiated inquiry method that stresses the relationship between children, the environment and collaborative learning’ (Green et al., 2009:23). It has been defined as one of the exemplary models of early years learning (Moss 2016). A distinguishing feature of the Reggio Emilia innovative praxis, as noted by Ewing (2010) is the ‘image of the child’ as being capable and competent. Scheinfeld et al., (2008) refer to this trope as do many practitioners influenced by the Reggio Emilia philosophy on Early Years Education. These authors affirm that ‘the image of child’ refers to the how the practitioner perceives the child and this influences the way in which children learn. It enables educators to comprehend the role of the practitioner and the concept of a curriculum. The *image of the child* challenges the adult to reflect on children’s capabilities, their development and their role in education and society. Thompson (2015) describes how the arts, when linked to this vision, gives the child autonomy and provides a platform to express concepts effectively. Practitioners should, therefore, consider the ‘image of the child’ when planning art opportunities for young children, in order to ensure that young learners are given appropriate agency during the creative process.

The Reggio Emilia approach can be viewed as a complex and unique educational philosophy in practice, and is an example of ‘constructivism in action’ (Thompson, 2015: 123). She highlights how constructivism can be difficult, for practitioners, policy makers and parents, to accept without reservation, as it does not reflect their own schooling experience. In her view, constructivism implies that learning is a less predictable process than might initially be envisaged and seems to minimise the role of the practitioner, as it stresses the role of the learner. Eubanks (2004) cited in Ruland (2012) advocates that Early Childhood Education and Care settings provide developmentally appropriate learning opportunities such as those found in Reggio, which he deems a good example of how practitioners can involve children in creative and meaningful learning activities.

Hertzog (2001) expands on this and describes the role of the practitioner in Reggio Emilia as being that of ‘the researcher, the data gatherer, the learner and the strategic
contributor to the child’s capacity to learn’ (Hertzog, 2001:n.p.). Moreover, Hertzog further posits that ‘there is a responsibility on the community of teachers to provide the contexts for learning’ (ibid: n.p.). In addition to this responsibility, Aden and Theodotou (2019:160) express how the Reggio Emilia approach considers practitioners ‘not only as facilitators but also as learning partners alongside children. Consequently, teachers assume a cooperative role in order to correspond with the strong image of the child’. This co-operation and learning partnership can be evidenced in e.g. the provision by the practitioner of colours and the child’s ensuing experimentation in colour mixing. If the practitioner provides the child with all three primary colours at any one time, the resulting colour (on mixing) will be brown (invariably). If, however, the idea is to facilitate children to explore colour and colour mixing, it is advisable to limit them to a combination of two of the primary colours at any one time. That way opportunities for rich and individual tonal exploration and the discovery of secondary colours is made available to children (Egan-Rainy, 2017).

The interplay between the various protagonists; practitioner, child, family and community, within the educational experience of the child has been further discussed by Deans and Brown (2018) within the Australian context. These authors document a University of Melbourne 15-year case study of arts-based education through inquiry-based learning within an Early Years Centre. A variety of teaching strategies were employed, including direct instruction, complex discussion and demonstration skills. The multiplicity of teaching strategies, by practitioner and artist afforded children the opportunity to acquire confidence and competencies though the rich transference of artistic skills and aesthetic values provided by the artist, in tandem with the practitioner as facilitator. Practitioners, on occasion employed a didactic role, using direct instruction techniques. Children need facilitation (rather than didactic teaching) to nurture their creativity; unhurried time and provocative questions which spark curiosity and encourage discussion. Time is essential in fostering inquiry through the arts. Painters, actors, musicians all develop and hone their skill-set over time. Ideas need time (and space) to germinate, grow and flourish. Children’s art experiences should not be isolated, once-off activities but should be viewed as an ongoing refining and mastery of one’s skill. Project-based experiences for young children should be provided allowing ideas to be explored, discussed, tried and tested, reflected upon,
developed, sometimes abandoned momentarily, only to be returned to and completed to the child’s satisfaction, over time (Egan-Rainy, 2017).

Deans and Brown (2018) describe the interdependent and dynamic relationships between the multi-disciplinary team of practitioners, artists and children, who share the common experience of creative and aesthetic learning and how, this in turn, effectively connects theory to practice.

Austring and Sørensen (2010) explain aesthetic learning as a process whereby impressions of the world and experiences which reflect the self are expressed through artistic form. They consider the role of the practitioner and cite Malaguzzi (1993) who claims that ‘education without research or innovation is education without interest’ (ibid: 71). The onus is on practitioners to engage in critical reflective practice, to participate in collaborative exchange and move away from what they regard as a non-interventionist and laissez-faire approach to the arts (Englebright-Fox and Schirrmacher, 2014). It is fundamental, therefore, to examine the role of the adult as one child’s artistic efforts which are practitioner-initiated and guided, thus, inhibiting natural creativity and self-expression (Deans and Wright, 2018).

In the Australian case study, practising artists-in-residence worked in conjunction with practitioners to deliver artistic experiences to young children. This raises the question of the place and role of the artist within Early Childhood Education and Care, which will now be discussed, against an Irish backdrop.

### 2.7.3 Role of the Artist in ECEC in Ireland

The Artists Schools Guidelines (DES, 2009) was drawn up as a result of a consultation process between the DES, Arts Council and key figures in arts and education in Ireland. The basis for the guidelines was a shared belief in the importance of providing high-quality arts experiences for primary and post primary students. The Minister for Education, at the time, Mary Hanafin (2009), stressed the timeliness of the document and how ‘such provision enhances mainstream arts education in our schools and also provides opportunities for fertile links to be made between the arts and other curricular areas’ (Hanafin, 2009: forward). She further highlighted how the guidelines would not
only impact positively on the personal and social development of the student but how the wider community (within and outside of the school environment) would benefit from greater emphasis being placed on the arts in education. A key feature of the guidelines is the rich partnership between student, educator and artist.

The impact of how cultural and artistic exposure and accessibility impacts on the young child’s future academic achievement and well-being, has been the topic of recent debate within the Irish context (Arts in Education Charter (AIEC) 2013). This charter has the principal aim and commitment to place the arts (and other subjects) at the core of the Irish educational system. It makes clear the distinction between arts education and arts in education. Arts in education, which the charter advocates, is concerned with officially introducing art interventions, from all artistic disciplines into the educational system. This can be achieved by employing artists in residence, by artists visiting schools, or by schools making contact with professional artists, in the community to stimulate and create cultural awareness (DES, 2013). The charter highlights that the following significant measures need to be taken, in order to promote and realise its vision; encourage dialogue, build strong partnerships amongst stakeholders, and foster collaboration between researchers, teachers, practitioners, artists and families.

A key initiative of the charter to help realise this strategy, was the launch of a National Arts in Education Online Portal (AEP) in 2015. The Portal facilitates building a community of practice within arts and education, providing a space where both artists and teachers can be supported and inspired’ (AEP, 2015:n.p.). Coolahan (2015) notes that the charter is a landmark attempt to activate a co-operative policy for the arts-in-education. He identifies the Arts in Education Portal as a method of providing young people countrywide, with educational opportunities to meaningfully engage with the arts.

Two recent publications by Barnardos (2019) and The National Childhood Network (2019) (Art Experiences for Young Children) and (Explore, Play and Learn though the Arts in pre-school settings) provide insights into how children explore and learn through the use of junk art, drawing, painting and playing with light. Moreover, the
publications offer guidance (for those working with and on behalf of children) on how best to cultivate the creative process through a wide range of arts experiences.

Brennan (2015) points out that there are a number of arts-in-education initiatives taking place across Ireland, which provide opportunities for young children to actively engage with the arts. These are documented by the Arts in Education Portal and involve local art officers, arts centres, arts groups and agencies, individual artists and practitioners. An example of an arts-in-education initiative resulting in a research study, is Heads Up- a Journey in Creative Reuse. This initiative adopts the artist in residence model within early years, and primary school educational settings, over a 16-week period in 18 educational settings facilitated by 11 artists. One of the main aims of the project is to observe the impact of professional artists working alongside teachers and practitioners and to determine if reusable materials nurture creativity in the classroom (O'Sullivan et al., 2016). The study was carried out in collaboration with Recreate (www.recreate.ie), a reuse facility which sources end of line and surplus stock from businesses to be reused as arts materials. The research findings indicate that the initiative has had a positive impact, in general, but also identifies a lack of pedagogic knowledge amongst some artists, which left them ill-equipped to work within the inclusive educational setting. This suggests that a knowledge of subject matter alone is insufficient, as the theoretical underpinning of how children learn and develop is imperative.

The above recommendation seems to have been addressed by Hayes et al., (2017) who published research on The Artful Dodger (2017), an arts education project carried out in two ECEC settings in Dublin. The primary purpose of the programme was to ‘provide an exploratory, creative and playful artistic space for children to grow and develop’ (Hayes et al., 2017:3). It adopts the artist in-residence model and Hayes et al., (2017) highlight its importance and how relationships amongst artist, practitioner and children develop over time. These authors note however, that the concept of artist in(formed) residence is used rather than artist in residence, throughout the action research project. Their justification for this title is largely to stress the ‘dialogic and synergistic tripartite relationship between artist, researcher and early years educator.’ (ibid: 6). Additionally, they praise the approach, which involves the mutual engagement, partnership and regular contact amongst the various stakeholders. It
ensures a positive and reciprocal exchange of skills, knowledge and expertise in the area of pedagogy and arts education. The project proved to be a very beneficial collaboration and worthwhile exchange, as it ensured that the artists were ‘trained’ to support and reinforce learning connections by the practitioner and *vice versa* (ibid.). The findings indicate that the programme, which provided open-ended meaningful art experiences, enabling children to link learning to real life experiences, has subsequently impacted on the pedagogical methods used within the participating centres. An interesting finding of the *Artful Dodger* (2017) study, is the observation made by one of the practitioners who considered how this experience would affect her future practice and how it provided her with a new skill-set to recognise the potential for child-led, artistic learning. The artist in(formed) residency model appears to demonstrate a distinct *Transdisciplinary* approach and the study makes recommendations that provision be made to increase the pedagogic experience of both artists and practitioners. In order to realise that objective, professional development for artists and practitioners should be fostered to facilitate cross-subject learning (ibid.).

A recent initiative (2019) has been instituted to establishing a bursary for the development of principles of working with young children and the arts, in early years settings. The Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) have invested in arts and culture in this way, as a five-year project (2017-2022) under Creative Ireland and in partnership with the Arts Council. The strategy is to position creativity at the core of public policy.

Another significant study in the Irish context was conducted by the Arts Council (2016). It concerns the arts and cultural participation, among children and young people and draws on insights from the longitudinal study - *Growing up in Ireland*. One of the outcomes of the report is the recognition that those working with children are assisted in providing arts-rich opportunities within and beyond the school walls. Smyth (2016) expresses how the study ‘underlines the importance of arts policy’ recognising ‘the mosaic of ways in which children and young people express themselves and interact with the world of culture’ (Smyth, ibid: Foreword). Smyth (2016) notes that there is a surprising gender gap regarding the frequency with which three-year-olds engage weekly in drawing and painting in the home. The study found that 55% of girls draw and paint six to seven days a week compared with only 36% of boys. The
The Minister for Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, Heather Humphreys TD (2017) addressing an audience at The Second Arts in Education Portal National Day (2017) stresses the Government’s commitment to meeting the creative potential of every child in Ireland. In reference to early childhood, she affirms that ‘Creative Ireland will ensure that children can participate in the arts from an early age, and it will drive cultural engagement in every county nationwide’ (Humphreys, 2017: n.p.). This would be achieved by fast-tracking the Arts in Education Charter and she concludes by laudably expressing the Government’s desire to ‘help build an environment where artists, teachers and students can be supported and inspired, for the betterment of society as a whole’ (ibid.). The principles and guidelines of the Charter
for Arts in Education (2013) which informs Creative Children, very much reflect the principles of IBL. While Creative Ireland (2017) accepts that the arts provide one of the first interactions children have with the rich world of creativity and makes it a priority to locate the arts at the core of the Irish educational system, it does not explore the learning environment. The learning environment is not a single entity, a space within an educational building/setting but rather is it a complex, multi-faceted concept, which merits detailed discussion. The following section will examine the complexity of the learning environment and the part it plays in IBL using a transdisciplinary approach.

2.8 Learning Environments in Inquiry-Based Learning: A multi-faceted concept

The learning environment is no longer perceived as merely a classroom in a school, or a space within a centre but is now considered to be a multi-faceted concept and one which can positively or negatively affect learning (Isenberg and Jalongo, 2018). These authors appeal to readers to draw upon their own positive and negative childhood learning experiences in relation to the classroom environment. They also stipulate that a positive environment is one where children feel comfortable, valued, and enjoy the learning process. A negative environment, on the other hand, creates unease and undue stress giving the child subliminal messages of poor self-worth. Learning, in such a milieu is then reduced to a dispiriting chore. In agreement, Whitebread et al., (2013) argue that a quality environment is one which allows the child to explore, inquire, and utilise its contents within an emotionally safe and secure setting and should facilitate creative processes and embrace the child’s changing needs, interests and abilities. This mirrors recommendations put forward by the Irish National Council of Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) in Aistear (2009) as well as the Aistear Siolta Practice Guide (2015) self-evaluation tool, on the environment. Both advocate for quality learning environments to be challenging, stimulating, flexible and ever evolving, and in tune with the growth and development of the child.

Similarly, Cohrssen et al., (2014) in reference to the ‘environment’ or the ‘climate’ in an ECEC ‘classroom,’ point to ‘high positive climates’. These are environments which possess the following constituents; warm reciprocal relationships, positive affect,
positive communication and respect. These authors emphasise that both practitioners and researchers in ECEC should keep in mind the basic principle of interaction between practitioner and child, in order to maximise learning and provide warm and safe relationships. This echoes Hayes (2013) common sense observation; children can learn skills and acquire knowledge when the environment is non-threatening and a warm relationship exists. More recently, Singh (2018) contributes to the debate by advocating that children flourish in a positive learning environment and the environment colours the overall educational experience.

It can, therefore, be deduced from the foregoing studies, that good learning experiences are related to 'high quality' environments. DeViney et al., (2010) claim that creating environments in which children can thrive and explore their individual interests, require creating warm, loving and sensory rich spaces. These spaces should meet the physical, emotional and spiritual needs of children and afford them the opportunity to explore their interests and respond to their curiosities.

The aforementioned Reggio Emilia is often considered to be one of the most lauded models of early years learning (Giardiello et al., 2019). Lindsay (2016), and other educational researchers, use it as a blueprint for comparison to other approaches. Cadwell (1997) describes how in the Reggio Emilia setting there is an organic feel to the pre-school and the design, which includes a central piazza, it replicates the classic Italian town. She observes how ‘no space is marginal, no corner unimportant, each space needs to be alive and open to change’ (Cadwell, 1997:93). The Reggio ECEC setting encapsulates what Ceppi and Zini (1998) term the osmotic relationship of the school to the world outside and are adamant that a school should not be a parallel world, but should be the very essence and distillation of society.

Furthermore, Gandini et al., (2005) claim that the Reggio Emilia philosophy regards the environment as the third teacher. She metaphorically describes the environment as an educator in itself and personifies the physical surrounds, to become a silent, unobtrusive presence, one which contributes to children’s learning. Christakis (2017:80) however, notes that much of the underlying ethos of the Reggio approach has been ‘lost in translation’ and does not fit well with the ‘competitive, product-driven [American] culture’. She argues that ‘doing’ Reggio is often viewed with an air of
elitism. It is interpreted as focusing primarily on the aesthetic rather than embracing the core Reggio philosophy, which is rooted in knowledge of, and respect for, the fundamental rights of the young child.

To elucidate this point, another researcher Tarr (2001) has compared early childhood settings in the US and Canada to those of Reggio Emilia in Italy, in terms of what Rosario and Callazo (1981) term *Aesthetic Codes*, by which they mean the visual qualities of objects and those of the environment, for example the children’s artworks on display. She concludes that in the USA and Canada, the classroom space is a discrete one with little organic connection with the outdoors and local physical and cultural environment (unlike Reggio Emilia). In the USA and Canada, the art works are not reflective of the wider world, but rather reflect a ‘school art style’ (Tarr, 2001:35). The space, she describes, includes various charts, posters and strips depicting the alphabet and she recalls ‘the overall impression is often of a visual bombardment of images’ (ibid.). She criticizes mass-production of art imagery, which commemorate festivals and bear a resemblance to greeting card motifs and decorations. It is stereotyped and talk down to children (ibid.). It is suggested by Tarr (2001) that the child is cocooned, and not challenged, to explore the diverse colour and images of popular media and global cultures. Moreover, Tarr (2003) in a separate article, highlights how didactic commercial products do not reflect the interest of the child, are not inviting nor do they stimulate the imagination because the outcomes are predetermined and do not allow room for individual and creative expression. She further posits that these products and materials are examples of a consumer society, designed to entertain but which fail to recognise the child as a creator and contributor to the learning environment and surrounding culture.

These sentiments are echoed by Fisher *et al.*, (2014) who observe the effects of the visual educational environment on children’s learning. The findings from their study demonstrate that visually over-stimulating environments, consisting of wall displays not connected to the learning content, result in children being easily distracted, lacking focus and being unable to stay on task. In contrast to Tarr (2003), Fisher *et al.*, (2014) observe how learning is maximised, when such displays were removed.
Another researcher explains that the busyness and abundance of children’s art work on display is often in response to parental expectations (Pecaski-McLennan, 2010). In the Canadian context of the Early Education setting, she notes how practitioners favour the emphasis on craft-based approaches to the arts, in order to pander to the desires of parents. She urges ECEC settings, to focus on the importance of process over product, as children flourish and develop a sense of aesthetics when they experience exploration.

In summary, apropos the environment in general, the US National Arts Education Association (USNAEA) (2016) encapsulates the sentiments of several of the above theorists (Isenberg and Jalongo, 2018; Hayes, 2010; DeViney et al., 2010) when it concludes that the child’s experience of the environment is holistic. USNAEA suggests that the optimum environment is an interdisciplinary approach to learning including formal and informal learning experiences. Robinson (2010) however, questions whether contemporary learning environments are fit for purpose and whether the concept of environment is rooted in what is known about learning in the past. He, therefore, urges educators to examine learning environments as they apply to the 21st century. We live in a rapidly changing environment whereby new problems or old problems, are not susceptible to old solutions (Drake and Reid, 2018). Likewise, Heath (2010) is critical in his description of how modern living robs children of the spaces and opportunities where creativity and imagination would naturally occur, and stresses the need to design and construct learning environments, whereby creative skills are promoted.

2.8.1 Promoting Creative Skills within the Learning Environment

With regard to promoting creative skills, several theorists (Runco, 2019, McClure et al., 2017; Davis, 2018; Davis and McGregor, 2016; Fisher et al., 2014; Davis et al., 2013; Addison et al., 2010; Tarr 2003, 2001;) describe the ideal environment. Davis et al., (2013) claim that there is a multiplicity of environmental factors which constitute a learning environment. This refers to the physical space, or surroundings, accessibility to educational resources and materials, use of the outdoors, the pedagogical environment and environments beyond the school. It also includes play-based
learning, flexibility and efficient use of time, as well as the relationship between the practitioner and the child. Similarly, Runco (2019) also looks beyond the mere physical setting in identifying the environment and stress the importance of stimulation within that physical space. He adds that environment is space and layout, but it is also outdoor learning, quality of materials and access to a variety of new surroundings. Furthermore, he posits that time is a fundament of the creative process and he stresses that children need to be afforded adequate periods of time to engage meaningfully in creative engagement. In concurrence, Addison et al., (2010) recognise that learning environments ought to be open and adaptable, rather than rigid and closed, in their use of space, in order for creativity to truly flourish. Likewise, Davis and McGregor (2016) in specific reference to early years, claim that themed areas with set goals and defined parameters deny children the imaginative freedom to move and learn between and within spaces. McClure et al., (2017) assert that organisation of materials is necessary, as is a materials-rich environment, which welcomes discovery and interactions.

When initial professional education students or practitioners plan learning opportunities for young children it is helpful to use what are termed ‘provocations’ as a starting point for discussion. This method allows for multiple avenues of inquiry to unfold (Egan-Rainy, 2017) (See Appendix 2, 3 and 4). A provocation can be defined as ‘a suggestion and invitation, a place to begin that engages the imaginations of both the child and the teacher.’ (Gandini et al., 2015:180). During their visual arts training in inquiry based learning, using a transdisciplinary approach, CIT students are encouraged to use provocations in the form of open-ended materials such as loose parts which are natural or man-made and arranged according to their common artistic elements. By providing a variety of loose parts which are grouped together according to colour, texture, size and shape, students learn how the adult opens up opportunities for discussion with the child, by exploration and investigation of visual image-making that is unrestricted and transient. Different sized pieces of wood, cut into halves and quarters, allows children to explore and construct visual imagery, while breaking down boundaries between subject areas (See Appendix 3). In this way, children develop an understanding of mathematical concepts, numeracy, sequencing, scale or fractions by using tangible materials. Moreover, they observe differences in scale, size, mass and form. Items such as pinecones, pebbles, bark and leaves can be configured into a visual pattern as well as used as counters. The process of creating visual imagery using a
variety of *loose parts* in a composition within a space is known as *transient art*. Transient art is non-permanent and allows children to manipulate, explore and experiment with patterns and shapes in a completely process-orientated way. It assists in developing an understanding of how things work and how things are engineered, providing them with valuable innovative skills for the future (Egan-Rainy, 2017).

Children should be facilitated with sensory experiences and allowed to explore kinesthetically, facilitating their sense of wonder, inquiry and imagination. This is achievable through responsive teaching, where emphasis is placed on practitioner-child interactions. McClure et al., (2017) also state that even more important than the environments is the ‘bond’ formed with practitioners who appreciate the child’s developing and diverse abilities, their little interests, their valuable questions and ideas and who regard these as integral to optimising the creative learning process.

In summary, the foregoing educational researchers (Davis, 2018; McClure *et al*., 2017; Davis and McGregor, 2016; Addison *et al*., 2010) are in agreement and stress the importance of environment in facilitating learning. It is not a narrow concept, but has connotations and permutations beyond the mere physical space and surroundings. It encompasses easy and ready access to materials and resources, freedom of movement, interaction, imaginative play, and pedagogy. Time, is a fundamental factor, and researchers stress the need to afford children adequate periods of time, to engage, to explore, inquire and utilise the environment. Environment is a concept painted in broad brushstrokes by the foregoing researchers. It is therefore, important to discuss approaches to curriculum implementation, for the above aspirations to be realised and bearing in mind the challenges of 21st century. The debate on the appropriateness of the *traditional* approach versus the *process* approach to learning, which inquiry-based learning espouses, is a perennial one.

### 2.9 Approaches to Learning: Challenges for the 21st Century in Early Years Education

The ‘traditional’, or didactic, approach to education versus the child-led inquiry-based learning (IBL) approach has been the subject of much debate over the decades. In the didactic model, the educator is recognised as the font of all knowledge and wisdom
and the learner is the passive consumer of such knowledge (Freire, 1993). However, there has been a climate of change over time and educators have been forced to rethink approaches to learning. Drake and Reid (2018), Saavedra and Opfer (2012) and Schleicher (2012) suggest there is increasing empirical evidence which indicates that traditional educational models do not prepare students for the broad challenges of the 21st century, including climate change, political unrest, shortage of resources and an over-populated planet. These authors propose the essential skills of problem-solving necessary to face the uncertainties of the future. In addition, they further outline the pre-requisite skills as: the ability to be curious and imaginative, to be able to engage in critical thinking, effective communication, negotiation strategies and collaborative processes. The challenge facing today’s students, they argue, is the actual educational experience, which generally reflects the more common didactic textbook model. The didactic model is also criticised by Devkota et al. (2017) who stress the necessity for students to acquire relevant competencies if they are to manage the ever-increasing phenomenon of interconnectivity in a technological and globalised world. Moreover, these authors question current teaching and learning practices and question whether students are capable of competing in the 21st century – an era of unprecedented globalization, with the advent of information technology, social media and hitherto unknown occupations.

A transdisciplinary approach to learning is considered an important strategy to manage the current and novel challenges. Bucciarelli (2016) claims that Transdisciplinarity is a new way of thinking about and also a new way of engaging in learning and inquiry. The French philosopher Morin (2001) had earlier stressed an urgent need to adopt a transdisciplinary approach to learning. He warned that it is necessary to reconceptualise our understanding of modern education so that the children of today can learn in a way which will best equip them for the demanding and different challenges of tomorrow. With reference to the integration of transdisciplinary approaches in curriculum, Drake and Burns (2004) recommend that educators design curriculum around student questions and concerns, equipping them with necessary life skills, as they can apply interdisciplinary and disciplinary skills to real life concerns, be they: social, cultural, political, economic or environmental. In agreement, Maeda (2012) advocates for the inclusion of the arts within the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) curriculum. According to Maeda (2013), transforming
the curriculum from STEM to STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics) better equips students with the necessary critical thinking and problem-solving skills, as well as creativity required for the 21st century. In agreement, Land (2013:550) refers to STEAM as ‘cross curricular collaboration’ and highlights the benefits of integrating the arts into STEM to ensure the children of today become ‘the capable and invested citizens of tomorrow’ (ibid:550). He argues that the arts not only provide a platform with which to build and develop an understanding of STEM content, through the promotion of analytical and creative thinking but ‘provides pathways for personal meaning-making and self-motivation’(ibid:552).

Apropos the relevance of the arts, Lindahl (2015) carried out research in Sweden which investigated the use of a transdisciplinary approach, exploring how mathematical concepts could be intuited by early learners through movement and dance, referencing Deleuze and Guattari (1987) and what they coined ‘Rhizomatic’ as the premise of her investigation. Rhizomatic thinking is a concept derived from the botanical reference of a Rhizome such as in a potato, tuber or root. Deluze and Guattari (1987) explain how ‘the rhizome pertains to a map that must be produced, constructed, a map that is always detachable, connectable, reversible, modifiable, and has multiple entrance ways and exits and its own lines of flights’ (Deluze and Guattari, 1987:21). In her study, Lindahl (ibid.) argues that a child needs to be the subject, not the object, of its own process of meaning-making. Moreover, she advocates that the practitioner listens to children in an attempt to identify their questions, theories, and hypotheses about the surrounding world. The practitioner can then use them as a basis for reflection on their attitudes as they consider how best to challenge children by the process of exploration. Similar recommendations could be accepted when children engage in the visual arts using a transdisciplinary approach. Aistear (NCCA, 2009) four interconnecting themes; Well-being; Identity and Belonging; Communicating; Exploring and Thinking facilitate a transdisciplinary approach to visual arts experiences in ECCE, as they celebrate the whole child, and recognise the complex ways in which each child learns and develops.

Marshall (2014), while referencing the place of the arts and the curriculum, recognises Transdisciplinarity as representing a general paradigm shift in educational models. It is a change in mindset from the traditional old-school, rote-learning of academic
content, to a move to a new overarching understanding of concepts and development of cognitive skills, integral to all disciplines. She elaborates by identifying how the integration of the arts across the curriculum addresses and develops skills such as artistic thinking, artistic processes and creativity and offers transformative alternative pedagogies. Art integration, should not be viewed as simply an add-on to other subjects, rather should it perfuse all areas of learning. Additionally, Marshall (2014) stresses that there is an onus on those advocates of arts integration to ensure that those outside the field recognise the pivotal role the arts can play in new cross-cutting educational reform. The integration of the arts in ECEC is considered also by Purnell et al., (2007) who realise the importance of developing culturally responsive early childhood settings through locating the arts at the centre of the young child’s learning experience. They recognise it as a valuable educational tool to expand children’s understanding of other cultures and to promote the development of their own healthy cultural identity. Within the Irish context, the Aistear (NCCA, 2009) theme, Identify and Belonging supports these ideals.

Yelland (2005) illustrates the shortcomings of traditional methods by arguing that the approaches to early childhood education need to be reconceptualised, to better reflect the complex times in which we live. She points to the inadequacy of traditional frameworks in coping with the multifactorial experiences of today. Luna-Scott (2015), an educational theorist, further concludes that didactic teaching (where the learner is the recipient of knowledge rather than the constructor or producer of same) does not adequately prepare the student for the demands of life in the 21st century. She strongly indicts the traditional learning model as it ‘typically leads to indifference, apathy and for most learners, boredom’ (Luna-Scott, 2015:2). She expands on the importance of the learning environment and outlines how educators should facilitate spaces for dialogue, to communicate new ideas and promote collaboration. Such spaces, she points out, cultivate creativity and are more effective in building competencies across disciplines rather than stand-alone courses. Similarly, Schulte et al., (2018) argue that within progressive, play-based early childhood environments, art experiences connect with everyday creativity and children are seen as capable social beings whose ventures into art practice, while often considered unpredictable, are nevertheless rich, and reflect unacknowledged cognitive dexterities. In agreement, Alismail and McGuire (2015) note that teachers play a significant role in equipping students with the necessary skills
to ensure future success. These authors propose strategies which ‘help integrate cognitive, social skills with content knowledge as well as increased student participation in the learning environment’ (Alismali and McGuire, 2015:152). They identify Problem-based learning (PBL) as one such teaching strategy. Problem-based learning is also identified by Chard et al., (2017) and Helm and Katz (2016) as a teaching strategy which enables practitioners to guide students through in-depth investigations of real-world topics. Learners produce tangible products, which reflect authentic problems over extended periods of time. In agreement, Luna-Scott (2015) views the role of the 21st century practitioner as that of a learning coach, providing the necessary support and guidance to assist students in meeting their particular learning goals. She asserts that the project and problem-based learning models ‘are ideal instructional models for meeting the objectives of twenty-first century education, because they employ the 4Cs Principles: Critical thinking, Communication, Collaboration and Creativity’ (Luna-Scott, 2015:5).

The appropriateness of current learning environments for preparing children and students for the challenges of the third millennium can also be questioned (Jimenez-Eliaeson, 2017). He references the Institute for the Future, which identifies Transdisciplinarity as one of the essential key skills to excel in the 2020 workplace. Moreover, he advances the concept of what he terms an Immersive Learningscape, as one which embraces Transdisciplinarity. He explains that Immersive Learningscapes allow for the following five typologies of learning to take place: Thinking, Creating, Discovering, Imparting and Exchanging. These he identifies as being crucial to equip the future workforce with the necessary skills for employment in jobs-jobs which have not as yet even been conceptualised or identified. Jimenez-Eliaeson (ibid.) also stresses the importance of immersive learningscapes in the actual design of learning spaces in early childhood and recommend that these spaces or scapes should be active, engaging, flexible and adaptable in order to foster a culture of inquiry and so generate innovation in learning and creativity. Similar observations are made by Davis (2018) and Bancroft et al., (2008) who advocate against the designation of specifically themed play areas within the early years learning environment if creativity and imagination are to fully flourish. Moreover, they recommend the removal of as much furniture as possible in order to present a sense of openness and spaciousness where children are encouraged to move freely and utilise different areas of interest in order to support their
inquiry, growth and development. Vecchi (2010) highlights how such areas of interest or ‘mini ateliers’ (art studios) within the learning environment, where attention is given to qualities such as light, colour, sound, micro-climate, enable children’s artistic self-expression and creative discovery to evolve.

Hedges and Copper (2018) also support inquiry-based experiences within the early years setting, arguing that IBL affords the child the opportunity to build on individual interests and knowledge already acquired. They provide examples of how the child draws from a fund of knowledge, which is to say, from lived experiences within the home environment. Lessons learned by the child observing the natural running of the household and the processes involved in day to day living within the family unit, often find expression within the early years setting. These experiences provoke the young learner’s interest because they can be related to meaningful and real situations. Inquiry-based learning is the art of questioning and the art of raising questions, whereas problem-based learning is the art of problem-solving. IBL is learning by hypothesizing, acquiring knowledge from direct observation and, optimised through investigation of real world problems which is the starting point for problem-based learning (Oguz-Unve and Arabacioglu 2014:122). Inquiry-based learning, and also problem-solving learning, is not without its critics and researchers such as Kirschner et al., (2006) who argue that there is insufficient empirical evidence to support the validity of the IBL process. Moreover, they are critical, of and warn against, the minimal and unguided nature of the IBL method, stating that such approaches often result in misconceptions where student knowledge is incomplete and disorganised. Furthermore, based on several controlled studies, they claim the evidence irrefutably indicates that students with a considerable prior knowledge, benefit more from guided instruction rather than what they consider the less effective unguided approaches. Such approaches include: discovery learning, constructivist learning and inquiry-based learning. However, Hmelo-Silver et al., (2007) counter this argument by citing several studies which demonstrate the effectiveness of IBL and Problem-Based Learning and unequivocally state they are ‘powerful and effective models of learning’ (Hmelo-Silver et al., 2007:1). They criticise Kirschner et al., (ibid.) for not differentiating between a number of the pedagogical approaches referred to earlier (constructivism, discovery, problem and inquiry-based). They argue that Problem-Based and IBL provide extensive scaffolding and guidance to facilitate the learning process.
Terreni (2016), states that critics of the traditional models are conscious that the child’s creativity is jeopardised when there is an over-emphasis on direct instruction, rote learning, and authoritarian teaching. Moreover, studies such as those carried out by Hampson et al., (2011) and Sawyer (2011) are uncompromising on what is expected of educators. In order to meet the demands of the 21st century they (the educators) must take on the role of facilitators, guiding knowledge acquisition amongst their students rather than imparting facts and figures. The current critique of the traditional model of education is not unique in historical terms. Many renowned educational philosophers in the past have recognised the limitations of the traditional approach. A century ago, Dewey (1915) argued strongly against rote learning— the product approach and held that students should learn from experience generated by their own innate curiosity, as detailed in a foregoing section. He claimed that students, would not only gain knowledge, but would also develop the necessary skills, habits and mindset to solve a myriad of problems. Piaget (1956) proposed that individuals construct their own knowledge and acquire this through experience. He argues that experience leads to the creation of schemas (structured patterns of thought and behavior), which in turn, leads to learning and attainment of knowledge. Malaguzzi (1993) is critical of educators, educational methods and the schooling environment/model per se, when he declares; ‘The child has a hundred languages but the school and culture steal ninety-nine’ (Malaguzzi in Edwards et al., 1998: 19). He is unequivocal in his directive to practitioners; a rich and meaningful exploration of the world should be nurtured and fostered within the pre-school environment and methods employed within the learning environment should allow for authentic learning processes to take place. Savery (2015) observes that this directive resonates clearly with, and is fundamental to inquiry-based learning through its focus on curriculum development, design, implementation and evaluation.

Ornstein and Hunkins (2009), while arguing that curriculum development is concerned with design, delivery and evaluation, it also includes personnel, processes and products. These authors outline how curriculum models assist educators in the design and implementation of learning and assessment processes and signal that the structured nature of curriculum design may fail to address key human qualities such as attitudes, feelings and values. Consequently, they recommend that personal and professional judgment be used when deciding on how best to address and meet the learning needs
of individual students. Tomlinson (2014) concurs, proposing that the curriculum, rather than be seen as a fixed document or programme, ought to be the starting point to assist learners make sense of and meaning of the world. She expands on this, stating that effective teaching demonstrates the ability to incorporate ‘content outcomes’ into ‘coherent learning experiences that capture young imaginations, build reliable organisational frameworks in young brains, and ensure that learners learn deeply what matters most in the disciplines they study’ (Tomlinson, 2014:79).

In addition, further studies indicate that the curriculum should encourage the child to think critically rather than just to acquire knowledge (Egan, 1997). The curriculum should address problem-solving skills and should allow the child to embrace change, triggering curiosity and creativity in preference to adhering to set ideas and instructions. In Ireland, the National Council of Curriculum and Assessment (2016) has acknowledged how Aistear (NCCA, 2009) equips children by imbuing them with the spirit of the above theorists. In this way, the child’s fundament of knowledge, skills and competencies is built and learning, in essence, is seen as emergent and inquiry-based. An emergent inquiry-based curriculum ‘uses children’s and practitioners’ interests, questions and experiences as starting points for curriculum planning’ (NCCA, 2016:15). In summary, the literature critiqued suggests that adopting an inquiry-based learning approach to children’s education more effectively provides them with the knowledge, attitudes, skills and dispositions to face the challenges of the 21st century. Fundamentally, Neary (2003) claims there are a variety of different curriculum models but perhaps the two most contrasting are the Product Model where the emphasis is on ‘plans and intentions’ and the Process Model which highlights ‘activities and effects’ (Neary, 2003:39) as illustrated and discussed in more detail within the following section (Fig 2.2).
Fig. 2.2 Product and Process Model

**Product Model**

- Teacher Control
- Content
- Social and Life Skills
- Student Control

- Plans and Intentions
- Use of Behavioural language
- Precise Assessment
- Structure
- Planned by teacher

**Process Model**

- Teacher Control
- Content
- Social and Life Skills
- Student Control

- Learning activities
- More student choice
- Environment
- Social and life skills

(Source: Tyler, 1949)
2.10 Product versus Process: Opposing Curriculum Models

Two advocates of the establishment of the product model, based on behaviorist theories, are Tyler (1949) and Bloom (1956). Schubert (2003) explains that behaviorists favor attention to time on tasks and he links behavioral aspects of teaching to standardised test scores. He stresses that behaviorists regard evaluation by quantitative methodologies as superior, in terms of validity and reliability. Tyler (1949) argues that the key elements of curriculum planning are centred around Purpose, Content, Procedure and Methodology. Furthermore, Hanna (2007) commenting on Bloom’s Taxonomy (1956), identifies it as a classification system in pedagogy, a hierarchical model, which classifies learning objectives according to a stair-like model, or pyramid. It begins with knowledge and understanding at the most basic level and moves through higher levels of complexity through: analysis, application and synthesis until the higher order or critical thinking level is reached. Anderson and Krathwohl (2001) noted that Bloom’s original design involved cognitive, affective and psychomotor parameters. It is now most commonly used to access learning on a variety of cognitive levels and provides assessment criteria that can be applied to artistic subjects. It has been the main instrument of much traditional education and is often used in designing curriculum goals, activities and evaluation.

Stenhouse (1975) in direct relation to the arts, challenges the product model and observes that studies of educators and teaching methods and styles reveal marked gaps between design and practice. A contrasting model which he developed, focuses on process and is expressed in his definition of curriculum. He states that designing a curriculum is an attempt to incorporate the main aspects of an educational program, so that it can be open to scrutiny. He argues that it is transparent, if consistency exists between curriculum design and curriculum delivery i.e. if one actually implements what one proposes to implement. In agreement, Elliot (2014) notes that the process-based concepts surrounding learning which is child-led, active, and collaborative are often unrealised and remain unfulfilled ideals despite educator enthusiasm. He attributes this primarily to emphasis being placed on outcomes rather than the learning process itself, a process where students are given autonomy and ownership of their own learning. Eisner (1998) is unequivocal in championing the inclusion of the arts in
the curriculum and argues that the central objective when teaching art is to elicit individual student response. He further asserts that it is inappropriate to determine the nature of that approach in advance. Kelly (2012) reiterates this when he challenges the product approach to arts curriculum implementation, claiming that one cannot approach the arts by specifying aims, objectives, or set goals, as it does not provide the necessary space for students to respond in an individual way. Children’s craft is a prime example of the product-orientated approach to art which Elliot (2014) decries, and is the subject of much debate.

2.10.1 The Arts versus Craft Debate

With regard to early childhood, Pecaski-McLennan (2010) emphasises how the product model (in relation to the arts) centres around a final outcome, whereas the process model focuses on the experience itself. She discusses the use of art versus craft within the early years educational context and cites Rayme (2006) who defines art as process-based and craft as product-driven. Pecaski-McLennan (ibid.) supports art over craft, in the learning experience of the young child, not to be confused with the highly recognised folk-art e.g. carving and pottery. She does refer to the opinions of a number of practitioners who strongly believe in the value and place of craft (the product) within ECEC. She alludes to the arguments of those practitioners who praise craft, because craft gives children an opportunity to create equally and develop fine motor skills and is welcomed by parents at festive times. She strongly disagrees with these views and presents the counter-argument that children should be directed to other avenues in order to explore aesthetics within the early years. She is adamant that adopting art, over craft activities, presents practitioners with opportunities to engage in higher-level questioning, where children can interpret and articulate their creative efforts. In her work as an ECEC practitioner, children are facilitated and enabled to experiment and explore materials in a unique and individual way, which is central to their sense of self, empowerment and agency. She posits that in the visual arts, the end result of the creative expression (the product), is based on the expressed sentiment, or message, which the artist wishes to convey. However, she also recognises the necessity for instruction in some instances (for artistic processes) in order for the child to develop techniques and skills.
In a similar vein, Christakis (2017) expresses concern at the way in which practitioners misinterpret the process and product approaches. She observes that ‘oftentimes, the traditional copycat-crafts are replaced with only a veneer of freedom and creativity,……teaching the same old boring Thanksgiving turkey activity, but without even the pretense of old-fashioned quality control or skill acquisition’ (Christakis, 2017:64). The prevalence of such activities is that practitioners often maintain they provide evidence of children’s developmental stages and concrete skills. She questions this proposition, stating that activities are limited to demonstrating obedience, following directions, sharing with peers, and using basic motor skills. All of the above, she argues can be accessed through more open-ended and individual approaches. Additionally, she maintains that providing such activities is a flaw in curriculum design. Consequently, practitioners risk losing out on the opportunity to observe ‘social and emotional qualities of the child’s experience…..have very little sense of the children, in particular the quality of their relationships…because high quality relationships are the best indicator of quality child- care and early learning’ (ibid: 65-66).

Craft education is considered to be very important in the Finish educational system, a system renowned for its holistic approach. Pöllänen (2011) argues against the foolhardy and outright rejection of craft in education by explaining that craft education in the Finnish school system has traditionally been central to the curriculum. It merits this position as it provides students with the skills needed to use their common everyday tools effectively. She notes, however, that in today’s digital age the place of craft within the educational environment is diminishing and she encourages its revival and praises what she regards as the ‘holistic Finnish approach’. However, clarification is required to explain how holistic craft (as practiced in Finland) differs from what Pecaski-McLennan (2010) and Christakis (2017) refer to in early education terms as ‘arts and crafts’. Pöllänen (2011) explains that holistic craft celebrates the various stages and steps of the craft process. She believes that the entire production phase, comprising the initial ideas, design, preparation and assessment of the artefact are all championed and led by the student. In today’s ever-changing demographic society, she maintains that by learning crafts, one promotes cultural awareness and celebrates worldwide traditions. Evidently, what Pöllänen (2011) proposes is more reflective of meaningful experiences and genuine mastery of the skills required, in contrast to the
more usual understanding of craft in the early education context. She makes a case for craft education, whereby the very nature of the process and use of authentic materials requires problem-solving, investigation and critical thinking skills, all of which are recognised educational attributes which are integral to inquiry-based learning.

The following table (Table 2.6) derived from a number of sources (Englebright-Fox and Schirrmacher, 2014, Hallam et al., 2011, Jolley, 2010) encapsulates the contrasting approaches or two schools of thought; Product-led (craft) and Process-led (art and holistic craft).

**Table 2.6 The Product versus Process Approach to Visual Arts**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Product-led</th>
<th>Process-led</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>closed-ended /subject specific and centred design</td>
<td>open-ended –problem-based, learner centred design</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>set instructions /specific desired outcomes/</td>
<td>no right/ wrong way of approach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>adult led- didactic</td>
<td>driven by interest of child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>results similar/ limiting creativity/ activity often ‘copying’ example</td>
<td>art work unique and original, empowers individuality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>predictable outcome formulaic/ reflects celebrations and seasons</td>
<td>art can be transient/ driven by emotion and free</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reflects Topic Based model</td>
<td>adopts inquiry-based model</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>materials prepared in advance by adult</td>
<td>celebrates theory of loose parts and transient art</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>materials often commercially generated- stencils, templates, googly eyes, pipe cleaners and sequins</td>
<td>encourages wide ranging authentic materials- free, found, recycled and organic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: Englebright-Fox and Schirrmacher, 2014, Hallam et al., 2011, Jolley, 2010)

It can be extrapolated from Table 2.6 that the product approach to the visual arts curriculum is adult-centred, stifles creativity, focuses on the outcome or end product and is underpinned by behaviorist theory. On the other hand, the table shows that the process approach to the visual arts curriculum is heuristic in nature and centred around developmentally appropriate stages of child development, underpinned by constructivist theories.
The process versus product approach is complex, as noted by Monjan and Gassner (2014), who recognise this complexity within some educational systems. They argue that in addressing the many learning strategies available, the focus on standardised testing does not address multiple student needs. Cropley (2015) reflects upon creativity and argues against exclusive divergent or convergent approaches to teaching and learning. He recommends the ideal as being a combination of convergent and divergent approaches. The divergent approach champions the classical concept of intelligence and the convergent approach favours innovative and flexible thinking. However, it is not necessarily universally applicable or transferable across international educational systems, as noted by Wu (2019) who observed the impulse to promote more creative approaches to learning within the Chinese system. She suggests that such a pedagogic approach may be incompatible with innate cultural characteristics, i.e. dominated by conformity and an authoritarian teaching style. In concurrence, Chien and Hui (2010) identify how the Chinese classroom adopts a product approach to learning, rooted in obedience and discipline, where students are discouraged from questioning or challenging their teachers. This is further explained by Cheng (2010) and Chi-Hung Leung (2017) who highlight how the Confucian Culture significantly influences pedagogy, by an emphasis on respect for elders and the recognition of a natural hierarchy - an approach which characterises learning environments in much of East Asia.

Chien and Hui (ibid.), comment on a study by Singapore teachers, which concludes that the creative student is perceived as being more disruptive than his/her peers. Chien and Hui (ibid.) together with Cheng (ibid.) stress that creativity is valued by those who design and develop curricula and the concept dominates educational reform. Furthermore, Chi-Hung Leung (ibid.) concurs and observes that from the perspective of the teacher, the nature of unstructured approaches is felt to be a threat to the ordered and manageable equilibrium of the classroom environment to which they are accustomed. In discussing the preschool curriculum of Hong Kong, he notes that official reform policy emphasises learning through play, is child-centred, developmentally appropriate, promotes creativity and adopts a process approach. Despite this policy, he claims that the practice within many pre-schools privileges the
traditional product type model, and practitioners and parents do not respect creativity nor deem it necessary for the child’s development.

Moreover, Wu (2015) comments on the differing interpretations of play in learning, by comparing the play-based learning model in Germany, which is child-directed and the practice-based model of Hong-Kong, which is a more practitioner-centred approach. She argues that the Western play-based model may not necessarily be the most effective in meeting learning outcomes and that spontaneous play alone should not be considered as the only means by which learning takes place. Play, when too structured by the adult, may hinder the child’s natural process of exploration and discovery. She claims that the level of seriousness attached to children’s learning is key to assessing learning, and both systems should be cognisant of ‘how best to help a playing child learn, and a learning child play without disrupting his or her own seriousness on task’ (Wu, 2015:338).

Similarly, Wright (2003) and later McArdle and Wright (2014) note that practitioner-directed (product) and child-centred (process) approaches are at either end of the spectrum and highlights the risks involved in unsupported art learning, where an anything goes attitude could be adopted. These authors comment on how the role of the adult is key in channeling children’s interests during the creative process, providing them with suggestions and the means by which to achieve desired outcomes. They further recommend an alternative or guided approach, whereby the practitioner assumes the role of facilitator and guides the child through the process of art making. Inquiry-based learning is an example of this process approach to curriculum (Stacey, 2018).

The linear and instructional approach to education which still exists in a number of countries and cultures worldwide, exercises authors such as Saavedra and Opfer (2012) who comment on the limitations of traditional approaches. These authors highlight how the traditional model is dominant, despite the widespread and increasing global body of evidence which identifies it as being unfit for purpose and points to the importance for learners to acquire the skills associated with IBL. Interestingly, these authors further advise that the need for educational reform is widely recognised in order to meet the challenges of tomorrow but that reform is yet to take place. The National
Council of Curriculum and Assessment (2016) of Ireland, through the development of the Aistear Siolta Practice Guide (NCCA, 2015) advocates the use of an emergent, inquiry-based learning curriculum. This is exemplified in its curriculum and quality frameworks, Aistear (NCCA, 2009) and Siolta (CECDE, 2006).

2.11 Aistear (NCCA, 2009) and Siolta (CECDE, 2006): Irish National Curriculum and Quality Frameworks

Aistear, the Irish National Curriculum Framework for Early Childhood Care and Education, was launched in 2009 on the NCCA website. Aistear meaning Journey, illustrates that education is a life-long challenging odyssey (NCCA, 2009). Notably, Towler et al., (2015) describe how Aistear (NCCA, 2009) was established, not in isolation, but following intense consultation with key stakeholders in education, particularly experts in the field of ECEC and with the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). Daly and Foster (2009) also acknowledge that the development of such a framework, to the Irish context is ‘an exciting milestone in Early Years Education and Care in Ireland; (Daly and Foster, 2009:3). Additionally, Murphy (2014) explains how ‘Aistear (NCCA, 2009) is a curriculum framework rather than a curriculum per se, and contains, Principles, Themes and Guidelines designed to underpin good practice’ (Murphy, 2014:165). Aistear (NCCA, 2009) true to inquiry-based learning, positions the child at the centre of the process. It encourages practitioners to provide learning opportunities that are driven by the child’s innate curiosity, in environments, which enable them to reach their full potential as competent and confident learners (Fitzpatrick, 2012).

In the report Towards a framework for Early Learning: Final Consultation (2005) commissioned by the NCCA and which is pertinent to this research, the importance of including the arts was emphasised. Under the heading Identification and Configuration of Themes, the arts was identified as an area of concern, which needs more attention as it is central to the child’s learning experience. ‘Participants requested greater attention be given to the arts through reviewing the themes, or by incorporating them (the arts) across the framework’ (NCCA, 2005:50). Some participants expanded further, on their recommendations, and explicitly requested that the arts be placed under a separate theme. In other words, a theme which would have as its sole focus;
creativity and the arts. If this were not practicable, they provided an alternative recommendation; that creativity and the arts be incorporated into one of the four existing themes, e.g. Exploring and Thinking (as in inquiry-based learning). It was eventually decided that creativity and the arts would not become a stand-alone theme within the framework, but would be integral to all four existing themes: Well-being; Identity and Belonging; Communicating; Exploring and Thinking, which are ‘the dispositions, attitudes and values, skills, knowledge, and understanding through which children learn’ (NCCA 2009:13). Children are encouraged to be ‘creative and spiritual’ (NCCA, 2016:3) and to communicate in a creative and imaginative manner. As they try to make sense of the world around them, they are facilitated to have ‘meaningful interactions with others in the form of play, investigation, questioning, hypothesizing, testing and refining of ideas’ (ibid: 18).

French (2013), in her report on the place of the Arts in Early Childhood Learning and Development, draws on the theory and research compiled by NCCA (2009) on how children develop and learn. She notes that coupled with this, ‘Aistear was underpinned by consultation with the early childhood sector, commissioned research papers and portraiture studies of young children’ (French, 2013:34). She adapts the key messages to consider in early childhood art and concludes by presenting recommendations for those working with or on behalf of the young child. She lists five key findings practitioners should:

1) provide a culture of listening and interactions should prevail in early arts experiences,

2) be well versed in pedagogic and artistic practices,

3) possess the skills to foster children’s curiosity,

4) nurture creativity,

5) understand how children learn and develop through active engagement in the arts (French, 2013:34).
A summary of Principles of how children learn, as outlined by French (2013) are compiled in Table 2.7.
Table 2.7 Principles of How Children Learn

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Play</th>
<th>Relationships, social interaction, verbal communication, creative use of materials, imaginative and divergent thinking, problem-solving capacity, adult and child -initiated learning experiences (adult to) plan interactions, scaffold learning nurture creativity.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Communication and Language | • receptive and expressive language intellectual functioning and creativity  
• creative experiences to support language development  
• art rich environments for exploration and experimentation,  
• real life diverse materials, children ask questions, hypothesise, develop thinking  
• collaborative processes both parties involved |
| Equality and Diversity | • individuality and self-expression  
• inclusion, respect, cultural diversity-cognitive, emotional, social growth  
• respect/affirm diversity, promote equality, challenge discrimination  
• authentic relationships support development |
| Arts-Rich Learning Environment | • learn through the senses-indoors/outdoors  
• a range of challenging and interesting art experiences, both environments  
• opportunities to explore, work independently and together, problem-solve, authentic art experiences  
• simple but versatile materials  
• extend imagination, address learning needs, level of understanding |
| Whole Child in Context | family, home and community  
• holistic development, (learning) not subject specific  
• (learn) by association not discrete subjects  
• Aistear (NCCA, 2009) Themes (well-being, identity and belonging, communicating and exploring and thinking) moving from discrete developmental domains to holistic, integrated way. Themes bridge developmental and subject domains, move towards integrated approach  
• Themes acknowledge interests, learning dispositions in natural, enjoyable way. |
| Early Childhood Arts Curriculum | • appropriate curriculum learning as a process not product (orientated)  
Plan around child’s interests, strengths, culture, needs, learning styles  
• practitioner prior knowledge on role of arts in child development  
• Curriculum in Reggio Emilia centres not planned, evolves organically guided by interest/curiosity, pursued through in-depth projects |

Source: French (2013)
In praise of Aistear (NCCA, 2009), French (2013) celebrates its progressiveness and indicates how it draws on, and has the potential to, reflect established good practice within ECEC. She does however, note that the adoption of Aistear (NCCA, 2009) has not been without its challenges and attributes this to an absence of a strategic implementation plan and adequate resourcing. Similarly, Hayes et al., (2013), Walsh (2016) and First Five (Government of Ireland, 2018) all register disquiet that the aspirations of the Aistear (NCCA, 2009) have not yet been realised in the ECEC sector in Ireland. They attribute this lamentable state of affairs to the lack of investment and/or effective implementation. The reasons are twofold, i.e. Early Years facilities struggle to engage authentically with the Aistear framework: 1) limited resources and 2) a lack of effective training (Hayes et al., 2013). This echoes a Department of Education and Skills (2010) policy document which stipulates that in order for practitioners to be able to realise the high expectations set out by Aistear (NCCA, 2009), there is an imperative to equip ECEC students with quality training. These findings and observations point to the worth of such research projects in ECEC, in order to bring about a paradigm shift in education. Findings from the current study may help to address the disconnect between curriculum design and curriculum implementation. This may further influence strategies to engage in the arts within ECEC settings across Ireland. Furthermore, the DES inspection report (2017) shows that almost a quarter of ECEC settings in Ireland have never had any type of Continuous Professional Development on Aistear (NCCA, 2009) or Síolta (CECDE, 2009).

Although adopting the Aistear Framework (NCCA, 2009) is not mandatory, pre-schools, especially those funded by the state under the ECCE scheme (DCYA, 2019)) are advised to comply with its principles (DYCA, 2013). Indeed, many primary schools use Aistear (NCCA, 2009) in conjunction with the Primary School Curriculum, at infant class level (Murphy, 2014).

Within the Irish educational system, children are eligible to attend primary school from the age of four upwards and formal education is compulsory at age six (DES, 2014). The primary school cycle is 8 years’ duration. Schools generally provide 2 years of infant classes, followed by Class 1 to Class 6 (ibid.). The DES (1999) recognises the importance of celebrating each individual child’s uniqueness and advocates that
practitioners facilitate all children to realise their full potential by fostering their sense of wonder and natural curiosity. Furthermore, it emphasises how these are chief motivational factors when it comes to children’s learning and holistic development. Creativity is now recognised as one of the key competencies within the Primary Curriculum Framework Draft (DPCF) (2020), where greater emphasis is placed on the arts to ensure that children of today are prepared for the challenges of tomorrow. The DPCF states that ‘Unlocking and promoting children’s creative potential impacts positively on their motivation, self-esteem and overall development’ (DES, 2020:10).

Aistear (NCCA, 2009) works in conjunction with Siolta (CECDE, 2006). Siolta main role, as noted by Duignan et al., (2007) is to act as a quality assurance structure, to include all aspects of quality within the ECEC and was designed mainly to support ECEC practitioners to ensure good practice. It emphasises the importance of the involvement and input of the various stakeholders, ‘the practitioners, policy makers, researchers, health professionals and students in the ECEC sector who were consulted on all aspects of defining, assessing and supporting quality in Ireland’ (NCCA, 2009:8). Notably, Siolta (CECDE, 2006) consists of 12 Principles, 16 Standards of Quality and 75 Components of Quality. Proportionately, they embody a national consensus on what the fundamental indicators of quality are in settings, which cater for children under the age of six (Fallon 2007). The principles of Siolta, envisaged in consultation with the early childhood sector, are the core values which guide personnel in their work. They indicate how the services are organised, how to relate to children and families and to one another. They are concerned with curriculum content and the way it is implemented or delivered (ECI, 2015b)

The following tables (2.8 and 2.9) outline the Siolta (CECDE, 2006) and Aistear (NCCA, 2009) principles as well as theme descriptors, aims and learning goals within the frameworks, as they apply to the arts.
Table 2.8: Síolta Principles (CECDE, 2006)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The physical environment of the young child has a direct impact on her/his well-being, learning and development</th>
<th>Experiences in early childhood positively enhanced by interactions with variety of environments;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• indoor/outdoor,</td>
<td>• indoor/outdoor,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• natural/man-made,</td>
<td>• natural/man-made,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• home/out-of-home.</td>
<td>• home/out-of-home.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environments should be high quality to;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• extend and enrich development and learning</td>
<td>• extend and enrich development and learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• stimulate curiosity</td>
<td>• stimulate curiosity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• foster independence</td>
<td>• foster independence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• promote sense of belonging</td>
<td>• promote sense of belonging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• foster respect (for the environment)</td>
<td>• foster respect (for the environment)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The role of the adult in providing quality early childhood experiences is fundamental.</th>
<th>Quality early childhood practice is built upon the unique role of the adult through their;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• competencies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• qualifications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• dispositions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• capacity to reflect (on role)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As central to the child’s education, the adult should be supported and valued and appropriately resourced.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pedagogy in early childhood is expressed by curricula or programmes of activities which take a holistic approach to the development and learning of the child and reflect the inseparable nature of care and education.</th>
<th>Pedagogy;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• supports child's development through broad range of interactions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• care and education inextricably bound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• addresses learning potential of the ‘whole child’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• acknowledges wide range of relationships and experiences in development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• supports concept of child as active learner in flexible and dynamic framework</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practitioners adequately prepared and supported.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Play is central to the young child’s well-being, development and learning.</th>
<th>Play enables child to;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• interact (other children, adults, materials, events, ideas)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• explore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• understand (the world)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Play should be a primary focus in quality early childhood care and education to promote well-being, development and learning, joy and fulfilment for the child.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: CECDE, 2006)
Table 2.9 : Aistear Principles Theme Descriptors, Aims and Learning Goals  (NCCA, 2009).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principles:</th>
<th>Themes and Aims:</th>
<th>Learning Goals:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Children and their lives in early childhood:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Well Being</strong></td>
<td><strong>In partnership with the adult, children will:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• the child’s uniqueness</td>
<td><strong>Aim 3</strong> <em>Children will be creative and spiritual</em></td>
<td>1. express themselves creatively and experience the arts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• equality and diversity</td>
<td></td>
<td>2. express themselves through a variety of types of play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• children as citizens.</td>
<td></td>
<td>3. develop and nurture their sense of wonder and awe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4. become reflective and think flexibly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5. care for the environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>6. understand that others may have beliefs and values different to their own.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| **Children’s connections with others:** | **Identity and Belonging:** | **In partnership with the adult, children will:** |
| • relationships | **Aim 4** *Children will see themselves as capable learners.* | 1. develop a broad range of abilities and interests |
| • parents, family and community | | 2. show an awareness of their own unique strengths, abilities and learning styles, and be willing to share their skills and knowledge with others |
| • the adult’s role | | 3. show increasing confidence and self-assurance in directing their own learning |
| | | 4. demonstrate dispositions like curiosity, persistence and responsibility |
| | | 5. experience learning opportunities that are based on personal interests, and linked to their home, community and culture. |
| | | 6. be motivated, and begin to think about and recognise their own progress and achievements. |

<p>| <strong>How children learn and develop:</strong> | <strong>Communicating :</strong> | <strong>In partnership with the adult, children will:</strong> |
| • holistic learning and development | <strong>Aim 4</strong> <em>Children will express themselves creatively and imaginatively</em> | 1. share their feelings, thoughts and ideas by story-telling, making art, moving to music, role-playing, problem-solving, and responding to these experiences |
| • active learning | | 2. express themselves through the visual arts using skills such as cutting, drawing, gluing, sticking, painting, building, printing, sculpting, and sewing |
| • play and hands-on experiences | | 3. listen to and respond to a variety of types of music, sing songs and make music using instruments |
| • relevant and meaningful experiences | | 4. use language to imagine and recreate roles and experiences |
| • communication and language | | 5. respond to and create literacy experiences through story, poetry, song, and drama |
| • the learning environment | | 6. show confidence in trying out new things, taking risks, and thinking creatively. |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thinking and Exploring:</th>
<th>In partnership with the adult, children will:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Aim 1</strong> Children will learn about and make sense of the world around them</td>
<td>1. engage, explore and experiment in their environment and use new physical skills including skills to manipulate objects and materials 2. demonstrate a growing understanding of themselves and others in their community 3. develop an understanding of change as part of their lives 4. learn about the natural environment and its features, materials, animals, and plants, and their own responsibility as carers 5. develop a sense of time, shape, space, and place 6. come to understand concepts such as matching, comparing, ordering, sorting, size, weight, height, length, capacity, and money in an enjoyable and meaningful way.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Aim 2</strong> Children will develop and use skills and strategies for observing, questioning, investigating, understanding, negotiating, and problem-solving, and come to see themselves as explorers and thinkers.</td>
<td>1. recognise patterns and make connections and associations between new learning and what they already know 2. gather and use information from different sources using their increasing cognitive, physical and social skills 3. use their experience and information to explore and develop working theories about how the world works, and think about how and why they learn things 4. demonstrate their ability to reason, negotiate and think logically 5. collaborate with others to share interests and to solve problems confidently 6. use their creativity and imagination to think of new ways to solve problems.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Aim 3</strong> Children will explore ways to represent ideas, feelings, thoughts, objects, and actions through symbols</td>
<td>In partnership with the adult, children will 1. make marks and use drawing, painting and model-making to record objects, events and ideas 2. become familiar with and associate symbols (pictures, numbers, letters, and words) with the things they represent 3. build awareness of the variety of symbols (pictures, print, numbers) used to communicate, and use these in an enjoyable and meaningful way leading to early reading and writing 4. express feelings, thoughts and ideas through improvising, moving, playing, talking, writing, story-telling, music and art 5. use letters, words, sentences, numbers, signs, pictures, colour, and shapes to</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The term Transdisciplinary does not feature in Aistear (NCCA, 2009) and Síolta (CECDE, 2006) documentation but the core principles, which underpin do indeed embrace a Transdisciplinary approach to learning. Aistear (NCCA, 2009) with its four interconnected themes, Well-being; Identity and Belonging; Communicating; Exploring and Thinking advocate a Transdisciplinary approach. These themes facilitate the development of the whole child and promote a non-didactic, traditional approach to education. It is one which lauds the curiosity and the identity and individuality of each child, facilitating the exploration of; who we are, where we are in place and time, how we express ourselves, how the world works and how we organise ourselves in it (La Porte, 2016).

Significantly, however, O’Sullivan (2013) identifies that from 2006 to 2013 Síolta (CECDE, 2006) has been implemented in only a little over 10% of Irish pre-schools. The anomalies, as identified by McKeown et al., (2014) are settings, which are government funded or participating in the free-preschool ECCE scheme (DCYA, 2019). These settings are required, as part of the governmental mandate, to incorporate Síolta (CECDE, 2006) into the curriculum. Síolta (CECDE, 2006) recognises each child’s individuality, strength and needs and identifies how this acknowledgment by the adult is key to providing quality Early Childhood Education and Care. Moreover,
Rogers (2013) emphasises how collectively, Aistear (NCCA, 2009) and Síolta (CECDE, 2006) highlight the importance of the adult role in ‘supporting the optimal well-being, learning and development of the child, reflecting contemporary thinking in effective pedagogy’ (Rogers, 2013:11). Additionally, she argues that approaches to the arts and training in the arts within ECEC vary significantly within the Irish sector, which in turn, may have a direct impact on how creative and artistic approaches are implemented and delivered within ECEC settings. In agreement, The Irish Arts Council (2013) supports this claim, and goes a step further, to highlight how Aistear (NCCA, 2009) has the potential to impact positively on arts implementation when used to guide collaboration and partnerships between ECEC practitioners and artists. This can be attributed to the manner in which Aistear (NCCA, 2009) places emphasis on ‘creativity, play and processes of learning,’ and how this ‘aligns well with the enquiry, observation, reflection, facilitation and documentation processes that artists understand and use’ (The Arts Council, 2013:76).

What has emerged since the Arts Council publication (2013) is the recent development of two significant Aistear-related online resources; Aistear Tool-Kit (NCCA, 2013) and Aistear/Síolta Practice Guide (NCCA, 2015). Both are designed to facilitate practitioners in implementing the curriculum framework effectively. They recognise the significance of childhood experiences (structured or spontaneous) in varying environments, indoors and outdoors, and how these contribute to children’s overall learning and development. It is worthy of note that the term ‘emergent, inquiry-based curriculum’ was not used in Aistear (NCCA, 2009) but first featured in the practice guide in 2015. In that regard, Maloney (2015) notes that implementing an inquiry-based emergent curriculum is very much a matter of personal choice, as the practice guide and tool-kit are provided as guides (only), being on-line, self-help resources for practitioners.

Furthermore, the Aistear Síolta Practice Guide (NCCA, 2015) also provides materials on how best to document children’s learning, through observation, as they engage in inquiry and meaning-making. Within the practice guide, the curriculum foundations section strongly emphasises the principles of Aistear (NCCA, 2009) and Síolta (CECDE, 2006), so that personnel in ECCE adhere to them and to facilitate practitioners operationalise both frameworks. Essa (2012) argues that children’s
observations can be used to portray a holistic view of them. Generally, findings from observations are used to create meaningful learning opportunities (Palaiologou, 2012; Hatch and Grieshaber, 2002). Aistear (NCCA, 2009) distinguishes between assessment of learning and assessment for learning. The former is the use of evaluation approaches such as observations, to inform stakeholders of learning outcomes. Whereas, the latter is used to improve practice and aid in the enrichment of children's learning experiences (Daly et al., 2009). An example of carefully arranged and organised documentation of children’s narratives, discussions and notated work, within the Reggio Emilia learning environment, provides insight into children’s thinking and learning Nutbrown and Abbott (2009). In this regard, Aistear (NCCA, 2009) asserts that documentation of children’s learning can include notes, learning journals, observations, videos and pictures of children’s actions, thoughts and conversations (NCCA, 2009). This documentation when shared with parents allows for feedback and collaboration between parents and practitioners (NCCA, 2009). Likewise, Arthur et al., (2012) explain that ‘pedagogical documentation’ (2012: 258) such as portfolios and observations may also be used as confirmatory evidence to inform parents and other interested parties that curriculum objectives are being met.

The NCCA (2018), developed, Mo Scéal (My Story): *Moving from Preschool to Primary templates*, in collaboration with preschools and primary schools. These templates afford the practitioner the opportunity to share information with parents on children's learning, development and visual arts experiences. Additionally, with parental consent, they are a useful resource for prospective primary schools, when children exit the ECCE programme.

In my opinion, visual arts processes which may result in a final piece comprising the various stages of discovery and investigation should be recorded and visually documented through photography and film (by both the adult and the child). These can be used to share the child’s creative journey with their peers, practitioners, parents and the wider community. Moreover, evidence of learning through documentation can form the basis for discussion and reflection, assisting children in identifying areas of strength and challenges, and giving them pride in their achievements. Documentation makes learning visible and emphasises the process of creative inquiry and research. Furthermore, children take great pride in seeing their work displayed. Display is an
essential way to make children’s learning visible for parents and more importantly for the child. Learning-stories highlight the stages of exploration and include observations, ideas and relevant quotes, as well as demonstrating the various avenues of inquiry undertaken. Lee (2019) describes the learning story as a philosophy, one which recognizes the power of the narrative and empowerment as it is approached from a socio-cultural perspective. Learning stories not only highlight the importance of different experiences but also provide children with important reference points to enable them to recall challenges and solutions on their creative journey. In turn, these are an effective means by which to plan and extend children’s learning through an emergent curriculum and are central to the current research. In this regard, Aistear Siolta Practice Guide (NCCA, 2015) stipulate that the curriculum and quality framework provide the building blocks to develop an emergent, inquiry-based curriculum (NCCA, 2017). This is highlighted by Nimmo (2017) within the Aistear Siolta practice guide, as he describes how child-led play fits into an inquiry-based emergent curriculum and he situates it where children reflect on matters which interest them. As a result, questions are generated which they then seek to answer through play. He subsequently deliberates on how the role of the adult as observer and documenter is at the heart of the emergent curriculum. This curriculum model is flexible and lends itself ideally to the arts in early years education. It will be explored in the context of Early Childhood Education and Care in the forthcoming section.

2.12 The Emergent Curriculum and Early Childhood Education and Care

The Emergent Curriculum, in the context of early years education, as described by Jones and Nimmo (1994) is a curriculum model evolving from what is deemed ‘socially relevant, intellectually engaging and personally meaningful to children’ (ibid: 3). Furthermore, the learning process is recognised as being organic and the child is allowed to flourish as a result of meaningful adult-child interactions and situations within the learning space (Nimmo, 2017). Miller et al., (2019) emphasise that rather than being unvarying and linear, with pre-determined planned outcomes, the emergent curriculum facilitates unrestricted learning. Such a curriculum model emphasises a flexible approach, permitting divergent views based on individual choice and self-discovery. Nimmo (ibid.) further deliberates that co-constructed play between child,
adult, and environment is at the heart of the emergent curriculum. In addition, he stresses that in order to authentically develop such a curriculum, adults must pay heed to children’s questions and how to build on them, all the while taking note of what transpires, which in turn leads to further questioning.

The many proponents of this approach categorically state that it is imperative to foster a culture of co-operative learning, allowing for active participation, promoting authentic learning experiences, which are child-centred and adult facilitated (Thompson, 2019; McLachlan et al., 2018; Jones and Reynolds, 2011). The practitioner needs to be open and receptive to the individual needs and interests of each and every child (Gestwicki, 2015). Biermeier (2015) endorses this point and makes a plea for children to be seen as protagonists in their learning process. She points out that the emergent curriculum challenges the product-orientated curriculum, and her strong criticism of product-orientated learning is captured in the following quotation. ‘It is designed to replicate outcomes and often eliminates all possibility of spontaneous inquiry, stealing potential moments of learning from students and teachers in a cookie-cutter approach to education in the classroom’ (Biermeier, 2015:72). She argues that such standardised curricula do not address the diverse needs of the changing demographic found within many contemporary pre-schools and emphasises that ‘in order to teach well, educators must ensure that creativity and innovation are always present’ (ibid:73).

Similarly, Frankenberg et al., (2018) and Lenz-Taguchi (2010) in reference to Early Childhood Education in Sweden, draw attention to a puzzling paradox. The increasing awareness of how the child learns through diverse strategies, the complex processes at work and the multiple theories of how knowledge is gained, contrast with the tendency to promote the opposite. The dominant philosophy seems to ignore this paradox and pays little heed to the diversity of how learning occurs. Instead, it panders to orthodoxy and conventionalism through curricular goal setting and formal learning strategies. Hopper (2009) acknowledges the complexities within the learning process of the very young, stressing the need for early educational frameworks to reflect a pedagogical approach, which recognises the varying abilities and starting points of individual children. He advocates the need to move away from overly-prescriptive linear systems and move towards approaches to learning, which celebrate diversity and different ways
of learning. An alternative to the linear approach is the emergent approach.

Yu-Le (2004) contextualises emergence within the curriculum. It is founded on ‘emergentism’ referring to the dynamic process of emergence and development of entity or phenomena’ (Yu-Le, 2004:n.p.). Moreover, she recognises it as a constructive curriculum, centred around the axis of dialogue. Williams (2012), in reference to outdoor learning environments, describes emergence as a key characteristic of the complex system. He defines it as a naturally and spontaneously occurring behavior, which is a consequence of complex interactions within a system, rather than a direct response to individual causal factors. In elucidating his claim, he draws attention to research findings, which acknowledge the significant role interaction components play within complex systems. He suggests that these interaction components result in ‘non-linear emergent changes’ (Williams, 2012:28) and he advises practitioners to strive to avail of the potential complex interactions afforded them within the learning environment. This can be realised by creating conditions for emergence to actually take place.

He proposes the key attitudes and learning environments as follows:

1. maintain an open-ended approach
2. allow for multiple responses and perspectives for learning
3. provide variety of challenges
4. place focus on relationships
5. press for effort rather than achievement
6. encourage students to take ownership of their individual learning process

(Williams, 2012:28).

Frankenberg et al., (2018), Dahlberg (2013) and Lenz-Taguchi (2010) amongst others, recognise that children do not make sense of the world by exploring it through the confines of subject areas. Rather, they argue, children create meaning through their different ‘languages’ (acknowledging Malaguzzi’s Theory of 100 Languages) involving all their senses. Marshall (2014:104) acknowledges this, by posing the question regarding teaching for the future, ‘If our goal is to make education more dynamic, integrated and meaningful for students, what qualities should we embrace?’
He attempts to initiate a dialogue in order to find answers, by arguing for art to be integrated across subject areas through Transdisciplinarity. Based on earlier arguments, it can be deduced that an emergent curriculum, which places art at the core of the learning experience, fosters inquiry through a TDA and is in accordance with the recommended paradigm shift in ECEC. To activate movement along that axis, however, is not without challenges, some of which will now be discussed.

2.13 Challenges to Implementation of Inquiry-Based Learning using a Transdisciplinary Approach to the Visual Arts

The implementation of inquiry-based learning (IBL) within the classroom environment presents a number of important challenges (Chichekian, 2016). These are recognised by Quigley et al., (2011) who identify hindrances and obstacles facing educators, and enumerate them as follows:

- Challenge 1: How can we measure the quality of inquiry as implemented in the classroom?
- Challenge 2: How can teachers use discourse and discussion to encourage more effective inquiry-based learning?
- Challenge 3: How can we get teachers to think of content and inquiry as not mutually exclusive, but rather aspects of the same goal?
- Challenge 4: How can we help teachers learn to manage an effective inquiry classroom?

(Quigley et al., 2011:55)

These are not just rhetorical questions as Quigley et al., (2011) also proffer a number of possible solutions to minimise the difficulties encountered. They make the case for advocacy between educator and student, whereby, educators reflect on their approaches to teaching. Learning should not be confined to the educator posing questions and measuring student responses, but learning rather should take place through evidence-based exploration. Students should first explore and investigate and then the scientific principles to explain their understanding can be applied.
Trautmann et al., (2004) describe challenges facing educators who are reluctant to accept IBL. A reticence in adopting this approach can usually be attributed to educators feeling inadequate. Furthermore, educators with minimal research experience may feel ill equipped for the task of facilitating students to develop an appropriate hypothesis for investigation. They posit that handing over control to the student, where outcomes may result in ideas and concepts, other than those envisaged by the educator, may be disconcerting and intimidating for educators. Trautmann et al., (2004) draw on a number of studies supporting their claim that educators need to be equipped with the appropriate pedagogical tools, to feel confident and to have a sound understanding of the subject content if truly authentic open-ended inquiry is to take place.

Barron and Darling-Hammond (2008) further acknowledge that there are several complex situations facing practitioners who attempt to facilitate IBL. These include design, planning, facilitation and scaffolding of learning, as well as differentiation amongst different groups. Facing these daunting prospects can constitute ‘a tall order for even the most experienced teacher’ (Barron and Darling-Hammond, 2008:8). This is further confirmed by a longitudinal study carried out by Chichekian et al., (2016) in which they found that recent graduates demonstrate a decline in self-efficacy during the first year of service and are unable to effectively implement IBL within the classroom setting. They attribute this to multiple challenges facing them once they move from position of student to role of teacher. The authors identify the main problems facing practitioners and these include: concerns around coverage of curriculum content in a limited time frame and lack of confidence in how to effectively transmit knowledge through inquiry-based instruction. These factors, they posit, are the reasons why ‘few teachers routinely use inquiry-based instruction’ (Chichekian et al., 2016:1). Christakis (2017) concurs, with specific reference to constructivist perspectives in the early years, acknowledges that despite a desire on the part of the practitioner to respond to the differing interests of children, they face a myriad of challenges. These challenges can become exaggerated, when practitioners work in isolation. They believe they lack ‘know how’ and lack time for adequate curriculum planning and reflection. Moreover, Christakis poses the question of feasibility, of various expectations on practitioners to ‘build a curriculum around every random interest that gets expressed at Circle Time’ (Christakis, 2017:11). In Henriksen’s
Henriksen (2018) study on Creativity and Transdisciplinarity, she notes that one of the most significant findings was how invaluable transdisciplinary skills are within a teaching context.

However, she recognises that implementation of a Transdisciplinary Approach is also not without its challenges and participating educators identified the following six skills as being key to the implementation of a TDA:

- Observation
- Patterning
- Abstraction
- Embodied thinking
- Modeling
- Play

(Henriksen, 2018:110)

She elaborates on those six skills and notes that observation is important ‘to develop an awareness of classroom dynamics, students and learning progress’ (Henriksen, 2018:110). Patterning shows ‘trends in classroom and school situations and events’. Abstraction is a teaching approach, whereby one explains complex ideas in a non-complex way. Embodied thinking ‘makes learning active and engaging’ (ibid.). Modeling is a useful tool to enable learning to be ‘more real and tangible’ and finally, ‘play’ is essential to ensure that learning is fun and also to develop a sense of curiosity about ideas and learning’ (op.cit.)

Obstacles hindering the practitioner in implementing authentic approaches to the visual arts within ECEC have been identified by a number of scholars (Hipp and Sulentic-Dowell, 2019; Christakis, 2017; Lindsay, 2017; Chichekian et al., 2016; Robinson, 2010). The main drawbacks are a lack of pedagogic knowledge and lack of confidence in their own creative ability and a low visual self-efficacy. There is also a certain conditioning, an awareness that society does not value the arts (Collins, 2016). Stake et al., (1991) carried out research in American schools to explore barriers to creativity. His group found that art plays a marginal role in education, one which they liken to
that of a guest in the household. They also identify several contributory factors: initial professional education, lack of sufficient resources and inherent resistance (by some teachers) to indulge ‘creativity’. It was observed that teachers, in general, demonstrate a tendency to implement non-challenging, simplistic, controllable art projects where the outcomes are pre-determined and teacher-directed. A dispiriting finding/conclusion was that even if improved resources, conditions and time were made available to teachers, they would not do things differently. The elementary teachers, they believe, are reluctant to encourage and facilitate experimentation with materials and few teachers advocate exploring the resources available for more effective tools. The emphasis of the teaching staff on the end product and technique, rather than on the creative process of facilitating an evolving vision within the child, is the most critical finding. Of equal concern is the observation that art was rarely presented by the teacher as enhancing critical thought and communication.

Narey (2009) has criticised practitioners in the USA for failing to appreciate the educational value of the arts and teacher inability to use the arts to develop ‘modalities of meaning making’ and thus, extend language, literacy and learning (Narey, 2009:2). She attributes this to the ‘verbocentric mindset’ of most practitioners as they begin their careers. Narey (2009), in agreement with Tarr (2001) argues that parental expectations dictate that most pre-school art in the United States of America is directed-production with holiday-type themes as motifs for the end-products. Athouse et al., (2003) also claim that the visual arts in Early Childhood Education is perceived as ‘holiday art to decorate the school…and activities to take a break from real learning’ (Athouse et al., 2003:10). What is dubbed teacher-directed art was also criticised by Seefeldt (2002) because of its negative psychological effect in undermining the child’s sense of self, the child’s creative ability and because it inhibits ideas.

As this literature review testifies, the place and value of arts in education has been the topic of extensive debate over decades. The problem is multifaceted, but two main themes emerge: the general public has limited understanding of what the arts entail and secondly, practitioners do not feel competent or confident in how to nurture creativity or how to involve children in meaningful creative activities (Tesch, 2012). Tutchell (2014) elaborates and opines on reasons why practitioners fail to recognise how the arts impact on education. Many practitioners (and students) have an innate fear of the
arts which manifests itself in the ‘I can’t draw’ syndrome and which Tutchell (2014) believes can be traced to past experiences. She focuses on how such attitudes are often due to childhood experiences in art education, if the emphasis was on representational accuracy. This frequently results in young children being offered limited opportunities to experiment and there is a tendency to stifle children’s creative talent by using activities which are template-based and adult-led.

Spiller (2017), however, comments on how the Finnish schooling system has been revolutionised by the introduction of a more horizontal learning process and attributes this to the role inquiry plays in the learning experience of the Finnish child. Darling-Hammond (2010) explains how ‘inquiry is a major focus of learning in Finland, and assessment is used to cultivate student active learning skills by asking open-ended questions and helping students address them’ (Darling-Hammond, 2010:n.p.). Huber and Hutchings (2004) hold the view that in progressive educational structures, the learner is seen as an active collaborator, who is self-aware, as well as being responsive to, and responsible for, their own learning. Moreover, Aerila and Rönkkö (2015) stress how the place of the arts and aesthetics is central to the Finnish Curriculum and they note how teachers and practitioners support children’s individual ideas and their interaction with others.

Although the importance of creative expression in child development is well recognised, many educational systems worldwide appears to be still deeply entrenched in outmoded, traditional, didactic educational methods (Saavedra and Opfer 2012). McGrath (2016) describes how there is still a substantial way to go before the arts are effectively integrated into the Irish school classroom. She expands that the arts are often perceived as a luxury and regarded more as an extra-curricular, or marginal activity, rather than being central to the child’s learning. Similar observations are made by Hipp and Sulentic-Dowell (2019) within the American context. These authors advocate for the integration of the arts across subject areas at all levels of education and note that learning through the arts not only makes the process of attaining new knowledge more enjoyable but it actively aids students in retaining information. This claim, they attribute to the motivational qualities associated with creative processes. Kenny (2016) in agreement with (McGrath, ibid) claims that the arts are viewed as an add-on instead of being at the core of how children think and learn.
McBride (2016) describes how evidence presented from the longitudinal study *Growing up in Ireland* undoubtedly establishes a strong connection between engagement in arts and cultural activities and children’s well-being. Moreover, McGrath (2016) cites McBride (2016) who stresses the importance of the integration of arts across the curriculum, further emphasizing the term *arts in education* as being fundamental as it ‘refers to a cross-curricular approach dedicated to freeing the arts from the silos of the subject’ (McBride, 2016 cited in McGrath 2016). Taylor *et al.*, (2006) define the term *integration* as the fusion of disciplines. The integration of the arts across subject areas is characterised by Ulbricht (2005) as multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary. O’Rourke *et al.*, (2019) and Stock and Burton (2011) further note that misinterpretation of what defines and distinguishes each disciplinary learning approach from the other, i.e. multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary is not uncommon amongst educators, academics and researchers.

Such confusion can often lead to a lack of high quality learning design on the part of educators and programmes, as argued by Park and Son (2010). Moreover, these authors expand that the often interchangeable use of such learning concepts may lead to confusion, whereby the educator addresses the subject and various topics at surface level only. This, they argue, can result in ‘the integration of knowledge and skills and professional application for real problems often remain as learner’s tasks and challenges’ (Park and Son, 2010: 82). Mitchell (2005) holds that true Trandisciplinarity is far more than drawing together concepts from the various disciplines and that it provides new frameworks which raze traditional boundaries between disciplines. This is in keeping with research by Klein (2000) who posits that Transdisciplinary approaches to art integration transcends disciplinary boundaries, and this in turn, establishes a more authentic new social and cognitive environment for learning. Taylor *et al.*, (2006) consider that the process and impact of art integration across subject areas leads to a rupture of disciplinary boundaries, which in turn, forges an exploration and dynamic interpretation of those ‘big ideas’ which determine our existence. Similarly, Marshall (2014) asserts that art integration has the potential to advance conceptual/procedural and metacognition skills amongst students. She further deliberates that knowledge of this significant role in advancing approaches to education, provides a powerful argument for shifting the position of art in education from the periphery to the core.
Finally, the spirit of art should permeate every subject, as described by Eisner (2002). This is possible by adopting a philosophy of IBL which places the student at the heart of the learning process (Savery 2015). In order for this to be achieved, practitioners, at initial professional education level need to be made aware of the importance of creativity in child development and education, so they in turn, can facilitate each individual child’s creative expression (Henriksen, 2018). Therefore, the position and status of the arts within initial professional education is crucial and is addressed in the following section.

2.14 The Arts and Initial Professional Education in Early Years Education

At the World Conference on Art Education (2006), it was recognised that art is undervalued and the challenges facing effective delivery of the arts were outlined. ‘There are insufficient teacher-training programs, specialising in Arts Education and general teacher-education programs do not adequately promote the role of the arts in teaching and learning’ (UNESCO, 2006:16). The conference suggested that within a wide range of Early Years Education settings, children are not sufficiently facilitated, nor enabled, to maximally develop their creative potential. Henriksen (2018) on referencing Transdisciplinarity and Creativity, recommends that institutes of higher education in the USA place greater emphasis on the arts within their initial professional education programmes. Her findings suggest that the process of engaging a student in creative activities develops a growing self-awareness as a creator. Moreover, she highlights ‘the importance of creativity and transdisciplinary thinking-skills among effective and successful teachers’ (Henriksen, 2018:111) adding that ‘teacher education programmes would benefit from an increased focus on creative thinking, and creativity in teaching practices’ (ibid.).

Interestingly, in challenging their own perceptions of creativity, Eisner (2002) advocates that educators require ‘the ability and willingness to surrender to the unanticipated possibilities of work as it unfolds’ (Eisner, 2002:70). This is perhaps one of the greatest challenges that faces initial professional educators. An explanation is offered by Wiggins and Wiggins (2008) who claim that initial professional educators
who lack sufficient training in the arts, are increasingly likely to negatively assess their creative competence. These authors further highlight how this impacts on the creative experiences offered to young children. These sentiments are expressed by Lemon and Garvis (2013) who further explain that attitudes to art and art education are developed during initial teacher education and are coloured by an individual’s own past experience. Similarly, Bamford (2013) attributes this to a lacklustre approach and lack of know-how regarding incorporating artistic techniques in the general learning process. She argues that the responsibility lies with individual teachers, many of whom lack the necessary support and guidance on how best to implement and integrate the arts within the curriculum. This is further explored by Nilson et al., (2013) who claim that effective delivery of the arts, depends on teachers being appropriately equipped with the necessary artistic skills. It requires engagement in reflective practice where teachers evaluate their individual ‘attitudes towards creativity and critical thinking’ (Nilson et al., 2013:12).

With regard to reflective practice, Cleary and Ni Bhroin (2019) stress its importance when making and teaching art and how it is intrinsic to student engagement with the visual arts. Albeit, in the context of visual arts for primary school, they cite the many advantages of the reflective journal in student training. The reflective journal is regarded as a safe platform, void of public scrutiny where students document creative concepts, personal thoughts and possible teaching ideas during training. It also serves the purpose of being an effective assessment tool, providing insights into the student learning trajectory for the trainer, which in turn assists in building confidence in the student’s artistic ability, through experimental learning. These authors also draw on the work of Evans-Palmer (2018: 24) who describes how a reflective art journal is ‘a tangible artefact that visually demonstrates artistic identity, having developed knowledge and skill in the process.’

Confidence in one’s self-efficacy is also discussed by Mulcahy (2013) who contributes to the discourse on art training in the USA. Despite some teachers and practitioners appreciating that imaginative approaches to the visual arts are not optimised, they still offer children adult-generated and adult-guided activities. She argues that teachers and
practitioners who offer adult-directed processes, despite they knowing that these do not optimise creativity, do so out of a feeling of insecurity regarding the creative process. They are often under the misconception that artists are born not made and creative self-efficacy cannot be learned. This diffidence in addressing the creative process leads to them controlling the artistic activity and in turn, the results.

Klooper and Power (2010) in an Australian study, indicate a direct correlation between initial professional education and how it can affect student confidence in their own creative ability, which in turn impacts on poor quality delivery of art forms. Similar sentiments are expressed by Gravis (2011) in her study of influences shaping the coming generation of practitioners in Australia. She examines self-efficacy amongst initial professional educators and concludes that current practices in arts education courses within initial professional education need to be revised in order to provide practitioners with the necessary skills (Gravis, 2011). These sentiments are in keeping with those of French (2013) with reference to the Irish context. She stipulates that ‘in order to improve outcomes for children’s learning and development, educators need thorough grounding in the theoretical principles underpinning pedagogical and artistic practices and skills in interactions’ (French, 2013:41). Additionally, The Irish Arts Council (2013) presents findings from Early Arts UK research conducted in Ireland on the promotion of arts within ECEC, and notes one of the factors hindering advocacy of the arts is ‘poor early childhood professional training – token coverage of creative skills in both initial training and on-going professional development’ (The Arts Council, 2013:80). The positive impact arts integration during initial professional education has on a practitioner’s self-efficacy and curriculum implementation is also highlighted by Hipp and Sulentic-Dowell (2019). Interestingly, and particular to the Irish context, are findings from the Survey of Early Years Practitioners- a review of Education and Training programmes in the Early Years (2016) which found that 86% (of 226 respondents with a level 7 or level 8 qualification) indicated ‘very well’ or ‘well’ in terms of their ‘awareness of the role of the arts in supporting children’s education development, participation and expression’ (DES, 2016:60). The survey however, did not investigate if the awareness applied to theory, or practice, regarding visual arts implementation. Moreover, Nilson et al., (2013) who emphasise the need to provide access to additional training to teachers already working in the field state that they also need to be ‘supported with opportunities for
further professional development in the area of arts program delivery’ (Nilson et al., 2013: 12).

2.15 Conclusion

This chapter is an extensive review of the extant body of literature on the topic of creativity and the arts in early childhood education. It traces the theories of eminent educational philosophers, psychologists and educational reformers, from Rousseau (1712-1778), to Pestalozzi (1746-1827), Froebel (1782-1852) and Dewey (1826-1959), who all stress the importance of nurturing creativity in early childhood development. In that regard, many contemporary researchers and authors (Thompson, 2019; Christakis, 2017; Lindsay, 2017; Pecaski-McLennan, 2010) concur and advocate that the arts be placed at the very centre of the young child’s education and learning experience. Additionally, the literature review covers a variety of other related topics as they pertain to the current research; an overview of the many aspects of visual arts education, inquiry-based learning, an emergent curriculum, transdisciplinary approaches to education and the product versus process approach to curriculum implementation. It focusses on the Irish context and the significant developments over the past decade, namely the introduction of the National Curriculum Framework, Aistear (NCCA, 2009) and Quality Framework, Síolta (CECDE, 2006). These initiatives have contributed to a greater emphasis being placed on the integrated nature of children’s learning and development and the role practitioners and the environment play in facilitating children’s holistic education. Furthermore, the literature proposes that implementing an inquiry-based emergent curriculum using a transdisciplinary approach to the visual arts is considered to be good practice, albeit not without its challenges. The chapter also outlines the emphasis placed on creativity and the arts, during initial professional education, at the various third level training institutions, nationally. It draws on international studies which suggest that different arts experiences during initial professional education have an impact on practitioner confidence, visual self-efficacy and subsequent curriculum delivery. Finally, a series of recent initiatives, which include the Arts in Education Charter, Creative Ireland and the National Arts in Education Online Portal, are discussed and highlighted as progressive movements to better integrate the arts in the Irish educational sector.
Chapter Three

Field Study Methodology
3.1 Introduction

This chapter comprises the process of data collection, data interpretation and analysis, as well as a review of the concepts of Validity and Reliability. The main findings of this thesis are contained in a review of the literature. However, in order to gain further insights, limited non-random research was conducted as follows:

- Semi-structured in-depth interviews (n= 30) ECCE practitioners
- Semi-structured in-depth interviews (n=10) support personnel

3.2 Qualitative Research Methodology

Qualitative research methodology is an approach which gives researchers the opportunity ‘to explore, in an in-depth manner, matters that are unique to the experiences of the interviewees, allowing insights into how different phenomena of interest are experienced and perceived’ (McGrath et al., 2018). This type of research investigation is employed in the current study because it is premised on the assumption that multiple forms of reality exist (Klenke, 2016; Merriam and Tisdell, 2016; Merriam, 2009). It is deemed to be a particularly appropriate method to afford respondents the opportunity to discuss the ‘reality’ of visual arts curriculum implementation, as it applies to them individually. The qualitative approach provides insights into ‘lived experiences’ (Grbich, 2012: 3) being a method which yields ‘well-grounded, rich description and explanations’ (Miles et al., 2014:4). Furthermore, it is a proven effective method to compare and build theory (Bazeley and Jackson, 2013) and in the context of the current research serves to encourage ECCE practitioners to reflect on their initial professional education and in-service training and how this impacts everyday practice. Before embarking on the data collection, an understanding of the philosophy of research design is important because it applies to fundamental principles of knowledge, reality and ethics. (Thomas, 2004).
3.3 Philosophy of Research Design

Research design is a process which has been defined as a strategy, and a methodology pertaining to a specific inquiry on: what, where, when and how data will be obtained and methods used to analyse and interpret that data (Sutton and Austin, 2015). The choice of research design is contingent (mainly) upon the set research objectives. However, when opting for a particular design model, certain flexibility needs to be employed and Taber (2013) notes that while an outline and plan is essential, one needs to be cognisant of the fact that a situation may arise where modification of design and methodology may be necessary. This may well be as a result of unforeseen circumstances, not envisaged by the researcher, at the outset but which emerge during the course of the study. The most appropriate research method is selected by deciding what type of information is being sought by focusing on the research question, which in turn steers the research design (Creswell and Poth, 2017).

The philosophy of research design is important because it pertains to the fundamental principles of knowledge, reality and existence, to include ethics, metaphysics or ontology and epistemology (Thomas, 2004). According to Crotty (1998), the difference between Ontology and Epistemology is that Ontology describes ‘the study of being’ (ibid: 10) and is a ‘philosophy or belief system about the nature and constitution of social reality’ (Hesse-Biber 2006:6) whereas epistemology is that branch of reality which examines knowledge, its source and validity (Mukherji and Albon, 2015).

There are three identifiable sources of knowledge: experience, expert opinion and logic (Johnson and Christensen, 2012). More specifically, Experience is the way one first learns about the world when exploring it through the senses, as a baby. Expert Opinion is knowledge passed down by ‘experts’, elders, parents and other family members, educators and friends and is an important source of information about the world (Mukherji and Albon 2015). Finally, by using logic, or the process of thinking and reasoning, rationalists maintain that one can understand something without actually directly observing or experiencing the phenomenon (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2014).

Another term which merits explanation is the term ‘paradigm’. In common usage, a paradigm is a model, or an exemplar, a theoretical framework, a way of viewing the
world (Hughes 2010). It is concerned with assumptions, propositions and concepts, which direct thinking and research and which are logically related. Fraser et al., (2004) define a paradigm as ‘a set of beliefs about the way in which particular problems exist and a set of agreements on how such problems can be investigated’ (ibid: 59). Constructivism is one such paradigm, directly related to this research, where knowledge and reality is constructed by the individual in a subjective way (Badie, 2017; Creswell, 2014, Mertens, 2014). In constructivism, objective reality does not exist and the researcher who uses this approach sets out to expose a multitude of realities (Osbourne and Dillion, 2008). Mertens (2014) holds that constructivist researchers are opposed to the notion that there is an objective reality. The researcher and respondent interact in, e.g. an interview or dialogue so that information can be gathered. This information, however, is subject to interviewer bias as one’s own beliefs are brought to bear when interpreting data (Creswell and Poth 2017). Bell (2014) cautions the interviewer, ‘If you know you hold strong views about some aspect of the topic, you need to be particularly careful about the way questions are put’ (Bell, 2014:95). She gives the example of how easy it is to ‘lead’ in an interview and when an interviewer poses the same question of two people how the responses can be very different depending on the tone of voice of the interviewer or the emphasis placed on the question. Therefore, the interviewer should aim for complete objectivity and acknowledge and be forthcoming about assumptions and beliefs regarding the focus of the research in order to minimise interview bias, which would affect validity. Careful planning of research design, choice of instrument and approach to data collection is essential, from the outset.

3.4 Research Question and Research Objectives

The first step in the field work is to define the research question, in other words, what it is that the researcher wants to discover (Farber, 2006). The research question is directly related to the specific query, which is being addressed (Strauss and Corbin 2014). It emerges from the rationale of the proposed research, and is in essence, the immediate objective addressed in a research proposal. When the researcher addresses and answers the research question, it assists in achieving the purpose of the research (Liamputtong and Ezzy, 2005). It is proposed that the research question sets the
parameters of the research, and is a deciding factor in the choice of research methods to be used for collecting and analysing data (Strauss and Corbin, 2014).

With regard to research objectives, Liamputtong and Ezzy (2005) explain how they should state clearly what the proposed study, or research, is expected to achieve. If the researcher fails to do so, the study lacks focus (Hackley, 2003). In fact, the research objectives provide a guide as to the direction the research will take (ibid.). The specific research question and objectives of this thesis are as follows:

Research question:

What approaches do Early Childhood Care and Education practitioners use when designing and implementing a visual arts curriculum for children (aged two years and eight months to five years and six months) who avail of the ECCE scheme? (DCYA, 2019).

3.5 Scope of the Research

Successful interviews require careful conceptual and practical planning, whereby the scope of the research is considered (McGrath et al., 2018). The following is a description of this study population and justification for choice of participants, as well as the sample site or geographical location of the research.

The study population comprises two cohorts;

1. A selection of practitioners (n=30) who are employed to deliver the Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme (DCYA, 2019) in ECEC settings.
2. Support Personnel (n=10) comprising: mentors, trainers, researchers, authors, representatives of Better Start, Early Childhood Ireland, City and County Childcare Committees, and the Department of Child and Youth Affairs.

The researcher was cognisant of the various stakeholders in the sector who could have been chosen for inclusion in the field study, e.g. representatives from the following
groups; DES, Tusla, Creative Ireland, Arts Council, EYE Policy unit, parents, children, practitioners, initial professional education training programmes (lecturers and students), artists in residence, regulatory bodies, Junior and Senior Infant Primary School teachers and EYE Policy Unit. However, as the focus of the study was specifically related to approaches adopted by practitioners who deliver the ECCE Scheme (DCYA, 2019) the majority of the foregoing representatives of the various stakeholder groups were excluded, at the research design stage. The foregoing comprehensive list was whittled down to a selection of Stakeholders including 1. ECCE Practitioners and 2. ECCE Support Personnel;

1. Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) practitioners involved in the delivery of the ECCE Scheme (DCYA, 2019). The ECCE practitioner is key in curriculum implementation or delivery, as well as design (depending on flexibility within an individual setting). This cohort can provide valuable insights into the ‘real-politik’ as they are the educators who interact directly on a day to day basis with early learners in an ECEC centre. This cohort can offer justification for the chosen approach, as well as information on philosophical or environmental factors which promote, or mitigate, against inquiry-based learning. Moreover, the participants in this cohort deliver the ECCE Scheme (DCYA, 2019) and are obliged, as such, to use Aistear (NCCA, 2009).

2. Support Personnel included an author in creative arts, researcher in the arts in Early Childhood and Primary Education in Ireland as well as representatives from Early Childhood Ireland (ECI), Better Start and DCYA.

- Early Childhood Ireland (ECI) represents over 3500, ECEC centres/settings throughout Ireland and as a membership organisation, is actively involved in quality enhancement. The inclusion of Early Childhood Ireland representatives in the research provides a general overview by key-informants, which is an important perspective on approaches to the design and delivery of visual arts within the ECEC sector. This cohort can shed light on whether the Aistear (NCCA, 2009) inquiry-based emergent curriculum (IBEC) in the visual arts is being implemented, or not, and they may be privy to information on factors which mitigate against the delivery of an inquiry-based emergent curriculum.
The role of Better Start Early Years Specialists in Quality Development is a co-operative one, in partnership with Early Years Services. As a supportive group, they strive towards building ECEC services capacity, in order to provide an optimum educational experience for young children. Inclusion of this cohort in the research illuminates the extent to which the Aistear (NCCA, 2009) objectives are being met (Curriculum design versus Curriculum delivery) and provides further valuable insights into factors which may mitigate against the delivery of an IBEC. Moreover, the inclusion of a selection of representatives, who work in close partnership with ECEC settings in the four provinces, serves to provide a national overview to visual arts curriculum implementation.

Early Years Training Lead (Department of Childhood and Youth Affairs (DCYA) is in the unique position to highlight what is regarded as good practice according to the DCYA policy. ‘Childcare services taking part in the ECCE scheme (DCYA, 2019) must provide an appropriate pre-school educational programme which adheres to the principles of Síolta (CECDE, 2006), the national framework for early years care and education’ (DCYA, 2019:n.p.).

Authors and researchers in creativity and the arts for use in ECCE are central to providing insights into which approach(es) constitute good practice in the design and delivery of a visual arts curriculum in ECEC, within the Irish context. Additionally, this cohort can provide the rationale for the overarching philosophy of an inquiry-based emergent approach.

The following table illustrates respondent qualifications, level and type of training, and institution, employment position, and years of experience in the sector;
Table 3.1 A Profile of Research Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ECCE Practitioner Respondents</th>
<th>Qualification in ECEC</th>
<th>Initial Professional Education: Training Institution</th>
<th>Full Time (FT) or Part Time (PT)</th>
<th>Years working in Sector</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Curriculum</th>
<th>ECEC Setting Location</th>
<th>Date of Interview</th>
<th>Length of Interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ECCE 1</td>
<td>Level 8</td>
<td>Cork Institute of Technology</td>
<td>FT</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Owner/Manager</td>
<td>Play-based focus on outdoor learning</td>
<td>Cork</td>
<td>9/10/2017</td>
<td>60 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECCE 2</td>
<td>Level 8</td>
<td>University College Cork</td>
<td>FT</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Pre-school Room Leader</td>
<td>HighScope</td>
<td>Cork</td>
<td>12/10/2017</td>
<td>50 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECCE 3</td>
<td>Level 8</td>
<td>Cork Institute of Technology</td>
<td>FT</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Babyroom Leader</td>
<td>Play-based</td>
<td>Cork</td>
<td>17/10/2017</td>
<td>45 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECCE 4</td>
<td>Level 8</td>
<td>University of Limerick (MIC)</td>
<td>FT</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Montessori Teacher</td>
<td>Montessori</td>
<td>Cork</td>
<td>23/10/2017</td>
<td>60 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECCE 5</td>
<td>Level 8</td>
<td>Institute of Technology Tralee</td>
<td>FT</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Montessori Teacher</td>
<td>Montessori</td>
<td>Tralee</td>
<td>23/10/2017</td>
<td>60 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECCE 6</td>
<td>Level 8</td>
<td>National University of Ireland Galway</td>
<td>PT (back to education while working in sector)</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Manager and Lecturer on Degree Programme</td>
<td>Forest School</td>
<td>Cork</td>
<td>25/10/2017</td>
<td>1 hr 20 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECCE 7</td>
<td>Level 8</td>
<td>Institute of Technology Blanchardstown</td>
<td>FT</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Owner and Manager</td>
<td>Play-based</td>
<td>Dublin</td>
<td>3/11/2017</td>
<td>55 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECCE 8</td>
<td>Level 8</td>
<td>Waterford Institute of Technology</td>
<td>FT</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Pre-school Room Leader</td>
<td>HighScope</td>
<td>Waterford</td>
<td>7/11/2017</td>
<td>1 hr. 10 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECCE 9</td>
<td>Level 8</td>
<td>Crawford College of Art and Design / University College Cork</td>
<td>FT (back to education while working in the sector)</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Owner and Manager</td>
<td>Reggio Inspired/ STEAM</td>
<td>Cork</td>
<td>8/11/17</td>
<td>1 hr 5 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECCE 10</td>
<td>Level 8</td>
<td>National University of Ireland Galway</td>
<td>PT (back to education while working in the sector)</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Manager</td>
<td>HighScope</td>
<td>Mayo</td>
<td>8/11/2017</td>
<td>60 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECCE 11</td>
<td>Level 7</td>
<td>National University of Ireland Galway</td>
<td>PT (back to education while working in the sector)</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Manager</td>
<td>Play-based</td>
<td>Mayo</td>
<td>9/11/2017</td>
<td>48 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECCE 12</td>
<td>Level 8</td>
<td>National University of Ireland Galway</td>
<td>FT</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Pre-school Room Leader</td>
<td>HighScope</td>
<td>Galway</td>
<td>13/11/2017</td>
<td>50 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practitioner Respondents</td>
<td>Qualification in ECEC</td>
<td>Initial Professional Education: Training Institution</td>
<td>Full Time (FT) or Part Time (PT)</td>
<td>Years working in Sector</td>
<td>Role</td>
<td>Curriculum</td>
<td>ECEC Setting Location</td>
<td>Date of Interview</td>
<td>Length of Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>ECCE 13</td>
<td>Level 7</td>
<td>National University of Ireland Galway</td>
<td>FT</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Pre-school Room Leader</td>
<td>HighScope</td>
<td>Galway</td>
<td>15/11/2017</td>
<td>60 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECCE 14</td>
<td>Level 7</td>
<td>Institute of Technology Tralee /University of Limerick (joint degree)</td>
<td>PT</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Pre-school Room Leader</td>
<td>HighScope</td>
<td>Limerick</td>
<td>16/11/2017</td>
<td>58 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECCE 15</td>
<td>Level 8</td>
<td>Dublin College University</td>
<td>FT</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Pre-school Room Leader</td>
<td>Play-based</td>
<td>Dublin</td>
<td>25/11/2017</td>
<td>57 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECCE 16</td>
<td>Level 9</td>
<td>University College Cork</td>
<td>FT</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Manager</td>
<td>Play-based</td>
<td>Cork</td>
<td>27/11/2017</td>
<td>45 min</td>
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<tr>
<td>ECCE 17</td>
<td>Level 9</td>
<td>Maynooth University</td>
<td>PT (back to education while working in the sector)</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Manager</td>
<td>Play-based</td>
<td>Tipperary</td>
<td>23/11/2017</td>
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<tr>
<td>ECCE 18</td>
<td>Level 8</td>
<td>University Limerick (MIC)</td>
<td>FT</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Pre-school Room Leader</td>
<td>HighScope</td>
<td>Kerry</td>
<td>26/11/2017</td>
<td>47 min</td>
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<tr>
<td>ECCE 19</td>
<td>Level 8</td>
<td>Dublin Institute of Technology</td>
<td>FT</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Manager</td>
<td>Play-based</td>
<td>Dublin</td>
<td>29/11/2017</td>
<td>1hr 10 min</td>
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<tr>
<td>ECCE 20</td>
<td>Level 8</td>
<td>Institute of Technology Carlow</td>
<td>FT</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Pre-school Room Leader</td>
<td>Play-based</td>
<td>Wexford</td>
<td>4/12/2017</td>
<td>60 min</td>
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<tr>
<td>ECCE 21</td>
<td>Level 7</td>
<td>Waterford Institute of Technology</td>
<td>PT (back to education while working in the sector)</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Owner / Manager</td>
<td>Reggio Inspired</td>
<td>Waterford</td>
<td>5/12/2017</td>
<td>52 min</td>
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<td>ECCE 22</td>
<td>Level 8</td>
<td>Cork Institute of Technology</td>
<td>FT</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Baby- Room Leader</td>
<td>Play-based</td>
<td>Cork</td>
<td>6/12/2017</td>
<td>60 min</td>
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<tr>
<td>ECCE 23</td>
<td>Level 8</td>
<td>Dublin College University</td>
<td>FT</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Room Leader</td>
<td>Play-based</td>
<td>Cork</td>
<td>6/12/2017</td>
<td>1hr 8 min</td>
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<td>ECCE 24</td>
<td>Level 8</td>
<td>Maynooth University</td>
<td>FT</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Manager</td>
<td>Play-based</td>
<td>Dublin</td>
<td>7/12/2017</td>
<td>54 min</td>
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<td>Institute of Technology Sligo</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>Pre-school Room Leader</td>
<td>Montessori</td>
<td>Sligo</td>
<td>8/12/2017</td>
<td>49 min</td>
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<td>ECCE 26</td>
<td>Level 8</td>
<td>Dublin Institute of Technology</td>
<td>FT</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Manager</td>
<td>Play-based</td>
<td>Dublin</td>
<td>10/12/2017</td>
<td>1hr 15 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECCE Practitioner Respondents</td>
<td>Qualification in ECEC</td>
<td>Initial Professional Education: Training Institution</td>
<td>Full Time (FT) or Part Time (PT)</td>
<td>Years working in Sector</td>
<td>Role</td>
<td>ECEC Setting Location</td>
<td>Date of Interview</td>
<td>Length of Interview</td>
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<tr>
<td>ECCE 27</td>
<td>Level 8</td>
<td>Letterkenny Institute of Technology</td>
<td>FT</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Manager</td>
<td>HighScope</td>
<td>Donegal</td>
<td>11/12/2017</td>
<td>60 min</td>
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<tr>
<td>ECCE 28</td>
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<td>Athlone Institute of Technology</td>
<td>FT</td>
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<td>Pre-school Room Leader</td>
<td>Play-based</td>
<td>Westmeath</td>
<td>13/12/2017</td>
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<td>FT</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Pre-school Room Leader</td>
<td>Play-based</td>
<td>Dublin</td>
<td>14/12/2017</td>
<td>46 min</td>
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<td>Crawford College of Art and Design /Waterford Institute of Technology</td>
<td>FT/PT</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>In-house Artist in 3 ECEC settings</td>
<td>Reggio Inspired</td>
<td>Wexford</td>
<td>15/12/2017</td>
<td>60 min</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Support Personnel Respondent** | **Organisation** | **Qualification** | **Role** | **Date of Interview** | **Length of Interview**
--- | --- | --- | --- | --- | ---
SP 1 | Better Start- Better Early Years Specialists | Level 9 | Early Childhood Specialist working with services in Cork, Limerick Tipperary and Kerry | 9/11/2017 | 1hr 35 min
SP 2 | Better Start- Better Early Years Specialists | Level 9 | Early Childhood Specialists working with services in North County Dublin and Dublin city | 16/11/2017 | 1hr 15 min
SP 3 | Better Start- Better Early Years Specialists | Level 9 | Early Childhood Specialists formerly working with services in south county Dublin and Dublin city, currently working with services in Donegal, Leitrim and Sligo | 22/11/2017 | 1hr 45 min
SP 4 | Better Start Better Early Years Specialists - | Level 9 | Early Childhood Specialists working with services in Dublin, Kilkenny, Wicklow, Westmeath, Carlow, Laois and Kildare | 24/11/2017 | 55 min
SP 5 | Better Start- Better Early Years Specialists | Level 9 | Early Childhood Specialist working with services in Co. Galway and Mayo | 28/11/2017 | 1hr 10 min
SP 6 | Department of Children and Youth Affairs | Level 9 | Early Years Training Lead | 30/11/2017 | 1hr 40 min
SP 7 | Early Childhood Ireland | Level 10 | Head of Training | 6/11/2017 | 1hr 20 min
SP 8 | Early Childhood Ireland | Level 9 | Mentor for *Aistear in Action*\(^5\) | 13/11/2017 | 1hr 40 min
SP 9 | Author in Creativity | Level 9 | Author | 17/11/2017 | 50 min
SP 10 | Author and Researcher | Level 10 | Author and Researcher in the Arts in Early Childhood and Primary Education in Ireland | 4/12/2017 | 1hr 10 min

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\(^5\) *Aistear in Action* was an initiative involving 24 pre-school practitioners across seven settings in South Tipperary and North Cork. It began in November 2011 and ended in June 2013’ (Daly *et al*., 2014:169). It is a support programme which enables early childhood practitioners (in the company of peers and a mentor) to: ‘Explore, develop and demonstrate children's learning using the *Aistear* framework, reflect on their current practice, identify improvements and make changes, compile documentation that clearly shows the curriculum in action’ (ECI, 2014:n.p.).
The geographical scope of the research was nationwide, encompassing a variety of ECCE settings where the practitioner cohort is employed, as well as various locations to interview support personnel.

However, before embarking on collecting primary data, and in order to address the research question and objectives, secondary data was sourced through a literature review.

### 3.6 Data Collection

#### 3.6.1 Secondary Data: The Literature Review

The literature review is the main focus of the data collection, as it provides a critical analysis of existing literature on the research topic (Opie and Brown, 2019). In this regard, Mc Neill and Chapman (2005) point out that it provides an overview and assists in forming ideas regarding key issues and they strongly advise researchers to review what others have written on the topic for research, before primary data collection. Secondary data for this study was compiled by an extensive review of; academic journals and articles, texts books and internet-based sources as well as relevant educational documents and publications by the Department of Child and Youth Affairs (DCYA), Department of Education and Skills (DES) and the National Council of Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and in addition, various college websites.

Kumar (2019) points out how a literature review is a conceptual framework, a plan of the direction the study should take after close scrutiny of key sources. A plan according to Benson (2016) ‘results from understanding the research problem, identifying the knowledge gap, and then developing an explanatory or theoretical framework for interpreting the research findings’ (Benson et al., 2016:339). The literature provides justification of the research focus, design and methodology (Hart, 2001) and the literature review, not only aids in formulating new perspectives on key topics, but can also assist researches in avoiding past errors. McNeill and Chapman (2005) elaborate on this point, claiming that researchers should be cognisant of what content to include within the literature review and should consider what is already known about the area
under investigation. Moreover, attention should be given to the placement of the current study in relation to other research (Stangor, 2015). It is also worth noting that there may be a paucity of literature on a given research topic, especially, on topics which are novel and new (Hackley 2003). Subsequent to the literature review, Primary Data is collected through in-depth interviews.

3.6.2 Field Work Data

Primary data is collected first hand by the researcher and is that which pertains specifically to the research questions posed (Burns et al., 2016). The raw data which is collected is summarised, interpreted and analysed and by relating it to the research questions and objectives, assists in solving the problem which has been identified (Berkeley Thoman, 2004). From the very outset, once the research questions are framed, it is essential to give considerable thought to how data is to be obtained, by what means and from what sources. There are many data collection instruments at the researcher’s disposal e.g. questionnaire, interviews and observation methods (Opie and Brown 2019). However, the in-depth, semi-structured interview, was considered to be the most appropriate data collection instrument, for this research, with the following justification. Where a deep understanding of a research problem is required, in-depth interviewing is most appropriate (Patton 2015). This research, on approaches to visual arts in Early Childhood Education and Care, is qualitative in nature. The aim of the empirical research is to explore respondent perceptions and insights concerning approaches to the visual arts in Early Childhood Education and Care, from which conclusions could be drawn regarding potential contextual links between the concepts.

3.7 The In-depth Interview as a Process

Interview data can be the key source of information for qualitative researchers and may be used in isolation, or in conjunction with other research methods (Miller, 2019; Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2006; Carson, 2001). Furthermore, the in-depth interview provides the researcher with insights into the respondent’s position and behaviour because of its open-ended nature, facilitating freedom of opinion (Elg and Ghauri, 2019) and is typically one to two hours in length, but may be much shorter (Hesse-
Biber and Leavy, 2006). Regardless of length, a good interview is similar to a conversation, meaning it should be a two-way process, and afford the interviewees the opportunity to share their lived experience. Ideally, however, the person who does most of the talking during an interview is the interviewee, while the interviewer listens. Active, careful listening enables the interviewer to ask the right questions, exposing what the interviewee really thinks, and allowing interviewees to fully express and develop their opinions on, and responses to questions asked, yielding deeper and more meaningful data (Cuff et al., 2016). Indeed, the very purpose of an interview is to gain interviewee perspectives on various matters and to discover their feelings, memories, and interpretations on issues that cannot be discovered or observed by other means (Seidman, 2013). Researchers are cautioned to be mindful of the fact that while the contributions of the researcher to the interview process can enhance data collection, care should be taken to avoid imposing the researcher’s personal point of view on the interview (McNeill and Chapman, 2005; Carson et al., 2001).

Interviews can be structured or unstructured. Structured interviews are quite formal, and involve moving through a standardised set of questions. Such interviews also tend to be composed of closed questions, and are usually used to gather quantitative data (Hammarberg et al., 2016), whereas, in unstructured interviews questions are not standardised. Although the researcher has topics to cover, unstructured interviews, also referred to as in-depth interviews, allow researchers the liberty of following the interviewee if the researcher thinks that by doing so, interesting information is revealed. Such interviews can result in the acquisition of more in-depth, revealing, and rich information (Burns and Bush, 2006; Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2006; McNeill and Chapman, 2005).

### 3.7.1 Interview Guide

It is useful for researchers to establish an interview guide which sets out to address the major themes of interest. An interview guide ensures the objectives of the study are addressed and sufficient data amassed on each area, to allow for valid conclusions to be drawn. The interview guide is developed in light of the aims and framework of the study and generated by the literature review. In alignment with a phenomenological
approach, flexibility is maintained during questioning to capitalise on the situation and facilitate probing points of interest to participant responses (Legard and Ritchie, 1999).

For the purpose of this research, two separate interview schedules were prepared for both cohorts in advance, using open-ended and probing questions to ensure consistency of approach across the 40 interviews (See Appendix 7 and 8). This interview schedule set out to ensure all areas relevant to the study were addressed, with a certain degree of uniformity. McGrath et al., (2018:1006) state that ‘a structured interview guide usually includes predetermined questions posed in the same way to all interviewees with the purpose of eliciting responses to the exact same phrasing’. In concurrence, Patton (2015) holds that the interview schedule aids the researcher in obtaining the basic information from each respondent because the interviewer adopts a systematic approach to predetermined questions. Seidman (2013) however, cautions against the interview guide being used to steer interviewee responses, based on the interests of the researcher. The structure of the interview guide for this research ensured all areas pertinent to the study were incorporated and, included topics identified during the initial review of the literature (secondary data).

A major advantage of the interview is that it is adaptable. The researcher can follow-up ideas and ask further probing questions as the interview evolves, an approach which is not possible when data is collected by questionnaire, because of its closed nature. Bell (2014) points out how a skilful interviewer can recognise that: body language, facial expression, hesitation in response, a change in tone of voice or language register can often be informative in itself and can provide information that would not be apparent in a written response, i.e. the questionnaire. The interview is not without its drawbacks. It is time consuming, and as one is dependent on the goodwill of the interviewee to give of their time in the first instance. Because research is also only an aspect of the researcher's life and work, only a limited number of respondents can be interviewed for any given project. It is, therefore, important to choose the participants wisely and to focus on good time-management and adequate preparation of a suitable interview schedule (Bolderston, 2012). Furthermore, the researcher should go through the appropriate channels to gain access to an institution and personnel.
3.8 Gaining Access to an Institution and Participants

In any research project, it is important to gain proper access to the sample site in order to adhere to appropriate ethical norms and out of courtesy to the personnel involved. Furthermore, it helps to avoid confusion, disappointment and is in the interest of good time management. Bell (2014) puts the case succinctly in the following quotation;

'Researcher can demand access to an institution, an organisation or materials. People are doing you a favour if they agree to help and they will need to know exactly what they will be asked to do, how much time they will be expected to give and what use will be made of the information they provide' (ibid. 2010:52).

Furthermore, Blaxter et al., (2010) explain that personnel involved in the research need to be convinced of the researcher's integrity and the worth of the research, before committing themselves. Permission should be sought very early on or when the focus of the study is decided upon and the project outlined (ibid.). A formal written approach to the individuals and organisations should be adopted, stipulating the researcher’s plan and intentions. It is important to be honest and forthcoming as to the worth of the research and not to make inflated claims about the study and possible outcomes (Bell, 2014). In this way, one enlists the goodwill of the participants, enabling the research to get off to a good start in a timely and organised manner. Access was gained to institutions and respondents by email and phone calls, keeping in mind that research should not impinge on the day to day running of an institution (ibid.). Consideration was also given to the interview venue in order to optimise data collection. Heed was paid to McGrath et al., (2018:1005) advice which asserted ‘we recommend interviews be conducted at a time and place of the respondent’s convenience, in a comfortable setting free from any potential disruptions and noise’. Interviews were conducted in a centre room devoid of interruption. A high standard of ethical behaviour is necessary throughout the duration of the research, from access to publication. There are certain ethical considerations which need to be taken into account.
3.9 Ethical Considerations

There is an ethical imperative on the part of the researcher to maintain strict ethical standards at all times (Bell, 2014). As well as formally requesting permission and access to institutions and personnel, the researcher assures anonymity and confidentiality. These terms need to be abundantly clear in advance of the study. If, for example, one assures anonymity, by stating that a respondent will not be named but the interview is conducted with ‘the manager’ and there is only ‘one manager’ then the term ‘anonymity’ is a misnomer, as the respondent can be identified by all in sundry (Bryman, 2016). It is also ethical to inform the respondents and institutions what will be done with the data collected, and who will be privy to the findings. Furthermore, where possible and appropriate, the researcher should provide the institution with a copy of the final report, in the hope that it will be of benefit to those, who out of goodwill gave of their time to participate in the study, in the first instance. The participants of this study were informed that a copy of the transcripts would be available to them should they choose to view them prior to analysis and write up. Additionally, on completing of the study, the final thesis would be accessible to the various participants should they desire to view it. As a gesture of gratitude all participants were offered to attend annual visual arts workshops held in CIT by the researchers 4th year ECEC students (See Appendix 4) should they be interested.

Finally, while not an ethical imperative, the researcher should observe a sense of decorum at all times and adhere to the basic courtesy of officially thanking the participants and institutions involved. If attention is paid to these and other possible ethical considerations which may arise unexpectedly throughout the study, then confusion and misunderstanding can be avoided, leading to good will and the smooth running of the research. The current researcher adhered to the European General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) which came into force in May 2018. The GDPR (2018) aspires to provide a high level of protection to an individual’s personal data. The emphasis on ‘minimisation both in terms of the volume of data stored on individuals and how long it’s retained….. Article 5 (e) of the GDPR states personal data shall be kept for no longer than is necessary for the purpose for which it is being processed’ (GPPR, 2018). The participants of this study were informed that the interview
recordings and transcripts would be kept within a secure office at Cork Institute of Technology and be destroyed within six months of this study being completed.

Cork Institute of Technology’s (CIT) code of ethics outlines the key principle standards of good practice and highlights the importance of adhering to them when engaging in research activity. The key principles as detailed in the following table are; honesty, integrity, co-operation and accountability, a pursuit of excellence, appropriate training and adherence to health and safety. This research was conducted applying these ethical principles.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cork Institute of Technology key principles to guide good research practice</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Excellence</strong></td>
<td>Researchers should strive to perform research of the highest quality.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Honesty</strong></td>
<td>CIT will endeavour to foster a culture of honesty across the institute. Researchers within CIT, or their collaborators, should be honest in the way they conduct all aspects of their research.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Integrity</strong></td>
<td>Researchers should comply with all legal and ethical requirements pertinent to their work and declare any conflicts of interest and the means to resolve them. Researchers must abide with the National Policy Statement on Ensuring Research Integrity in Ireland.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Co-operation</strong></td>
<td>Researchers should support the open exchange of information and debate/discuss same in a constructive manner subject to any reasonable constraints of confidentiality.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Accountability</strong></td>
<td>Researchers should expect to be accountable to their colleagues, the Institute, the funding organisation, their collaborators and the general public and should not invoke confidentiality to suppress reasonable dissemination and debate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Training and skills</strong></td>
<td>CIT will endeavour to ensure there is appropriate training and career development opportunities for its researchers and collaborators, where appropriate, and provide timely advice in this regard. Researchers should ensure they are appropriately trained and educated in the requisite skills necessary for them to be effective researchers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Health and Safety</strong></td>
<td>CIT and its researchers and collaborators should make best efforts to ensure that all health and safety risks are identified and, wherever possible, mitigated, with the support of expert advice if needed. They should report and address any concerns and continue the research only if the risks have been satisfactorily addressed.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: Cork Institute of Technology (2019))
3.9.1 Insider-Researcher

An additional ethical consideration for the current study is the researcher’s position as insider-researcher. Unluer (2012) stresses that it is fundamental for social researchers engaging in studies using qualitative methodology, to clarify their position and role during the inquiry process. Evidently, therefore, it is imperative to reiterate that the researcher conducting the current study works in the capacity of lecturer, in initial professional education in visual arts for early childhood education and care within one of the main national Institutes of Technology (See Appendix 1). Namely, that she is ‘someone whose biography gives her a lived familiarity with the group being researched - that tacit knowledge informs her research producing a different knowledge than that available to the outsider’ (Griffith, 1998: 361). As an inside-researcher she reflected on her position throughout the research cycle, from the definition of aim, choice of methodology, production of data and dissemination plans. There are significant advantages to any study, which is led by an insider-researcher (Coghlan and Shani, 2014). The researcher was familiar with the phenomenon under investigation and this facilitated an open dialogue and mutual understanding between researcher, ECCE practitioners and support personnel. This, in turn, enhanced greater interpretation of the research focus (Rooney, 2005; Bonner and Tolhurst, 2002).

Additionally, Smyth and Holian (2008) identify how the insider–researcher often has an extensive knowledge base and insight into the sector, which an outsider may take significantly longer to acquire. This applied specifically to the researcher in the current study as she already had a professional relationship and rapport with key stakeholders (having met at national and international conferences). This facilitated access to a number of participants during the recruitment of support personnel. Importantly, however, although the advantages to inside-researchers is noted, DeLyser (2001) stress that there are also issues associated with greater familiarity, as this can lead to a loss of objectivity. Moreover, wrong assumptions about the research process can be made, due to researcher bias based on prior knowledge, in other words, the researcher’s previous underpinning knowledge and previously held assumptions of the area of research (Teusner, 2016). The importance of an awareness of insider-researcher bias was a constant throughout the current research on visual arts curriculum delivery in
ECCE, the researcher being a lecturer in initial professional education in that area. In order to mitigate the potential for bias, specific strategies were employed. For example, any hypothesis or conclusions made were based on empirical research and participant-generated data (primary research). The researcher also sought to keep an open mind to new solutions and perspectives on approaches to visual arts curriculum implementation in ECCE. Moreover, the researcher remained cognisant of this throughout the inquiry process and heeded advice given by Unler (2012) who notes that ‘whether the researcher is an outsider or insider, there are various issues one should pay attention to for valid data. Ethical considerations must be taken into account, with the benefits outweighing the displacement of subjects, setting and researcher’ (ibid. 10).

Importantly, many viewpoints, theories and perspectives within the literature on visual arts within ECCE were identified, discussed and presented in this study. This facilitated a balanced discussion on creativity and visual arts experiences in ECCE. These considerations informed and guided the formulation of theories and conclusions surrounding the study area. During the data collection stage, clarification was sought from respondents as advised (Unluer, 2012) to ensure that researcher analysis of the data was based on participant responses. Furthermore, it is important to provide maximum information to participants on what the research entails and to go through the formalities of signing consent forms (Chesnay, 2014).

3.9.2 Information Sheet and Consent Form

Participants were provided with an information sheet and invitation to participate in the study (Appendix 5). This serves to explain the research aims in clear, non-technical language. The information sheet states expectations, any attendant risks, as well as the voluntary nature of the research process. It is clearly specified how confidentiality would be maintained, and as Walliman (2011) advises, contact details for further information or support is provided, at the outset. Seeking consent is an ethical imperative (Farrimond, 2013). Furthermore, informed consent allows for potential participants to gain a genuine understanding of the intended study, what it means to them, as well as outlining key features of the research (Bryman, 2016). Moreover, consent involves full disclosure of information; a thorough account of the study,
potential benefits and possible implications of the research as well as outlining the voluntary nature of participation (Mertens and Ginsberg, 2009). Practitioners and support personnel are required to sign the consent form (Appendix 6), attached to the Information Sheet. In so doing, they agree that they understand the research goals and what is required of them. Signed copies are retained by the researcher and stored in a locked cabinet in a secure private office. Thereafter, a pilot study is conducted.

3.10 Pilot Study

A pilot study is a crucial element of a good study design. The objective of piloting is ‘to test the research approach [and] identify potential problems that may affect the quality and validity of results’ (Blessing and Chakrabarti, 2009:114). The fundamental purpose of conducting a pilot study is to examine if the intended approach is feasible for a larger study (ibid.). In essence, a pilot study is a mini-version of the research, to test the methodology and to establish if methods work before embarking on the main study (Benson et al., 2016). By conducting a pilot study, possible problematic questions can be identified (Merriam, 2014) and more specifically, Cunningham et al., (2013) point to the fact that a pilot study assists the researcher in making modifications or alterations to the proposed methodology, when warranted. For this research on inquiry-based learning in the visual arts for children availing of the ECCE scheme (DCYA, 2019), (which does not include children under the age of two nor over the age of six) a pilot study was carried out by conducting four in-depth interviews with four ECCE practitioners with Level 7 and Level 8 qualifications working in ECEC settings within Cork city. An additional pilot study was carried out with two support personnel working in a mentoring capacity in ECEC settings in Cork County. The pilot studies are undertaken to ensure that the in-depth interview schedules are a valid and reliable instrument for data collection and piloting the research also assists in ensuing that any questions that warrant extensive explanation in both pilot interviews are flagged and altered immediately after the interview is concluded. Subsequent to the pilot study, a sampling frame of likely individuals to partake in the research is devised.
3.11 The Research Sample

It is important to choose the research sample carefully, as Thomas (2004) describes how in qualitative research consideration must be given to ‘knowing’ what or whom to study. The researcher needs to be realistic, as the amount of primary source data which can be collected is limited and any researcher should be satisfied with a sample (Hackley, 2003). It is, therefore, important to purposively select cases, sampling units, or units of analysis, for examination which will provide valuable insights into the area of research (Liamputtong and Ezzy, 2005). When sampling is used in a qualitative study the aim is to allow for the process, rather than the distribution, involved in the phenomenon, to be described. Findings are not generalised to an entire population, as is the concern of sampling in quantitative studies. Sampling, per se, refers to the members of the population from whom to obtain data (ibid.).

The two main modes of sampling are probability and non-probability sampling (Berkeley Thomas 2004). Probability sampling allows the researcher to use random selection procedures ensuring that different entities within the selected population have equal probability of being chosen. Non-probability sampling, on the other hand, is not based on random selection, rather is it based on the subjective judgement of the researcher (Quinlan et al., 2019). Regardless of which approach is used for primary data collection, consideration ought to be given to the quality of contributions and insights which the study will generate. Hackley (2003) advises special attention be paid to sample size, representation of participants, and the practicalities involved i.e. time and participant availability. Stangor (2015) emphasises the need for appropriate sample representation, rather than random selection, as this helps alleviate concerns surrounding the researcher making inferences or generalisations about the population sample. The recruitment of (n=30) ECCE practitioners was a two- stage sample. Firstly, through purposive random sample, using the Tusla register list settings within a particular county were identified but it did not identify individual’s qualifications. As the aim was to try to secure participants from at least every Higher Educational Institution (HEI) offering initial professional education in ECEC, inclusion criteria were identified.
Using inclusion criteria (bulleted below) practitioners were deemed suitable to participate if they were:

- involved in the delivery of ECCE scheme and working in Tusla registered centres.
- qualified to at least level 7 or 8 awarded every university or IoT in Ireland.

This proved to be an arduous task and in order to identify practitioners with qualifications from every HEI, snowballing was use as the second stage of the sampling. Access to further participants was achievable due to the researcher having a professional relationship and rapport with a number of stakeholders having previously met at national and international conferences and they were able to refer others who complied with the inclusion criteria. The researcher also contacted the Association of Childhood Professionals who disseminated an invitation for participation online and this further identified potential participants. Some were included and excluded depending on the whether the criteria (stated above) was met or not.

However, a limitation of snowballing is that it is open to the possibility of bias in data collection procedure as respondents may only refer others who share similar views (Croucher and Cronn-Mills, 2019; Liamputtong, 2010). This was minimised by the provision of clear instructions to participants regarding eligibility for participation in the research. Furthermore, the researcher addressed the question of bias by adhering to the CIT code of Ethics (Table 3.2). Finally, in choosing representatives from this cohort, the literature review had assisted in identifying the key stakeholders; mentors, trainers, researchers, authors and representatives from various Early Childhood organisations (n=10) support personnel. This second cohort was a purposive sample.

Finally, rapport between the interviewer and respondent has a direct bearing on the quality of ‘insights’ gleaned in the research (Miller, 2019). Furthermore, the original sample may have to be extended to include individuals who possess knowledge, information and insights relevant to the research but who were not in the original sample frame (Hackley, 2003). For the purpose of this study non-probability sampling was chosen whereby the researcher sought to include a number of different ECEC settings across the country. These settings reflect a variety of educational philosophies.
from the HighScope, Montessori and Steiner methods, to Reggio Emilia (inspired) educational environments and play-based curriculum.

3.12 Coding and Analysis of Qualitative Research Findings

Most quality researchers use some method of content analysis which involves coding language (words and phrases) (Gibbs, 2013). While no particular method takes precedence over another as being correct, coding is a very useful means of placing data in theoretically defined categories for ease of analysis (Auerbach and Silverstein, 2003). The research objectives generally determine the categories and are, more or less, decided upon prior to data analysis (Carson et al., 2001) and the codes serve the purpose of arranging data into patterns (Sbaraini et al., 2011; Saldana, 2009). There are two stages involved in content analysis, giving words or phrases particular codes and drawing comparisons or highlighting contrasting features in coded data. Neuman (2006) refers to the first step as open and axial coding, at which point data is analysed and the text assigned particular codes. Occasionally, it may be necessary to devise further, new codes during the process, while the main emphasis should still be on the original codes (Carson et al., 2001). This method of devising further coding was adopted in the current research due to unanticipated developments when the research was underway for example further questions were asked of support personnel regarding access, availability and to Continuing Professional Development for ECCE practitioners.

Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2006) interpret the first stage of coding differently and look on it as a stage when data is explored. It is a period when the researcher peruses and reflects upon the data collected and is in essence Grounded Theory. At this juncture, there is a sifting of information, whereby important data is given prominence by highlighting or marking it and emerging patterns or snapshots become evident. Although Neuman (2006) and Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2006) provide differing perspectives or interpretations of the first stage of coding, they are in agreement as to the importance of actually coding data. Stage two of the process is selective coding, the interpretation stage. The initial coding has been decided upon and assigned to the data and the researcher now needs to compare and contrast content.
material. Generalisations of responses are made and similarities and differences are noted (Carson et al., 2001). Data which has been coded (stage 1 Open and Axial Coding) and interpreted (stage 2 Selective coding) may be analysed using Grounded Theory, as was employed in this current research.

Open Coding

The in-depth interviews were analysed ‘line by line’ (Strauss, 1987: 28) to inductively generate concepts on approaches to visual arts curriculum implementation in ECCE from the interview transcripts (Charmaz, 2014). Open coding was utilised to generate ‘a list of codes and categories attached to’ (Flick, 2018:310) practitioners and support personnel descriptions of visual arts experiences in ECCE.

Axial Coding

Axial coding comprises the clarification, illustration and revision of the initial codes over an extended period (Strauss, 1987). After refinement, the initial codes were re-defined as categories (ibid.). Gibbs (2010) recommends that researchers can look for ‘intervening conditions’ during axial coding. These conditions relate to constructive and destructive stimuli (Strauss and Corbin, 2014) which may affect ECCE practitioner approaches to the visual arts curriculum implementation. As a result, the following questions relating to the influences on practitioner experience of visual arts were an important part of the analysis process:

1. What initial professional education do practitioners receive in order to develop and deliver an inquiry-based emergent visual arts curriculum in ECCE?
2. What perspectives towards the visual arts do practitioners demonstrate and how does this in turn determine chosen approaches to the design and delivery of visual art experiences in ECCE?

Axial coding was repeated numerous times before core categories were identified (Glasser, 1992). It was at this stage, that selective coding began (Strauss, 1987).
Selective coding

Following the open and axial coding process, the concept of training and its impact on future practice emerged from the analysis of the data. Selective coding enabled the researcher to focus on three core categories and associate ‘other categories to it’ (Mertens, 2005: 424) to assess and refine categories and their relationships to one another (Table 3.3).

### Table 3.3 Selective Coding

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Open Coding</th>
<th>Axial Coding</th>
<th>Selective Coding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Access and availability -visual arts modules during initial professional education and in service training. Subject specific knowledge base- visuals arts and pedagogy. Familiarity and understanding of curriculum and quality frameworks: Aistear (NCCA, 2009) and Siolta (CECDE, 2006), Inquiry-based learning, Child development, holistic learning and the visual arts.</td>
<td>Theory versus practice</td>
<td>Policy and Training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structure of visual arts experiences at initial professional education and in-service training (theory and practice). Expertise of those delivering undergraduate and continuing professional development training. Artists in residency and ECCE practitioner partnerships. Past visual arts experiences/schooling. Visual arts self-efficacy. Attitude towards role of the arts in child development. Role of the adult, environment and display. Image of the child. School readiness. Knowledge, Attitude and Skills towards/of IBL using a TDA to the visual arts</td>
<td>Process (i.e. Inquiry-based and child-led) or Product (adult directed) approach</td>
<td>Approaches to visual arts curriculum implementation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inspectorate- Tusla, DES. Parental expectations, culture and ethos of ECEC setting. Conflicting/similar ideology and training experiences amongst staff. Management and leadership (strong or lack of). Status of and value placed on the arts. The learning environment and display. Space, time and resources.</td>
<td>Confusion surrounding expectations of regulatory bodies Knowledge, Attitude and Skills of and towards IBL using a TDA to the visual arts</td>
<td>Challenges to effective visual arts curriculum implementation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: Egan, 2019)
3.13 Grounded Theory

Grounded Theory was considered to be a particularly appropriate model for this research because it is ‘grounded in the everyday experiences of the social processes between individuals’ (Carson et al., 2001:150). First described by Glaser and Strauss (1967, 1965) it is a very useful research method when the aim of the research is ‘to generate a novel theory because it emerges from data gathered and analysed’ (Howard-Payne 2016: 50).

Theories are founded on data collected rather than by testing hypotheses which have been framed in advance (Carson et al., 2001). In that way, theory development is generated and grounded in data gathered from respondents who have experience of the area of research (Creswell, 2014). Qualitative Research is the approach used in Grounded Theory, allowing the researcher to generate a general theory of a process, action or interaction shaped by the opinions of a group of participants (Strauss and Corbin, 2014). It is a particularly attractive approach in sociology, psychology anthropology and education and can provide new useful insights into already accepted theories.

Emergent Research Design, based on ‘theoretical sampling’ is one of the basic principles of Grounded Theory (Taber 2013). In ‘Theoretical Sampling’ there is a step by step approach, whereby data which has been collected is analysed and influences the course of action in the next stage of data gathering. An iterative approach is adopted in the form of regular comparison until there is a theoretical saturation point reached, when continued data collection is seen to add little of substance to the theory being developed (ibid.).

Grounded Theory is a particularly good research design to employ in the absence of an existing theory which explains a process (Creswell, 2014). While theories may exist, in general, they may not deal with the specific area of interest or focus of an individual research. While Grounded Theory is considered worthwhile in such instances, the approach is not without its drawbacks as it demands that the researcher set aside (in so far as is possible) preconceived ideas concerning the topic, in order to allow the analytic, substantive theory to emerge. As the researcher has already undertaken a
literature search, the challenge is to be vigilant, open minded and not have set ideas during or as a result of the literature review process. In addition, researchers utilising Grounded Theory may be challenged when it comes to deciding when categories are saturated, or when the theory is sufficiently detailed.

The current research, however, while rooted in a Grounded Theory approach, and while engaging many elements associated with Grounded Theory, is not a purely grounded theory study. The Grounded Theory elements of coding, comparison, cataloguing, and linking, as outlined in the aforementioned seven stages, were all adopted but some other elements of Grounded Theory were not. One such element, ‘Memoing’, which refers to the researcher writing down ideas about the evolving theory throughout the coding process (Creswell 2014) was not used consistently but only as an aide memoire as data was being interpreted. This study was not founded on proving, or disproving, a hypothesis or hypotheses, rather was data gathered for the purpose of creating new knowledge and developing a theory. Consequently, this study adheres to a Grounded Theory approach. Whatever research method is adopted, the concepts of Validity, Reliability and Transparency need to be addressed.

3.14 Research Validity and Reliability

Validity, Reliability and Representativeness are scientific research terms or criteria by which research can be evaluated. Hitchcock and Hughes (2002) point out that one should be cognisant of the fact that these terms apply in equal measure to methodology, data collection and analysis. Furthermore, there is a divergence of opinion among researchers as to the precise meaning of the terms. Hammersley (1992) explains that the terms were established in regard to measurement in Science and that qualitative research is not concerned with measurement per se but with interpretation and meaning. Despite the divergent views among theorists, it is vital to examine research carefully to ascertain if the evidence is convincing or not and whether claims made are justified, based on that evidence. Validity is concerned with instruments, findings and discussion, and in essence, pertains to the truth or extent to which the data collected by the researcher is a true and accurate picture of what it maintains is being described (Kumar, 2019). There are several types of validity; descriptive validity pertains to an accurate and authentic description of events which leads to explanatory validity or the justification of explanations given, in light of the evidence presented. Are the
explanations internally consistent and logical, given the materials available? Are there any alternative explanations or rival factors which should have been considered? Instrument/technique validity is fitness for purpose of data collection techniques and instruments and their appropriateness to the type of information being sought and to the research objectives (Hitchcock and Hughes, 2002). Another type of validity is criterion validity, or a consideration of the findings of a study, in light of another valid explanation of the same matter (Berkeley Thomas, 2004). All types of validity are concerned with accuracy and quality of data collection, recorded findings and explanations, claims and theories based on the research (Hackley, 2003).

Reliability, on the other hand is concerned with the extent to which a particular method of data collection can be replicated. In other words, to what extent would a different researcher who repeated this research using the same technique arrive at the same conclusions or results. Simply put, reliability concerns the extent to which a particular technique will yield the same or similar results however, whenever and whoever conducts the research.

Transparency in relation to the analysis and interpretation of findings is of considerable importance in qualitative research studies. Clear explanations regarding why an interpretation is decided upon, are essential (Hackley, 2003, Carson et al., 2001). Transparency can be strengthened by linking interpretations to established theory wherever possible (Carson et al., 2001) and copies of transcripts, documentation, and recorded notes should be available for examination.

All of these aspects were adhered to in the current research. Validity and reliability were increased by piloting the instrument before undertaking the study. Dikko (2016) claims that the pilot test can show the construct to be both valid and reliable, giving the opportunity to insert refinements to the research tool. Subsequent to piloting, some ambiguous questions and statements were rephrased, while others were made redundant. Recording the interviews also increased validity by facilitating playback for analysis. Triangulation was brought about by the inclusion of the support personnel cohort, to garner varying expert perspectives on approaches to visual arts curriculum implementation, in their capacity as mentors, authors and researchers.
3.15 Strengths and Limitations

3.15.1 Strengths

A strength of this research is the willingness of practitioners and support personnel to share their expert knowledge, skill and experience of working with young children as pertaining to the ECCE Scheme (DCYA, 2019). This study also identifies the many challenges currently facing practitioners: paucity of visual arts training at initial professional education level, unavailability of continuous professional development (CPD) training opportunities specific to the visual arts, lack of visual arts experience among practitioners, lack of pedagogic training amongst artists in residence, low visual self-efficacy among practitioners, confusion regarding regulatory bodies, and concern surrounding parental expectations. A particular strength of the research is the resulting provision of solutions to address each of the foregoing challenges.

In order to meet the aforementioned challenges, a visual arts model for ECEC initial professional training, and a proposed professional profile for trainers have been devised. In addition, a visual arts CPD model for a special purpose award, has been developed by this researcher. These initiatives could be viewed as a particular strength of the research, should the relevant personnel, in early years education adopt them for use. Presently, within the ECEC field there are no such models in place. If implemented, these initiatives will ensure that current and future ECEC practitioners will be appropriately trained in good practice, based on primary and secondary data. Furthermore, practitioners already employed in the sector who have deficits in visual arts education at initial professional education level, will be afforded the opportunity to upskill and develop their knowledge, and competencies in inquiry-based learning using a transdisciplinary approach to the visual arts. This will ultimately guarantee that creative experiences offered to children availing of the ECCE scheme (DCYA, 2019) within Ireland will reflect recognised good practice in visual arts curriculum implementation.

In addition, an important strength of this research is that (to the author’s knowledge) this is the first study at Doctorate level, in Ireland which investigates approaches to the
design and delivery of visual arts curriculum in Early Childhood Care and Education. Despite these strengths, the research also has limitations.

### 3.15.2 Limitations

Representatives from Tusla and DES were invited to participate in this study at the research design stage but the invitation was declined without explanation. In light of research findings regarding the regulatory bodies, it is imperative that Tusla and DES be informed of the findings of the research in order to address concerns and ease disquiet among practitioners and support personnel. It would also facilitate implementing some of the aforementioned recommendations.

Parent representatives and ‘the voice of the child’ were not included in the study as the research focus was to investigate approaches adopted by practitioners to visual arts curriculum implementation. In future research, it would be worthwhile to elicit the parent viewpoint, as it transpired during interviews that perceived parental expectations regarding product-based art, influences practice and was one of the reasons proffered for using templates for children to take home. This cohort would have provided rich data which would have increased validity of the research.

Another limitation of the research was that personnel from the third-level training institutions were not included in the study. It was not considered necessary at the design stage, as the research focus was on approaches used by practitioners in visual arts curriculum implementation. However, as the study progressed it became apparent that the visual arts are not a central component in initial professional education programmes and it would have been worthwhile to establish why some institutions place the visual arts at the periphery of undergraduate Early Years Education programmes and not central to training.

A purposive random sample was also used from a list of ECCE settings. This list was accessed via the Tusla website [https://www.tusla.ie/services/preschool-services/list-of-pre-school-services-by-county/](https://www.tusla.ie/services/preschool-services/list-of-pre-school-services-by-county/). Bias was reduced by specifying, in the inclusion criteria, that respondents work within the ECCE Scheme (DCYA, 2019). The snowballing technique was adopted to gain access to ECCE practitioners and served as
a referral mechanism (See Appendix 9). However, a weakness of the snowballing technique is the possibility of introducing bias to the data collection procedure. Participants may be inclined to only refer others who have similar views to themselves (Croucher and Cronn-Mills, 2019; Liamputtong, 2010). In the current research, this was counteracted by providing participants with clear information, regarding the research and inclusion criteria, as outlined in Chapter 3.

3.16 Conclusion

This chapter outlines the methods by which the research for this study was conducted. Additionally, the choice of research methods was explained and justified with support from existing theory. In essence, the study is rooted in a phenomenological, Grounded Theory approach. A Grounded Theory framework is typically best suited and employed in research projects where little is known about a phenomenon. Considering the dearth of research on an inquiry-based emergent curriculum, using a transdisciplinary approach to the visual arts in Early Childhood Education and Care, a Grounded Theory research approach provides a suitable framework to examine this topic. The framework provided by Grounded Theory studies also emphasises the role of the researcher in recording and constructing the beliefs and opinions of respondents into meaningful data and hypothesis (Charmaz, 2006). This characteristic of Grounded Theory was considered particularly important because the nature of this study centres on gathering the views, opinions, and perceptions of ECCE practitioners and support personnel on approaches used in the design and delivery of a visual arts curriculum in Early Childhood Care and Education.

The role of the researcher in establishing trust and rapport in order to illicit meaningful responses, and in constructing new theories, therefore, is a highly intrinsic and valuable element of this study. A research objective of this study, for example, was to determine what approaches Early Childhood Care and Education practitioners use when designing and implementing a visual arts curriculum for children (aged two years and eight months to five years and six months) who avail of the ECCE scheme (DCYA, 2019). A Grounded Theory methodological approach, therefore, provides the researcher with adequate freedom and flexibility to explore, compare, and
conceptualise data relating to emerging themes, all within a rigorous and methodical framework. Moreover, the scope of the research is identified, as are the research objectives, and issues of concern such as research validity and transparency are addressed. Findings resulting from the primary research conducted are outlined in the following chapter.
Chapter Four

Findings and Analysis
4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the findings from the fieldwork are discussed in relation to the findings from the review of the literature (Chapter 2), which forms the basis of this thesis. The extant body of published literature provides a very plausible case for the importance of creativity in early childhood development. Eminent educational philosophers, psychologists and educational reformers, from Rousseau (1712-1778), to Pestalozzi (1746-1827), Froebel (1782-1852) and Dewey (1826-1959) are of one voice as to the child’s natural imagination and curiosity and why the arts should be placed at the very centre of the young child’s education and learning experience. Contemporary researchers (Thompson, 2019; Christakis, 2017; Lindsay, 2017; Pecaski-McLennan, 2010) reiterate theories of such illustrious scholars and provide rich insights into the merits of learning by inquiry. Emphasis is placed on the Reggio Emilia approach to the design and implementation of an inquiry-based emergent Curriculum (IBEC) as it is lauded by many as the model in ‘good practice’ (Giardiello et al., 2019; Lindsey, 2017; Gandini, 2015; Hanna, 2014). However, a criticism of Reggio Emilia is that while it operates optimally in an Italian context, it is an approach which may not transfer well to other cultural contexts (Emerson and Linder, 2019).

Additionally, a review of training opportunities in Ireland and the status of the arts in undergraduate programmes yielded valuable information regarding the differing emphasis placed on creative-based modules during degree courses. Two extremes were identified, whereby one institution offers arts-based mandatory modules (in theory and practice) during the undergraduate years while another institution does not include any creativity modules (either mandatory or elective) throughout the course content. This is of particular significance, given the vast body of literature on how creativity and child development are inextricably bound, as well as the imperative on initial professional education training institutions (Henriksen, 2018; Garvis, 2011; Wiggins and Wiggins, 2008) to provide future practitioners with a solid foundation in the arts (French, 2013, The Arts Council, 2013). This grounding has a direct impact on practitioner visual arts self-efficacy (Lindsay, 2017, Evans-Palmer, 2016, Klopper and Power 2010) and subsequent ability to design and implement curricula which provide authentic creative experiences for young children. Moreover, it is argued that in order for effective implementation of an IBL using TDA curriculum in the visual
arts, practitioners must be equipped with the pre-requisite Knowledge Attitude and Skills (KAS) which are ideally fostered through practical application, underpinned by pedagogical theory (Hipp and Sulentic-Dowell, 2019; Henriksen, 2018).

A review of the literature also presents a recurring theme of the necessity to prepare the child of today for the challenges of tomorrow, in a 21st century World (Howard, 2018, Pei-Ling Tan, 2017, Saavedra and Opfer, 2012; Robinson, 2010). These researchers stress the need for a true recognition of the arts and an arts-rich learning environment in firing creativity and imagination and an acknowledgement of the pivotal role the arts play, in the holistic development of the child. Inquiry-based learning, using a transdisciplinary approach, is recommended as being very effective in curriculum implementation and should inform practice (Thompson, 2019; Hedges and Copper, 2018; Walker, 2014). However, regardless of the appropriateness of the IBL TDA approach, research by Christakis (2017) and Chinchekian et al., (2016) points to how practitioners and teachers struggle in adopting such a progressive approach. It is often at variance with their own traditional, teacher-led educational experience (Lemon and Garvis, 2013). To address this conflict, several international studies indicate how the learning environment should be more progressive (Jimenez-Eliaeson 2017) and practitioners should strive towards providing a less-stimulating physical learning space (Pecaski-McLennan, 2010).

Some of the main challenges facing ECEC practitioners in facilitating the art experience of the young child have been identified. Creative Ireland (2017) and other recent initiatives are documented and their potential addressed. Currently, the importance of the arts in the lives of Irish children is topical and research initiatives striving to expand the research base are encouraged.

4.1.1 The Research Focus of the Field Work

Two distinct interview schedules (See Appendix 7 and 8) were prepared in advance, to gather data pertaining to the following research areas:

- Initial professional education in the visual arts in Early Years Education and how it impacts practice
• In-service training opportunities in the visual arts for use in ECCE
• Approaches adopted by ECCE practitioners when implementing a visual arts curriculum
• Good practice in the design and delivery of the visual arts in ECCE.

4.1.2 Emerging Themes for Discussion

On collating the research findings for analysis, several emerging thematic areas are identified, all of which are systematically discussed and critiqued in this chapter. Although presented under separate headings, there is often overlap, whereby a theme already discussed may impact on another theme under discussion. This involves some repetition of reference to themes, which is intentional as they are not mutually exclusive, discrete entities, but themes are interlinked and intrinsically bound, one often having implications and ramifications for another.

With regard to the first theme for discussion: Training in the visual arts and its impact on practice, it is important to establish at the outset the type of training ECCE practitioner interviewees have had in the visual arts at initial professional training level. Furthermore, this theme is worthy of scrutiny, as it is well recognised by educators and researches that the quality of any sector within an educational system is largely determined by the quality and level of training of its practitioners, and is integral to optimum curriculum implementation (Moloney, 2018, Urban et al., 2017, Wolfe, 2015, Dahlberg et al., 2007).


4.2.1 Modules on Offer

Early Childhood Education and Care practitioner interviewees describe a variety of very different training experiences in the visual arts at initial professional training level, illustrating differing emphasis on visual arts depending on the third-level institution attended. This confirms findings based on an on-line review of module titles as part of the literature review (Chapter 2, Table 2) which tables creativity modules on offer at training institutions nationwide. At the outset of each ECCE practitioner interview,
preliminary questions are posed to obtain background information on the number and type of modules respondents have taken in the visual arts during initial professional training. Subsequent probing questions are crafted to glean information on specific approaches adopted by lecturers in visual arts module delivery. The rationale behind this line of questioning is to ascertain if the strong criticism levelled at the poor status of art in initial professional education institutions worldwide also pertains to the Irish context (UNESCO World Conference 2006). UNESCO (2006) criticises the lack of focus on art education in teacher-training and the failure of teacher trainers to recognise its importance. The organisation identifies two major failings in the system: insufficient teacher-training programmes specialising in Arts Education and ‘failure to promote the role of the arts in teaching and learning’ (ibid: 16). In accordance, Nilson et al., (2013) stress the importance of laying a solid foundation in visual arts during training, and caution that failure to do so results in mediocre art experiences being offered to children within the learning environment.

Findings from the current research based on a desk review of modules concur with both observations made by UNESCO (2006) and Nilson et al., (2013) and show that some initial professional training institutions in Ireland give more prominence than others to the visual arts in Early Years Education. At one end of the spectrum, is an institution which offers mandatory modules in the visual arts during three of the four undergraduate years, while at the other end is an institution which does not offer any creativity or arts-based modules during all of the four years of initial professional training. In between these two extremes, are seven institutions, which provide one or two modules in creativity, and five institutions which offer one or two modules specifically related to the visual arts during all of initial professional training. The majority (24) of ECCE practitioner interviewees, have attended institutions where only one, or two, visual arts modules are offered in total, during training and some institutions offer them on an elective basis. It can be concluded therefore, that the majority of respondents have very limited training in visual arts. In my opinion this left them poorly equipped to meet the demands of implementing an inquiry-based emergent curriculum (IBEC) as set down in the Aistear Siolta Practice Guide (NCCA, 2015). Furthermore, in instances where visual arts modules are offered during one year only and on an elective basis, a graduate enters the workforce with minimal formal training in the visual arts.
4.2.2 Timing of Modules

Another factor which practitioner interviewees highlight is the timing or timetabling of modules and how the juncture at which modules in the visual arts are introduced influences future practice positively or negatively. Over half (15) state that timetabling arts-based modules early-on in training has limited impact on future practice, being too distant in time from when trainees enter the workforce. It can be surmised that lessons learned are soon forgotten. Furthermore, practitioner interviewees indicate how early and limited exposure to the visual arts is indicative of the low status awarded the arts in some institutions:

*I had art in the first year and then in the second year it was a choice between art and drama. I did drama, so to be honest by the time I graduated 3 years later I had forgotten what I’d learnt in art. Anyway, art was definitely not emphasised as being that important in my training* [ECCE 5].

Another ECCE practitioner interviewee states:

*I only graduated last year and I haven’t used any of what I learnt during art at college. I had art in the second semester of first year and it seems so long ago I don’t even remember what we did in that module. It was too long ago* [ECCE 28].

This finding is substantiated by 16 ECCE practitioner interviewees who have equally vague and imprecise recollection of visual arts modules during initial professional education, as exemplified in the following quotation:

*Let me try to remember.......it was only in 1st year. I suppose what it was......was more ‘Creative Development’...I guess...I suppose...the visual arts was included in that. You see it was only in 1st year ......and from then all the course was more theory based. When they spoke about approaches it was all the theory, they didn’t show us* [ECCE 10].

The foregoing quotations are examples of sentiments expressed by many ECCE practitioner interviewees who imply that they often struggle to remember if, and when,
they have taken art during initial professional education and what the programme entailed. One can deduce from these findings that graduates from institutions which award the arts poor status would be challenged to later implement a curriculum which enthusiastically involves children in meaningful creative experiences. In light of the statement that modules are theory-based and that trainees are not afforded hands-on experience it is important to delve deeper into module content and delivery.

4.2.3 Module Content and Delivery

When invited to describe module content in the visual arts, two thirds (20) of ECCE practitioner interviewees are critical that modules are in the main theoretical in content and fail to incorporate a practical component. Furthermore, all 20 ECCE practitioner interviewees attribute the lack of hands-on experiences as impacting negatively on the visual art curriculum they deliver:

_I had lectures about how children learn and we were shown examples of children doing amazing art, like sculptures in clay but I wouldn’t know where or how to start as our lectures were theory based_ [ECCE 16].

Similar findings are recorded in research conducted by Goodman-Schanz (2012) who observes that practitioners are in a quandary as to how to transfer theoretical knowledge to practice. She attributes this disconnect to visual arts teaching. This aligns with several other studies, which highlight the influence of prior experiences upon the development of self-efficacy (Evans-Palmer, 2018; Lindsay, 2017, Lemon and Garvis, 2013, McArdle, 2013).

The eighteen ECCE practitioner interviewees, and seven support personnel, who identify the importance and desirability of hands-on practical experiences in initial professional education, reflect the arguments put forward by the National Association of Education of Young Children (2009). They maintain that ‘excellence in early childhood teaching is contingent upon continuous interplay between theory, research and practice’ (NAEYC, 2009:6). While seven support personnel interviewees stress the central position that theory plays in the visual arts in Early Childhood Care and Education, they are adamant
that course designers need to revise module content to include practical experiences for trainees:

*Theory and practice need to go hand in hand, in undergraduate courses if practitioners are to develop the skills needed to provide authentic inquiry-based art processes for children [SP 5].*

In agreement, another support personnel interviewee directly refers to graduates of third-level institutions where there is no practical component to creativity modules and stresses:

*Degree courses need to be designed so that every graduate, at some point during their training, engages in hands-on, process-led art [SP 9].*

All seven support personnel identify a practical component as being fundamental to enabling practitioners to develop the necessary confidence in the arts for effective delivery of meaningful art education, in future practice. Moreover, another support personnel interviewee adds to the discourse and questions the onus put on practitioners to deliver appropriate visual arts experiences, when they have not been afforded the practical opportunity to engage in art-making during training, as module content is theoretical only:

*If we expect educators to deliver rich art experiences for children, we need to ensure that they engage in such experiences themselves during their initial professional education and not just learn the theory behind best practice [SP 3].*

These findings draw attention to the fact that graduates from some training institutions are ill equipped to implement a visual arts curriculum, which truly provides authentic learning opportunities for young children. In my opinion, it is a systemic failure, and not a failure on the part of the individual, newly-trained practitioner. This does not apply to Irish institutions solely. As well as the aforementioned UNESCO (2006) study, Hipp and Sulentic-Dowell (2019) shed further light on the subject in their study on *Arts Integration* in the USA pre–school and primary school learning environments. These authors recommend a repositioning of the visual arts within initial professional education programmes, to better equip practitioners to effectively implement a visual arts curriculum. Similarly, LaJevic (2013) maintains that this is achievable by incorporating
practical art components in course content which should be delivered by qualified faculty members who have been trained in both art and pedagogy. In concurrence, one support personnel interviewee recommends:

*Those appointed to deliver visual arts modules on ECEC programmes should really come from an artistic background as this will better ensure students get the necessary training and skills to deliver high quality art experiences in their future practice*  
[SP 1].

Another area of concern, which evolves from the discussion on modules on offer, is the effect training in the visual arts has on practitioner confidence. This echoes findings by Barton *et al.*, (2013) who claim, that as a result of a lack of time allotment and attention given to the visual arts in undergraduate training curricula, many initial professional educators are left feeling underprepared to deliver high quality art education. This ‘unpreparedness’ in turn can lead to a lack of confidence as highlighted by both practitioners and support personnel, interviewees.

### 4.2.4 Impact of Visual Arts Training on Practitioner Confidence

Over half (22) of the ECCE practitioner interviewees express frustration that their initial professional education has prepared them so inadequately for arts practice and voice openly how this affects confidence in competency, as captured in the following quotation:

*I feel overwhelmed and disadvantaged by my limited training in the visual arts. I tend to do art with them which is more product based than following their lead, to be honest, because I didn’t learn how to during my degree. So I wouldn’t have the confidence to do it* [ECCE 24].

Another ECCE practitioner interviewee, of three years’ experience, explains her confusion, and implicit in the following quotation is the lack of confidence she experiences at her inability to involve children in meaningful art activities. She has a knowledge and awareness of what is required in theory but is at a loss as to how to transfer theory to practice:
I often feel totally at sea when it comes to doing art with the children. I just don’t trust that I really know how to broach it in the correct way, like it’s supposed to be, ‘based on their interests’ [ECCE 8].

This feeling of inadequacy is exacerbated when practitioner interviewees realise that they are working alongside colleagues who have attended institutions where art is central to training. They tend to measure their own performance against others who are skilled in delivering process-driven art experiences to children, as apparent in the following quotation:

There was no visual arts module available to me at all during my training, whereas the girl who works in the next room to me had art in every year of her degree. She does amazing art with the children, it’s all process driven and to be honest I don’t really feel skilled in the same way when it comes to doing art with the children [ECCE 2].

In contrast, ECCE practitioner interviewees who have been trained in institutions where art is central to the programme exude confidence and they too draw comparisons between themselves and other colleagues in the workplace:

I was really lucky in comparison to the people I work with. I got the practical skills during my training to be able to deliver arts experiences for the children and that’s why I feel very, very confident [ECCE 1].

Another ECCE practitioner interviewee makes similar comparisons:

I know colleagues who work side by side with me who had a totally different experience to myself regarding the visual arts during their training. I was very fortunate, though as the training I got was very art focused across all four years. Everything we did was informed by an inquiry-based approach to art so it’s real easy for me [ECCE 22].

I deduce from the foregoing three quotations that the first ECCE practitioner interviewee feels unprepared and ill-equipped to deliver an inquiry-based emergent Curriculum (IBEC) in the visual arts because of a lack of training in this regard. Implicit in her comment is how this has affected confidence as she compares her
performance to that of her colleagues. She links her ineptitude directly to deficiencies in training. In contrast, the second ECCE practitioner interviewee exudes confidence in her ability to deliver a visual arts curriculum, which she attributes to quality initial professional education. Noteworthy, also is the way she draws comparisons and measures her performance against that of other colleagues. Likewise, the third respondent recognises that her experience of the visual arts during her undergraduate degree is not necessarily the experience of other Early Years Education graduates, as she describes how her practice is informed by an inquiry-based approach which was central to four years of training.

The majority (25) of practitioner interviewees state that colleagues who have graduated from programmes where visual arts are awarded high status are much better equipped to implement quality visual arts experiences for children. Often implicit in their responses and tone of voice is a sense of deep frustration at what they consider to be inadequate training. Those practitioner interviewees who compare themselves to better trained colleagues, who exude confidence in using the Aistear (NCCA, 2009), voice disquiet at their own inability.

However, regardless of training, there are three practitioner interviewees who feel empowered to deliver meaningful art experiences for children. They attribute their confidence and ability to a sense of creative self-efficacy, as captured in the following quotation:

\[ I've always had a love of art and have always been artistic. Even though art only featured very briefly during my training and I didn't learn much in the way of basic skills, I just love to get children involved in the process of art making [ECCE 20]. \]

Subsequent to these findings emerging, support personnel were interviewed on the impact visual arts training has on practitioner confidence. This cohort express concern at the apparent insecurity among new graduates in delivering meaningful art experiences for children and attribute this inadequacy directly to the type of training received. They confirm findings from practitioner interviewees, stating that if the arts have low status during the initial professional education years, graduates subsequently lack confidence to
deliver an emergent curriculum based on children’s interests. Support personnel also recognise how the converse applies, as captured in the following quotation:

*There are many graduates who are not confident at all coming out of some colleges as they are unable to articulate why they are taking a particular approach to teaching and learning through the arts. I’ve also seen other graduates who are very self-assured. It depends on their training in the visual arts [SP 8].*

There is also an awareness among support personnel of the disparity among institutions regarding modules on offer. Six support personnel speak openly about the lack of status afforded the visual arts and how it affects practice, as apparent in the following quotation by one support personnel, who mentors practitioners in methodology at various locations countrywide:

*Some Early Years Degree programmes offer creative arts modules only at the very start of the degree. Some have a module for one semester only and other institutions don’t offer any at all. This results in very different training experiences amongst the workforce which results in different approaches depending on the status it’s given during training [SP 5].*

Their views on the matter serve to triangulate research findings. Support personnel [1] who also works as a mentor in ECEC services across the country, elaborates:

*There are definitely issues out there with the way in which some early years educators are being trained in the visual arts. It varies so much from college to college. Some have extensive training in visual arts while others have barely any [SP 1].*

Essentially, therefore, these findings suggest that when there is an insufficient depth and breadth of visual arts subject knowledge and skill-set among ECCE practitioners they are deprived of the important tool kit to confidently respond to and stimulate children’s interests. When there is a deficit in training, and practitioners are not equipped to deliver an IBEC, their other recourse is to replicate art from their own past experience, as indicated by eight support personnel.
4.2.5 Impact of Past Experiences on Future Practice in the Visual Arts

The strong influence past experiences in the visual arts have on practice is affirmed by 20 ECCE practitioner interviewees and substantiated by eight support personnel who also proffer a solution:

There needs to be a deconstruction of past schooling art experiences when it comes to training early years educators. They need to be present and encouraged to engage with alternative and more progressive creative approaches so that they can develop the confidence they need in order to be able to implement meaningful art experiences in their practice [SP 3].

One practitioner interviewee confirms the reliance on past experiences, as voiced by many: I still use many of the art activities that I remember doing myself when I was in school [ECCE 12].

Moreover, nine support personnel elaborate on ECCE practitioner lack of familiarity with inquiry-based learning and attempt to pinpoint the underlying cause and why they resort to the use of pre-determined art activities:

They are not asking the questions ‘How do we support children's curiosity? How do we support children's innovative and intrinsic motivation to learn? And this I think is really down to the fact that the arts were not approached like this during their own education so they use product-orientated art which they are familiar with [SP 7].

This is expanded upon by another support personnel interviewee. She suggests that practitioners lack of knowledge, skill and competence in the visual arts may be attributable to the arts not been central to their training, and they resort to replicating their own educational experiences:

The arts are often approached in a more didactic manner. Practitioners see themselves as ‘the teacher’, the one with more knowledge, which is ironic seeing as there is not enough emphasis placed on the arts during their training.
So they are using approaches they recall from their own schooling [SP 5].

Despite the apparent criticism of practice, it needs to be stated that the ten support personnel specialists pay tribute to practitioners in the sector, stating that they work to the best of their ability. If practitioners do not implement an IBEC it is because they are not trained or equipped to do so, they lack the know-how: No educator sets out to do harm or engage in poor practice [SP 10] and, At the end of the day practitioners can only do what they know and what they experienced themselves [SP 8]. These sentiments are mirrored by over half (18) of the ECCE practitioner interviewees who give an honest appraisal of their practice: we do the best for the children with what we have and what we know how to do [ECCE 13].

In conclusion, initial professional education is but a step in the practitioner’s professional trajectory and when there are deficits in visual arts education, Continuous Professional Development (CPD) is essential, the benefits of which will be the subject of discussion in the following section.

4.3 Continuing Professional Development in the Visual Arts in Early Childhood Education and Care

The benefits of continuing professional development (CPD) are innumerable and researchers recognise that CPD serves to expand on knowledge and hone existing skills (Moloney, 2018, Peeters et al., 2016, Bleach, 2014). In the current research, the viewpoints of the cohort of support personnel interviewees were first sought. As mentors to practitioners countrywide, five support personnel interviewees are in the unique position to provide a comprehensive overview of practitioner competence in the visual arts. All six mentors are adamant that the provision of CPD visual arts training opportunities is of paramount importance and more especially when there are deficits in arts education at initial professional education level. Furthermore, three of this cohort are of the opinion that CPD should be mandatory, as distinct from desirable, stating that CPD may be the only opportunity which some practitioners are ever afforded, to acquire the necessary competencies to implement meaningful, authentic visual arts experiences for children:
If initial professional education is not providing the foundation needed for effective implementation of art experiences for children, then there needs to be a mandate whereby all practitioners should engage in CPD focused primarily on the arts [SP 7].

The support personnel interviewees echo the sentiments of many researchers who hold that CPD can be categorised as ‘formal, non-formal or informal learning’ (NFQ,2017: n.p.). All support personnel (10) extol the virtues of life-long learning and caution how training should not be viewed as the culmination of learning, that practitioners need to upskill especially in the arts due to the changing nature of practice in that discipline:

*I also think there is a mistake we make in thinking that all training is completed once you have a degree, and this can be such a problem especially regarding how art practices change. Learning is a continuous process* [SP1].

This is in line with the concept of life-long learning as outlined by Alsop (2013) who stresses the need to view learning through CPD as cyclical, and stresses the importance of honing skills in order to maintain professional standards.

Furthermore, seven support personnel interviewees state that CPD in the visual arts is crucial, not only for practitioners, but also for those who occupy leadership and management roles, as personnel in these positions influence the overall ethos and practice in ECEC. CPD also affords this cadre the opportunity to upskill, update and ensure that competent performance is maintained within the setting which they manage or lead:

*Upskilling through CPD in the visual arts is very often recommended by mentors, to leaders and managers in ECEC settings, as well as practitioners. They too need to keep abreast of current trends* [SP 9].

This finding is significant, as 22 ECCE practitioner interviewees express frustration at not being able to implement inquiry-based learning, because of the ethos of the setting where they are employed. Management does not welcome change, as a product-driven approach to the visual arts has been employed for years. Therefore, if leaders and managers were involved in CPD they should have a better understanding of practitioners who have been trained in IBL, and would endeavour to facilitate implementation of a
process approach to the visual arts in the setting. One ECCE practitioner interviewee expresses dismay at management’s reluctance to embrace new approaches to the visual arts with which they are unfamiliar:

*This results in uncertainty amongst us staff as to what is actually expected of us. We have quite different interpretations of Aistear and inquiry-based learning and I, for one, don’t feel supported by my manager. I’ve shared different ideas of how we might introduce more process-based art and I’ve been met with comments like; ‘This is how we’ve always done it. The children and parents love it,......why try to fix what’s not broken’* [ECCE 3].

The above quotation demonstrates how staff and managers are at variance with one another and it can be concluded that an individual practitioner would have little chance of success in implementing process-led art, in the face of lack of support from management.

Another benefit of CPD, according to nine support personnel interviewees, is the opportunity it affords practitioners to engage in reflective practice, as captured in the following quotation:

*It is a step in the right direction to ensure practitioners remain connected to the process of making and appreciating art rather than running the risk of losing skills acquired during initial professional education* [SP 1].

Consistent with this viewpoint are observations made by the majority (18) of ECCE practitioner interviewees who state that they have engaged in CPD post-qualification, in order to: *keep up to date with new approaches* [ECCE 13]. Others claim that undertaking CPD has: *a greater impact on (my) practice* than that of initial professional education: *especially as there was little hands on art during (my) degree years* [ECCE 27]. While there is unanimity among ECCE practitioner interviewees and support personnel, alike, as to the desirability and need for CPD post-training, it also comes to light that CPD in the visual arts is not readily available in Ireland.
4.3.1 The Status of Continuous Professional Development Specific to the Visual Arts in Ireland

All 30 ECCE practitioner interviewees agree that they would avail of CPD opportunities in the visual arts, should the opportunity arise. However, 12 ECCE practitioner interviewees note that visual arts based CPD: *is not readily available to us in our area* [ECCE 5] but is confined to the major cities. They comment on the urban, rural divide:

*There are workshops out there but they are mainly in Dublin, Galway, Limerick or Cork. I’d love to do a CPD course specific to the visual arts but I haven’t seen any around the midlands* [ECCE 11].

Not only is it a question of location but despite their willingness and enthusiasm to engage in CPD, the vast majority (23) of the ECCE practitioner interviewees believe that there is a dearth of practical opportunity, to engage in CPD specific to the visual arts:

*There aren’t actually many CPDs specific to the visual arts available. You’ll often find ones on Aistear in Action or responding to Tusla but there are very few practical workshops which is disheartening as I’d love to attend some* [ECCE 7].

Furthermore, nine of the ECCE practitioner interviewees are critical of CPD workshop content. One expresses annoyance at a workshop which she attended, which comprised what she considers to be a morning of banal activities: *I mean it was just a morning being shown templates, and product-driven activities to do with children* [ECCE 11]. She suggests that the mere provision of CPD is not in itself sufficient, as emphasis also needs to be placed on quality workshops, which represent good practice in the visual arts in ECEC:

*It’s no good having a workshop just for the sake of it, especially if it is contrary to best practice. Aistear promotes inquiry-based learning and I attended a workshop promoting templates. I mean it’s confusing for us as they are supposed to be the experts running the CPD workshops* [ECCE 11].

In contrast, however, five ECEC practitioner interviewees comment positively on the visual arts CPD they attended. All five stress that the CPD workshops were: *really
informative and provided me with new hands-on skills that I now use in practice [ECCE 12] but they lament the fact that CPD workshops in the visual arts are: *seldom available, few and far between and you really have to travel to the cities if you want them and that's not always convenient* [ECCE 15].

In my opinion, it would be beneficial if such CPD quality workshops were made available nationwide. Furthermore, those who hold CPD workshops on product-orientated activities need to engage in reflective practice and familiarise themselves with the Aistear (NCCA, 2009), as they are currently promoting approaches to visual art implementation which are in direct opposition to good practice.

Of specific interest to this finding is an initiative by the Irish Arts Council whereby they commissioned Early Arts UK (2013) to carry out research on how to support the growth of early childhood arts practice in Ireland. Subsequent recommendations within the report submitted by that body suggest that funding be allocated for the provision of arts-based elective options during initial professional education, as well as post qualification, for the Irish ECEC workforce. The review specifically stresses the significance of CPD to ‘reinforce the skills and knowledge required to deliver the creative elements of Aistear in areas where arts professionals are not available’ (ibid: 48). They question the effectiveness of CPD projects in changing practice on a large scale, if only available to a select number of ECEC settings. Additionally, six support personnel voice concern about the long-term impact of these types of initiatives, especially if CPD is just a single, isolated experience. The general consensus amongst the six support personnel interviewees is that unless long-term and repeated engagement takes place, practitioners view CPD as:

*A once off, like watching a performance rather than integrating the key concepts into their everyday practice and therefore they feel removed, almost like an onlooker or bystander* [SP 4].

Evidently, therefore it can be deduced that in order for CPD to be effective, it needs to be a regular and constant feature on the early years training landscape. Moreover, strong partnerships between those working with, and on behalf, of children and those delivering the CPD training, needs to be established. This is of particular importance, to ensure that content and approach to visual arts curriculum implementation is
informed by sound pedagogy as well as an appropriate artistic skill set. The partnership between artist and practitioner is elaborated on by both research cohorts.

4.3.2 The Artist and Practitioner: Importance of Partnership

When artists in residence are employed on an ad hoc basis in Early Years Education, it is imperative that collaboration between practitioner and artist is established. One support personnel interviewee opines that in order for practitioners to feel included and enabled to build on their subject knowledge, an: *authentic partnership and collaboration between artist and early years practitioner must exist* [SP 3]. She explains how this is particularly relevant in ensuring that the creative experiences are appropriate and should be:

*Tailored to the individual needs and have meaning for the children within the chosen setting. This is particularly so if the artist does not come from an Early Years background and is not really familiar with how children learn* [SP 3].

Another support personnel who has had over ten years’ experience working as a city childcare committee co-ordinator, also stresses that it is equally important for the practitioner to have the willingness to be:

*Open to learning from the artist’s ability, to be comfortable in the unknown, to allow the magic of experimentation to unfold* [SP 6].

This need for partnership was researched by Kenny and Morrissey (2016) who examine teacher-artist partnerships as specific to CPD. Their research findings show that the overwhelming majority (82%) of participating teachers endorse the experience as being ‘good’ or ‘excellent’ (ibid:71) and teachers choose to engage in such ventures out of ‘a desire to access specialist expertise, be inspired, up-skill, develop creative approaches and new ideas for teaching the arts, re-energise within the profession and most significantly share ideas, knowledge and experiences through collaboration’ (ibid.). Similar conclusions are reached in other research projects on the impact of arts based CPD initiatives in ECEC in Ireland (Hayes et al., 2017; O'Sullivan et al., 2016; BEAG, 2011).
In the current study, one ECCE practitioner interviewee and owner of two ECCE centres, highlights how she employs an artist as part of her teaching team to deliver creative experiences to children in the two settings. Worthy of note, is that the artist holds dual training in Montessori and Ceramic Design, but despite being trained in both the arts and pedagogy, the artist in question and the ECEC practitioner interviewee stress the importance of frequent participation in CPD, in order to:

Keep up to date with current ideas on how best to tailor creative experiences which are in line with best practice when it comes to children’s early education [Artist working in two ECEC settings owned by ECCE 30].

In conclusion, the foregoing findings identify how ECCE practitioner interviewees and support personnel recognise the need for CPD and welcome the opportunity to upskill in the visual arts. This is particularly so where there are obvious deficits in initial professional education among many respondents. However, ECCE practitioner interviewees and support personnel point to the scarcity of CPD opportunities in the visual arts, and CPD per se may not even be available in one’s locality as there is an urban-rural divide. In my opinion political rhetoric on the importance of availing of CPD by practitioners, leaders and managers (Zappone 2018) is of little use if in reality CPD is not readily available outside of the main cities. Some practitioners who attended CPD workshops in visual arts are frustrated at workshop content, which advocates an adult-led approach. The wisdom of CPD workshops in the visual arts which promote pre-determined outcomes by the demonstration and use of template art activities is indeed questionable. It is counterproductive, being contrary to Aistear (NCCA, 2009) principles and at variance with good practice. Good practice advocates adopting a holistic approach to learning which promotes an inquiry-based emergent curriculum to meet the cognitive, emotional, social, spiritual and creative needs of the young child. Therefore, it is necessary to glean information on participant interviewee understanding of Aistear (2009), the National Curriculum Framework and also to establish the extent to which Aistear principles are adhered to in visual arts practice in the sector.
4.4. The National Curriculum and Quality Frameworks: Aistear (NCCA, 2009) and Síolta (CECDE, 2006)

4.4.1 An Understanding of Aistear (NCCA, 2009) and IBL in relation to the Visual Arts

Aistear (NCCA, 2009) for use in Early Childhood and Primary School education in Ireland, has four central themes; Well-being, Identity and Belonging, Communicating, and Exploring and Thinking. When information on Aistear was elicited during interviews, all 30 ECCE practitioner interviewees cite the Aistear themes with ease and how they purportedly use them to promote holistic learning when planning creative experiences for children:

*Because we follow Aistear and use the themes as the basis of our art planning we ensure that all the developmental needs of the child are being met through inquiry [ECCE 21].*

The vast majority (26) are positive about inquiry-based learning (IBL) and speak knowledgeably and eloquently on the importance of placing the arts at the core of children’s learning and how children should be facilitated by adults to make their own discoveries through experimentation, using Aistear themes:

*Children learn through actively participating in hands-on experiences, which are developmentally appropriate and where they lead the learning. I find that art really helps them [children] make discoveries and build skills. We use the Aistear themes for planning our visual arts curriculum [ECCE 30].*

And another ECCE practitioner interviewee stresses how:

*Art is essential for the children as it helps meet their holistic needs, like their motor-skills, problem-solving and self-expression. Aistear help me plan and implement a curriculum which addresses the emergent interests of the child [ECCE 7].*

These quotations also echo research by MacLachlan et al., (2013) who praise IBL for being child-initiated and play-based allowing for maximum active child participation in response to individual needs. This approach to learning is also succinctly captured.
in the following ECCE practitioner interviewee quotation where she describes how she implements IBL:

We [adults] give them (children) the scope and range to express their ideas and we facilitate their self-directed discoveries by asking these three questions: What do you see? What do you think? What do you wonder? [ECCE 1].

Her approach to art is in line with Dewey (1938), who considers the role of the adult as one which facilitates the student learning process, affording children the opportunity to identify the relationships and interconnectedness between areas of information. In accordance with one ECCE practitioner interviewee who describes how the adult adopts the role of researcher to develop a curriculum which identifies the children’s areas of interest and which responds to their holistic needs:

Children learn by active participation. They learn by doing, by engaging in inquiry-based learning where they can ask questions, experiment with materials and make discoveries. It is our job as adults to enable rich learning to take place by facilitating rather than directing that learning so that their holistic needs are being met [ECCE 3].

The foregoing quotations indicate an impressive understanding of Aistear themes and how they apply to the visual arts. While ECCE practitioner interviewees use specialised terminology, demonstrating sound theoretical understanding, they are unclear in relation to what role the adult assumes in approaches to visual arts curriculum implementation. When probing questions are posed, some twenty-three ECCE practitioner interviewees describe how the adult assumes a didactic teaching role and others (7) speak of the adult as being a facilitator in children’s learning. It is, therefore, necessary to investigate what ideally the role of the adult should be in inquiry-based learning.

4.4.2 The Role of the Adult in Inquiry-Based Learning

In inquiry-based learning, the adult assumes a non-didactic role to facilitate the child’s learning process (Savery 2015). Learning is, therefore, less predictable as children are
given autonomy and provided with a platform to express themselves artistically. This is termed ‘constructivism in action’ by Thompson (2015:123). An example of the acquisition of new knowledge by posing questions, and the role of the adult as a collaborative learner is aptly described in the following quotation:

*The art experiences usually grow out of questions, e.g. Why do leaves change colour? Why do leaves fall? We see our role as that of collaborative learner. Together with the children we embark on researching the changing colours and textures of leaves and colour matching, documenting our findings through drawings and photography, and collecting and sorting leaves and learning about autumn [ECCE 9].*

Importantly, this example places the adult alongside the child, and art at the core of the learning experience, which illustrates a sound understanding of Aistear (NCCA, 2009) whereby learning is a shared experience between adult and child and is holistic not siloed in categories. This dynamic nexus is held cocoon-like via children’s interests and personal experiences.

Support personnel highlight that practitioner understanding of their role as co-constructers of knowledge, through a holistic learning process is fundamental to their understanding of the Aistear (NCCA, 2009), which promotes IBL:

*If the educator understands their role during visual arts experiences, as one of facilitator and guide when needed, and if they are open to learning alongside the child, then I believe the experience they provide will better reflect examples of inquiry-based learning [SP 4].*

Evidently, therefore, such findings suggest that in order for authentic inquiry-based visual art experiences to take place within ECCE settings, practitioners should, as outlined in the national curriculum (2009) ‘build on children’s abilities, interests, experiences, cultures, and backgrounds, provide for their needs and facilitate them to initiate activities, to make choices, and to become increasingly independent and responsible’ (NCCA, 2009: 27).

One support personnel interviewee observes that although early childhood education policy documents within the Irish context are excellent…..what happens on the ground is very different [SP7]. She opines that the way in which policy documents are
interpreted is largely dependent on the value individuals working with children accord the visual arts. Significantly, she notes that:

*Some educators interpret Aistear in a very funnelled way and often don’t understand how best to implement the principles within the framework. I’d say this is largely due to a lack of understanding of their role and how to support visual experiences. I’ve noticed two extremes, 1. Exclusively child led and 2 exclusively adult-led [SP 7].*

In light of these findings, while all ECCE practitioner interviewees purport to understand Aistear, and the role of the adult as facilitator it is important to clarify to what extent Aistear principles are adhered to in practice, the extent to which rhetoric matches reality, in the implementation of a visual arts curriculum.

**4.4.3 Aistear (NCCA, 2009) and the Visual Arts Curriculum Implementation**

In order to investigate how ECCE practitioner interviewees put the Aistear (NCCA, 2009) into action, the views of support personnel were first sought. This cohort is in a unique position to provide an overview of practice in the sector, especially as five are mentors in the implementation of Aistear, at a variety of sector locations across the county. The five Better Start support personnel mentors claim that the vast majority of ECEC practitioners nationwide do not currently implement art experiences in line with Aistear (NCCA, 2009). If this perception is true, it gives cause for concern as all 30 ECCE practitioner interviewees describe how they implement a visual arts curriculum based on Aistear themes. Therefore, it can be extrapolated from the foregoing claim by all support personnel interviewees, that some practitioners do implement an inquiry-based curriculum where the child is central to learning, whereas ‘the vast majority of ECEC practitioners nationwide’ implement pre-determined, product-orientated, adult-led, visual art activities:

*There are exceptions to the rule but generally I would say that the Art taking place in ECEC settings is not inquiry-based or in line with Aistear, where children are seen as*
capable and competent and able to lead their own learning
[SP 4].

Another support personnel interviewee elaborates on that point, observing that even when a minority of practitioners do attempt to embark on inquiry-based learning, consistent with Aistear (NCCA, 2009) recommendations, it is at a very superficial level:

*A depth of engagement is lacking, there aren’t meaningful interactions and relationships through experiences to allow children to develop holistically* [SP 6].

This support personnel queries the quality of interactions between adult and child, believing that free access to open-ended materials is insufficient to meet the child’s developmental needs:

*An easel in the corner and access to open-ended materials alone is simply tokenism. Unfortunately, it’s hard to find settings operating beyond that level* [SP 6].

Another support personnel opines that the disconnect with the Framework may be due to the lack of leadership in training and practice within the sector. She maintains that instead of understanding the visual arts experiences as being central to children’s: communication, thought, exploration, wellbeing, sense of belonging and identity: *a number of educators’ view Aistear in silos and separate out the various themes* [SP 1]. She elaborates on how this, in turn, impacts on practitioner knowledge and ability to foster children’s curiosity, innovative spirit and motivation to learn. The spirit of Eisner (1998), a powerful proponent of IBL who places the arts at the centre of learning, pervades her comments. She maintains that:

*Placing the visual arts at the core of children’s learning experience assists the adult in identifying their holistic interests and needs* [SP 1].

One ECCE practitioner interviewee (12) of three years’ experience, Level 8 qualification and employed as a pre-school room leader, emphasises that being aware of the holistic development of the child is crucial and fundamental to sound education. She stresses that it is paramount when planning and implementing learning opportunities, asserting that through the medium of visual arts, children are:
…developing interpersonal skills, learning to share and turn-take during social interaction with their peers during creative play and particularly during visual arts [ECCE 12].

Despite this strongly held belief, when asked to outline a typical art experience which would encompass those views, ECCE practitioner interviewee (12) is at a loss to provide a single example. She outlines an activity which is in direct opposition to her sound theoretical knowledge. It is prescriptive and adult led, and does not employ the themes and principles of Aistear and inquiry-based learning:

*Last week we read Goldilocks and the Three Bears. So I’d take a few kids aside and then ask them do they want to draw Goldilocks. They were all interested, so I first drew my picture and then showed them and said this is my picture now you can draw yours [ECCE 12].*

This specific example resonates with Pecaski-McLennan (2010) who notes that practitioners in a Canadian context have a tendency to privilege adult-directed, topic-based arts and craft rather than promoting the holistic development of the child. When a holistic approach to the care and education of young learners is adopted, the practitioner addresses the *wholeness* of a child’s physical, emotional and psychological needs (United Nations Convention of Rights of the Child cited in Children’s Rights Alliance, 2010). In light of this statement, it is imperative that practitioners are not only equipped with a sound theoretical understanding of the fundamental stages of child development but that they also implement a curriculum which focusses on a holistic approach to learning.

### 4.4.4 Holistic Learning and Visual Arts Curriculum Implementation

Almost two thirds (19) of ECCE practitioner interviewees highlight that the visual arts enhance cognitive development through *problem-solving* [ECCE 19], *exploring and investigating* [ECCE 5], *manipulating different materials* [ECCE 11] and *drawing conclusions and making discoveries* [ECCE 22] as envisaged in Aistear (NCCA, 2009). These observations point to their sound theoretical understanding of Piaget’s (1956)
Theory of Cognitive Development and how children’s first visual expressions, through drawing, reflect their cognitive competencies. Piaget and Inhelder (1956) note that through the act of drawing, children demonstrate the ability to document their perceptions of their lived experiences and their environment. The results of these visual expressions assist the adult in gaining insight into children’s intellectual capabilities of reasoning and problem-solving. Additionally, nineteen ECCE practitioner interviewees point to their understanding of educational philosophies such as the Montessori method and the Reggio Emilia approach to ECEC. Almost an equal number of ECCE practitioner interviewees (18) recognise that children need encouragement to use the visual arts as a mechanism to release pent-up emotions and increase sensibilities:

*It is important to plan art experiences which allow for children to have a voice and to express what they are feeling. This helps with their cognitive and emotional development [ECCE 10].*

This is in keeping with research by the American National Coalition for Core Arts Standards (ANCCA, 2012:5) which highlights social interaction in early childhood and explains how visual arts experiences for young children are ‘primarily social experiences’. Very young children are often very interested in ‘re-telling pictorial accounts to peers and adults, especially as their images become more representational’ (ibid.). In addition, the majority (20) of ECCE practitioner interviewees cite Vygotsky’s (1978) thesis on co-operative learning and how they apply this theory to the visual arts in ECEC:

*When children make art together they are learning a number of important life skills, like how to share and take turns, how to cooperate and listen and they also learn from one another, from the more knowledgeable other as in Vygotsky’s theory of ZPD [ECCE 6].*

Similarly, Lindsay (2017) cites many studies which have identified the incongruity between what is propounded in theory and the actual reality in practice in the visual arts in ECEC. The majority of practitioner interviewees display a very impressive knowledge of educational theorists and examples of good practice, Montessori and Reggio Emilia, but again it raises the question of rhetoric and reality. There are, however, some exceptions as for example ECCE practitioner interviewee (six) who is
qualified and highly experienced (18 years, Level 8 qualified, Early Childhood Education and Care manager, third-level lecturer) recognises how: the holistic needs of the young child are fostered by engaging in creative processes and she explains how:

*Children are basically visual learners and through active experimentation become confident, competent, critical thinkers [ECCE 6].*

Importantly, she does not simply pay lip service to sound educational theory but provides examples of practice, which clearly demonstrate synergy between theory and practice, at the centre which she manages:

*Our art experiences reflect the individual interests of the child and we provide a range of open-ended materials as this ensures all areas of development are addressed through free expression. Besides that, we also ace emphasis on the transference of artistic skills such as drawing techniques to enhance and build on children’s mastery of visual representation. Saying that however, the end goal is always determined by the child and our role is to facilitate and scaffold that process [ECCE 6].*

Another ECCE practitioner interviewee uses the central philosophy of Aistear; seeing the child as capable and competent, as the driver of the visual arts curriculum she plans and implements, and expresses how:

*When we are exploring a theme within the setting we encourage children to record their response to the concepts, and they can approach this through whichever medium they like, so some children might prefer to work 3 dimensionally and so their visual experience would be through block play, others might document their ideas in paint some might choose collage, all of these processes target different developmental skills but the foundation to everything we do is to ensure children are given choice as this sends the message that we trust and believe in their competencies and capabilities [ECCE 9].*

It is apparent from the responses given by both ECCE practitioner interviewee (six) and (nine) that the link between the theoretical underpinning of how children learn and the role the visual arts play in children’s holistic development is understood. Moreover, their insight into giving children agency over their own learning process closely reflects arguments made by Kelly (2012) who claims that it is inappropriate on the part of the
practitioner to have pre-determined outcomes regarding children’s artwork. The majority (23) of ECCE practitioner interviewees state that they provide pre-determined art activities because they are: *easy to follow with examples included. Even if you aren’t good at art, the idea, steps and materials needed are all there* [ECCE 5]. These observations are confirmed by nine support personnel who provide valuable insight as to why practitioners resort to product-orientated art activities. Practitioners approach art in the only way they know how because:

*Many educators are not equipped with the necessary skill set during initial professional education to enable them to provide a visual arts curriculum which is inquiry-based* [SP 3].

Consistent with the focus of this study, only one ECCE practitioner interviewee describe the art experiences within her settings (three in total) as reflective of a transdisciplinary approach (TDA). Although she makes no direct reference to the term Transdisciplinarity, there is congruence with McGregor’s (2017) thesis on learning which claims that a novel, richer and holistic approach to knowledge and inquiry is induced by a process of stepping out of silos and in effect transcending different disciplines:

*The visual arts open up the language of all subjects like, Maths and Science, Literacy, History and so on. We don’t separate out the areas of learning here. Instead we work with STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Maths) and use art as children’s language of discovery, encouraging them to record and document observations and discoveries* [ECCE 9].

Findings from other respondents however, indicate a skewed understanding of the role the arts play in fostering children’s holistic development. Responses from seven of the ECCE practitioner interviewees are limited to exclusively highlighting the emotional benefits: *well it helps with children expressing themselves* [ECCE 2] and physical benefits: *art is a great way to develop fine and gross motor skills* [ECCE 17]. A little over a third (12) of the ECCE practitioner interviewees also provide responses which suggest a skewed understanding of their role:
I first make an example and then show them [the children] what we are going to make today and then get them to follow the steps [ECCE 29].

We [the adults] look up art activities, often online, on Facebook or Pinterest, to do with the children and then we discuss the different ideas as a team and decide what craft we will do for the month [ECCE 2].

Such responses raise significant doubt as to whether the core of Aistear (NCCA, 2009) philosophy is really understood. Essentially, effective use of Aistear (NCCA, 2009) requires adults to engage in all areas of children’s development as stipulated by Rogers (2013). Notably, it is highlighted in Chapter 2 that Aistear (NCCA, 2009) and Siolta (CECDE, 2006) promote ‘supporting the optimal well-being, learning and development of the child, reflecting contemporary thinking in effective pedagogy’ (Rogers 2013:11). Of significance, despite Siolta (CECDE, 2006) being the National Quality Framework, none of the 30 ECCE practitioner interviewees make any reference to Siolta. The reason for this is not established.

In summary, findings show that among practitioner interviewees there exists a variety of differing interpretations of the principles of Aistear (NCCA, 2009) and Siolta (CECDE, 2006), as they pertain to the planning and delivery of visual arts experiences for pre-school children. Some ECCE practitioner interviewees believe the visual arts processes offered to children are indeed reflective of the principles of Aistear (NCCA, 2009), affording children opportunities to be active rather than passive participants during creative experiences. However, examples which they cite do not reflect quality creative experiences which act as a catalyst in nurturing children’s; well-being, sense of identity and belonging. Rather, are the core elements of the curriculum and quality frameworks viewed in isolation and the emphasis in visual arts processes is placed on targeting specific skill-sets such as motor, hand-eye coordination and dexterity. In my opinion, while these are very worthwhile skills to master, the tendency to use visual art experiences exclusively as a means of ensuring school readiness is contrary to good practice. Furthermore, more open-ended, creative processes, including sensory experiences using loose parts incorporates the development of motor skills, while also fostering self-expression, thus, facilitating children to investigate and explore, and communicate ideas, thoughts and feelings to develop holistically (Egan-Rainy, 2017). Although, the vast majority appear to have a theoretical understanding of how children
learn and of the quality and curriculum frameworks whose aims they can cite at ease, this theoretical knowledge does not translate to practice. Fundamentally, the findings suggest that there is incongruity between ECCE practitioner interviewee rhetoric and the reality which they describe. This claim is confirmed by support personnel interviewees. They note, that good practice is stressed in national policy documents, but is not evident in visual arts experiences within the Irish ECCE context. A more substantial insight into different approaches to the visual arts amongst the ECCE practitioner interviewees was sought.

4.5 Approaches to Visual Arts Curriculum Implementation

4.5.1 The Process versus Product Approach

The two main models for the implementation of visual arts education are: the traditional, *product approach* where emphasis is placed on ‘plans and intentions’ (Neary, 2003:39) and, the more progressive *process approach* which highlights ‘activity and effect’ (ibid.). The process approach to creative experiences for young children is considered to best facilitate an inquiry-based emergent curriculum in Early Years Education (McLachlan et al., 2018) and the recognition of the outcome of that process in the form of a finished artistic product is also important (Eisner 1973-1974).

Significantly, all 30 ECCE practitioner interviewees state emphatically that the visual arts experiences they provide children are process-driven. However, on further probing, only seven of 30 demonstrate a deep and rich understanding of the role of process-led learning opportunities, when asked to describe a typical learning activity they afford children in their care. The following methodical plan is one which demonstrates an adherence to the principles of Aistear (NCCA, 2009) and inquiry-based learning:

*I display items from the natural world with a focus on the artistic element line; thick, thin, long, short, wavy, straight, broken etc. We would examine these and build descriptive vocabulary. We might then use different drawing materials like charcoal, graphite, ink pens and*
introduce a variety of surfaces on which to explore and create a range of marks [ECCE 22].

The process-led approach is again adhered to in the following quotation, whereby the practitioner or adult acts as a facilitator to enable the child to embark on self–discovery through self-directed learning:

We encourage outdoor learning so for example an idea we might explore in the outdoors would be to collect natural materials like leaves, twigs, pebbles, bark etc. and encourage children to explore transient art and create visual patterns like mandalas using loose parts. That way they can learn about size, scale, texture, colour even numbers and sequencing [ECCE 1].

Additionally, two ECCE practitioner interviewees describe the importance of carrying out visual arts projects over several weeks. This demonstrates not only an understanding of the process approach but also how the practitioner allows it to unfold, over time. In process learning, the facilitator should ensure that children are unhampered by set time lines or set end points as outlined in the following quotation:

Ideas often need time and space for reflection. Art isn’t always instantaneous and children should be enabled to have that time so that their concepts germinate and grow. So we might explore the concept of autumn by first examining what fruit and vegetables are harvested at that time of year. We could have children engaged in research through still-life line sketches of different pumpkins, squashes and corn. That could then be followed by colour studies, then print could be introduced or additional mark-making over the paintings and so on [ECCE 9].

Another example in keeping with Eisner’s (1973-1974) theory where he stresses the importance of the end-product, as well as the process, is highlighted by ECCE (30):

I’ve noticed that the children get huge personal reward from working through an idea and piece over time. It’s an amazing sense of achievement and pride especially when we display the entire learning and discovery process in images along with their final piece for their parents to see [ECCE 30].

These responses closely reflect a project approach, as described by Katz et al., (2014), whereby ideas develop and evolve over time and children are not limited to a set period
for art but rather are afforded the facility to research and engage in prolonged in-depth investigation through extended projects. Additionally, Chard et al., (2017) highlight that children who engage in this level of research in the visual arts acquire the necessary skill-set to learn across multiple domains.

In contrast to the aforementioned examples of process-driven approaches to the visual arts, 23 ECCE practitioner interviewees provide examples which were exclusively product-based, although they enthusiastically endorse the process approach. This is reminiscent of the aforementioned gulf between lip-service and practice, rhetoric and reality and echoes concerns raised by Christakis (2017) who records that practitioners frequently cannot distinguish between a process or product approach to the arts in ECEC. She opines that ‘traditional copycat-crafts are replaced with only a veneer of freedom and creativity’ (Christakis, 2017:64). This statement is true of 23 responses, as exemplified by one ECCE practitioner interviewee with six years’ experience working in the sector, who states enthusiastically how she adopts: *a process approach to the visual arts, based on the emerging interests of the children* [ECCE 2]. However, when requested to outline a typical art experience which one would expect to provoke the child’s curiosity and stimulate interest, she details an activity which is clearly adult-led, where the focus is on an end product, in direct opposition to the holistic, process-led approach to curriculum which she claims to espouse:

*We have our theme set out for the month. At the moment we are using the book ‘Room on a Broom’, because it’s Halloween and we get the children to copy and paint a picture from the book. It’s great cause they can choose the picture they like and we don’t tell them what to paint [ECCE 2].*

The ‘Room on a Broom’ activity has specific aims and objectives and leaves minimal opportunity for children to respond in an individual way. This product approach to the implementation of an arts curriculum is inappropriate for fostering Aistear (NCCA, 2009) themes and developing children’s creative expression (Kelly, 2012). Such adult-initiated activities do not provide the necessary experience which addresses a holistic approach to learning.
Another ECCE practitioner interviewee employed in the sector for 15 years (currently training to obtain a Level 8 qualification) explains how she embraces a process-based approach, solely, stating emphatically:

*For us it’s never about the product. Everything we do is about the process so that children can develop holistically* [ECCE 16].

However, when invited to describe an example of a typical activity, the one she proffers is in direct opposition to the above claim:

*So, recently we cut out ghost handprints, you know upside down ones where each hand-print is unique. Because of the theme, Halloween, they all used black paper and white paint but after that they could decorate them any way they wanted. So some used googly eyes, others used glitter or cotton wool* [ECCE 16].

The two aforementioned examples give cause for concern in that they represent the disconnect between the understanding of Aistear (NCCA, 2009) theory, and the implementation of Aistear (NCCA, 2009) principles. Furthermore, these examples are not isolated instances or anomalies in the research but rather do they reflect the convictions of the majority (23) of ECCE practitioner interviewees who are convinced that they are compliant with Aistear (NCCA, 2009) objectives when implementing a visual arts curriculum. The claim that either of the foregoing activities afford children choice and: *the opportunity to express and communicate their individuality* [ECCE 18] demonstrates the gulf between theory and practice. Cut-out hand prints prepared by the adult in advance, with a prior decision about colour (black and white for Halloween) to be decorated with cotton wool and glitter, represents an adult-led, product-driven activity and is out of sync with the spirit of Aistear (NCCA, 2009) and inquiry-based learning (Egan-Rainy, 2017).

The disconnect between theory and practice is again, evident in the case of a newly qualified practitioner interviewee, who points out that: *greater value is placed on the experiential process over the end product, in this setting* [ECCE 4] and also by another ECCE practitioner interviewee of 15 years’ experience: *activities which are open-ended and child-led are favoured in our centre* [ECCE 25]. However, there is little or no evidence to back up these claims and it is noteworthy that a similar disconnect exists
regardless of when both graduated. A further 23 ECCE practitioner interviewees describes how the topic, activity and materials have all been purposively chosen by the adult in advance, with minimal input from the children. Interestingly, despite the visual arts being valued and at the core of play-based practice within the early childhood context as championed by Aistear (NCCA, 2009) and Síolta (CECDE, 2006), as well as other researchers (Wright 2012, Vecchi, 2010), the responses more closely reflect Bamford’s (2013:177) claim that ‘there still remains a large and growing gulf between the lip service paid to arts education and the provision of meaningful creativity experiences’. This is not to suggest that ECCE practitioner interviewees are being disingenuous but rather does it point to the disconnect between theory and practice. There are many reasons for this disconnect, not least of all training at initial professional education level, already discussed. A further reason for favouring such festive activities as the Halloween ghost handprints described above, is that they serve to provide evidence of learning for display, to be viewed by the various stakeholders.

4.5.2 Art Display as Evidence of Learning

The majority of practitioner interviewees (25) stress the importance of an art display wall as evidence of learning for both parents and the inspectorate: *It shows parents exactly what we have been doing in art and is there for the inspectorate to see when they visit the centre* [ECCE 2]. This rationale is shared by seven support personnel who maintain that practitioners often feel pressured to provide evidence of art activity and, art wall displays are effective, in this regard. Furthermore, another support personnel explains the impetus behind such art on display, within the Early Childhood context:

> Providing templates or step by step crafts are a very safe way of showing measurable outputs, it proves publicly that you have done art and you find this often amongst educators who are not confident in their practice and own artistic ability [SP 6].

The art on display described by 23 ECCE practitioner interviewees reflects little more than the perfunctory skill of colouring, sticking and pasting. In my opinion, this unimaginative display-dominance cheats children of the creative experience. It restricts their efforts at exploration and paralyses efforts to express what Narey (2009:2) identifies as ‘modalities of meaning making’. The following quotation
further demonstrates how rooted this concept is in the psyche of practitioners and the almost reflex pattern adopted is to mechanically create pre-determined adult-led products with little or no relevance to the holistic approach to education, as informed by creative processes and experiences:

We tend to use paper plates for almost all our art. You can do so much with them like now we have pumpkins for Halloween. We will start our Christmas art in two weeks’ time where we will use them to make Santa faces and fold them in half to make chickens in spring [ECCE 7].

In my opinion, this almost religious adherence to the ‘tried and tested’ does not allow for experimentation and self-expression, provoke curiosity or nurture creativity. Seefeldt (2002) strongly criticises the stifling and inhibiting effect of this type of adult-directed approaches to art. He is unequivocal in his condemnation where he posits that rather than promoting a sense of self, they have a negative psychological effect which undermines the child’s confidence and creative ability. The abundance of such examples of approaches to visual art experiences within the Early Childhood context prompts serious questions as to the relevance of such unbridled activities.

The aforementioned findings highlight conflicting interpretations amongst the research participants on how best to ensure children’s holistic development is met through visual art experiences. While respondents demonstrate a sound understanding of the theory, merits and desirability of inquiry-based learning, the approach they adopt is adult-led and product-driven. This is evidenced by the detailed descriptions of various art activities undertaken, as well as the abundance of product driven, pre-determined wall displays in various settings visited during the current research. Of particular significance, is the mindset of ECCE practitioner interviewees, their unawareness of the disconnect between the theory they propound and the practice in which they and the children engage. While they are convinced that they are implementing a curriculum which meets the emergent interests of the child, they are in reality implementing a product-driven approach of very limited pedagogic value. There is, therefore, a need to examine more closely the role of the practitioner and the image of the child in determining chosen approaches to the visual arts, to be addressed in the following section.
4.5.3 The Image of the Child and the Role of the Adult

The founder of the Reggio Emilia approach, Loris Malaguzzi (1993) highlights that social, cultural and historical factors influence how an educator views a child. Indeed, he draws a direct correlation between the image of the child’s competencies and capabilities and the teaching approach adopted by the educator. More recently, Martalock (2012:3) defines the image of the child as ‘how people think about a child’s capabilities, development, motivations, purpose, and agency’. This is further reflected in Aistear (NCCA, 2009) which advocates learning experiences which enable children to grow and develop into competent and confident learners. In the current research, the majority (8) of support personnel regard the main obstacle to effective implementation of a visual arts curriculum as predominantly how practitioners view the child. They regard the image of the child as being key to planning and operationalising visual arts experiences for young children:

*If practitioners have an image of the child as being confident, competent and capable they would surely provide more process-led art because they would recognise its power in affording children agency, in meeting their holistic needs and in turn providing them with the necessary skills for life-long learning* [SP 8]

Additionally, it might be due to their perception that a direct correlation exists between a child’s socio-economic background and a child’s ability to have mastered basic skills like holding a pencil or using a scissors properly. How ECCE practitioner interviewees view the child, emerges when they describe the adult role in art opportunities, which they provide.

The role of the adult in visual arts curriculum implementation can be direct or indirect depending on the approach adopted by the practitioner. All 30 ECCE practitioner interviewees, outline visual arts experiences which fall into one of two categories, as described by Lillard (2013) in relation to play: *free or guided*. *Free* play is an impromptu activity often involving peers, concentrated around fantasy and imagination with little adult involvement or input. *Guided* play, on the other hand, encompasses direct adult input, often providing specific materials and tools to stimulate children’s natural curiosity. Interestingly, all 30 ECCE practitioner interviewees describe their
practice as one which provides: free art opportunities [ECCE 21] and gives children access to materials throughout the day [ECCE 13]. However, only a small number of ECCE practitioner interviewees, six in total, describe experiences that more closely resemble what Lillard (2013) terms as playful learning. She argues that authentic learning which is child-centred, practical and constructivist encompasses both free and guided play.

Tutchell (2014) places the responsibility of empowering children’s artistic experience, on adults and maintains that this is achieved when practitioners engage in ‘dialogue, motivation, observation and documentation’ (Tutchell, 2014: 96). Notably, examples of these types of interactions between adult and child during art experiences are evident among six ECCE practitioner interviewees only. One describes collaborative interactions between the adult and child where autonomy of creative expression and direction is provided to the child, as indicated below:

Together with the children we discuss ideas, select relevant art materials, ones that we imagine might help them to best represent their ideas. We then give them the opportunity to share their work, to talk about their drawing, what they noticed, how they might approach it differently next time and what was successful [ECCE 1].

Another ECCE practitioner interviewee expands on the role of the adult during free art, as being paramount in supporting and scaffolding children’s learning as described by (Wood, Bruner and Ross, 1976):

Our role is to observe and ask open-ended questions which invite the children to tell us about their drawings and this gives us the opportunity to find out what the children are interested in and build their learning around those ideas [ECCE 9].

This example demonstrates the importance of guided participation which enables children to take the lead but where the adult can actively steer, encourage and extend learning opportunities where necessary. Moreover, another ECCE practitioner interviewee adds that during free drawing sessions she is mindful of when to participate in the process. She states that giving children space to express themselves
is fundamental, in order to inspire and enhance learning and interest in the arts rather than impede it:

*I find that during free drawing, especially with young toddlers I learn the most about them. It might just look like a bunch of lines on the page but I know that they are drawing connections between what they are trying to represent and how they might achieve this with their marks* [ECCE 11].

These quotations are reflective of the type of responses given by six ECCE practitioner interviewees when their views were sought on adult involvement in children’s art experiences. They point towards ECCE practitioner interviewee understanding of balanced play, which provides opportunities to incorporate both child-centred activities and adult interaction. Additionally, these findings demonstrate that six of the ECCE practitioner interviewees recognise that guided play includes adult-scaffold learning objectives but is directed by the child, reminiscent of Jenson’s (2018) thesis that a successful art experience involves sound knowledge of child development by the adult. An example might be to recognise how ‘markings (scribbles) mean something to children as they make cognitive connections between marks made and known objects’ (ibid: 75). In opposition to this perspective, however, the vast majority (24) of ECCE practitioner interviewee responses suggest that adult involvement during free art time is in fact detrimental to children’s learning. They agree with O’Brien (2010) in her claim that adult intervention in play is damaging children’s self-agency:

*It’s a time for them to do what they want in art and so the adult shouldn’t disturb that as otherwise it can interrupt their learning and it takes away from their own ideas* [ECCE 28].

Another ECCE practitioner interviewee maintains that: *free art means it’s free from adult involvement* [ECCE 26]. Sharing this opinion another ECCE practitioner interviewee stresses that: *free-art is process-driven and child-led and therefore affords children the opportunity to uninhibitedly, express whatever they want* [ECCE 24]. Interestingly, although reference is made to supporting children’s learning in a general sense by all 30 ECCE practitioner interviewees’, only six hold the view that there is a need for adult interaction during children’s art (play) in order to support learning. The remaining 24 ECCE practitioner interviewees are all of the opinion that process-led
and free art should be void of adult intervention, as they believe that this would corrupt children’s natural artistic development. These concerns largely appear to pervade the Early Childhood Education and Care sector. Ewing (2010) draws attention to extensive research, recommending adult involvement in children’s visual arts experiences as a means of furthering and supporting, rather than hindering artistic development. In my opinion however, a laissez-faire, non-interventionist approach to the visual arts seems to prevail. This is apparent particularly during free-drawing experiences where ECCE practitioner interviewees interpret ‘child-led’ as leaving children to their own devices:

*We don’t really get involved in their drawing or colouring. If they ask us something of course we help them but it really is their free time to do their art [ECCE 15].*

Instead of adopting a hands-off approach (by the adult) during child-led art processes, a deeper partnership between adult and child is advised by Lindsey (2020). She describes how working alongside children, as they express their ideas and theories in a visual and symbiotic way, affords them the opportunity to learn from the observations of the adult. It does not hinder the creative process but promotes self-expression. However, this approach can be a daunting prospect for some practitioners who feel they lack self-efficacy or visual arts pedagogical knowledge or training in the fostering open-ended free-expression (as has been voiced by some respondents in the current research). Additionally, children’s free drawing sessions without adult intervention appear to have less value amongst 18 of the ECCE practitioner interviewees, in contrast to the planned intentional art activities: *they put their free drawing in their folders after they are done colouring [ECCE 19].* In contrast, prepared activities are viewed as having a definite purpose, where developmental skill is easily identifiable and therefore it would appear is held in higher regard:

*We’re doing hedgehog pictures with them at the moment. Each child has an outline and they can decorate them with the leaves they collected in the garden. We then display them and talk about hibernation and this helps us record their motor-skills, their spatial awareness plus what information they’ve retained about the theme [ECCE 14].*

When probed further on how the adult might identify areas of learning during free art sessions, 24 ECCE practitioner interviewees struggle to provide concrete examples.
The nature of free-art seems to be interpreted as exclusively child-led and playful in nature, resulting in learning being more difficult to identify:

*We can easily see which children are having difficulty when we do our weekly art because we have given instructions and there are steps to follow. It’s also clear if they have learnt about the theme or if they have become better at using a scissors or if they know their colours. The free drawing is more for them to just express themselves so I find it harder to pinpoint their learning [ECCE 8].*

This quotation is not an isolated viewpoint but rather representative of sentiments shared by 24 ECCE practitioner interviewees and raises concerns surrounding the issues involved in unsupported art experiences in pre-school. Similarly, McArdle and Wright (2014) caution against practitioners adopting an ‘anything goes’ attitude, and stress the role of the adult as being key to guiding art experiences, in order to enable authentic meaning-making to take place. In my opinion, it can be deduced that if children are merely left to their own devices, the opportunity for the arts to act as a catalyst for rich learning and development is lost. The conundrum facing practitioners is recognising how best to realise and maintain a supportive role during unstructured drawing experiences, and this becomes apparent in 18 of the ECCE practitioner interviews. The following quotation expresses sentiments shared by all 18:

*It’s easier to show them [children] how to do art when we have structured art activities around a theme where we are all doing the same thing. It also helps me take note of their motor-skills, their hand–eye coordination, dexterity and so on [ECCE 7].*

Interestingly such observations are also held by Yelland (2011:5) who refers to learning through play as (at times) being, ‘problematic and misleading’ as the type of learning taking place may not necessarily be obvious. This could generally apply to 18 ECCE practitioner interviewees who share how they struggle to identify learning through free-art processes. A further 20 ECCE practitioner interviewees identify guided art activities, involving cutting, sticking, and colouring, as being easier options to support children’s learning: *we can show them how to follow steps in an activity [ECCE 29] and how developing motor-skills can be facilitated: If a child is struggling with how to use a scissors we can identify that very quickly and help them [ECCE 12].*
Essentially, it can be argued that such examples suggest adult-directed art is considered a higher order methodology, than free drawing, due to the ease of measuring developmental indicators such as hand-eye coordination and motor-skills. Deans and Wright (2018) note that many practitioners hold more traditional views of childhood development whereby the child’s artistic efforts are practitioner initiated and guided rather than borne out of individual forms of expression. It would appear from 18 of the ECCE practitioner interviewee responses that it may well be because practitioners feel more comfortable and better able to assess children’s developmental milestones through product-based, adult-guided craft activities. Research suggests that rather than promoting holistic development, such structured art experiences do in fact inhibit natural creativity and self-expression. Lee and Wright (2017) point out that practitioners overlook children’s drawing as a form of expression, which records, documents and makes visible their perceptions, observations, sense of awareness and growth. Such examples give rise to questions surrounding how practitioners interpret what constitutes visual arts experiences within the early childhood context and the rationale for chosen approaches. Moreover, half (15) ECCE practitioner interviewees justify adult-guided art experiences as providing children with essential skills to ensure a smooth transition from preschool to primary education.

4.5.4 The Visual Arts and School Readiness

Seven ECCE practitioner interviewees express the importance of adequately equipping children in their care for: *the challenges which face them when moving on to primary education* [ECCE 10]. In this regard, nine ECCE practitioner interviewees claim that the visual arts *greatly assist in preparing children for primary school* [ECCE 7]. They proceed to provide examples of product-driven activities which ‘equate art to doing and making’ (LaJevic, 2016:10) and which do not have the potential to assimilate all areas of learning and development. Two ECCE practitioner interviewees stress the importance of such activities which include:

*Colouring-in and making craft especially to help children from disadvantaged backgrounds to improve and put them on an equal educational footing with others on entering primary school* [ECCE 25].
In accordance, ECCE practitioner interviewee (16) who works in a community-based ECEC setting, where the majority of children come from a poor socio-economic background describes and rationalises the visual arts programme she implements:

*We mainly do a lot of cutting and pasting and colouring in. I use art to give these children a fighting chance when they start primary school. Ninety percent of them come from really deprived backgrounds so I concentrate on showing them how to hold a pencil properly to develop pre-writing skills and how to use a scissors [ECCE 16].*

Despite being well intentioned to equip children with the necessary skills for school readiness such an approach to the visual arts adopted by this and other ECCE practitioners does not nurture the child’s holistic development but in fact stunts and inhibits the learning experience. Additionally, Moyles (2001:14) identifies that ‘children’s thinking is embedded in the context which has some meaning to them’ and therefore, they place no value on ‘activities such as filling in the blanks, worksheets and colouring-in’ (ibid.). Arguably, although motor-skills are enhanced through the frequent use of pencils and scissors, the other developmental domains are not being addressed, nor do such approaches reflect an inquiry-based emergent approach to learning. The focus of arts education in the early years should primarily be on developing the whole child ‘influencing and increasing their cognitive, physical, social and emotional skills simultaneously’ (Jenson 2018:75). Contrary to this, 15 ECCE practitioner interviewee responses focus exclusively on motor and concentration skills and fail to acknowledge the other developmental areas which support and advance children’s cognitive, problem-solving, social and personal competencies and dispositions as well as their physical, emotional and verbal development:

*Many children go to Primary [school] without being able to hold a pencil, use a scissors properly or sit still and listen to instructions. I think art really helps develop these skills when they have to make something in art which has set stages like cutting things out and sticking them in certain places. This all helps prepare them going forward to primary school [ECCE 16].*

Developing the skill to hold drawing tools, sit still while making art, and listen to step by step instructions when creating craft, may not ease the transition from preschool to primary as some ECCE practitioner interviewees think, as they do not appear to be
naturally holistic. Nor, do they reflect research by Brown et al., (2010) who advocate the importance of providing arts-rich environments where meaningful creative interactions can take place. These authors note how arts rich environments in turn, enhance children’s future educational outcomes by imparting to them essential problem-solving and necessary critical-thinking skills.

In conclusion, the dominant approach adopted by ECCE practitioner interviewees to the implementation of visual arts experiences for children is one which is; pre-determined, activity-based and product-driven. According to ECCE practitioner interviewees, the more adult-driven the approach to visual art experiences, the easier they are to implement, manage, display and measure. Furthermore, there appears to be a lack of clarity as to the role of the adult in such experiences and subsequently a large portion of ECCE practitioner interviewees believe their purpose is to ensure children are ready to embark on the next stage of their educational trajectory.

However, the practitioner is but one of the three key players in children’s learning, the other two being their peers and the educational environment. Indeed, Gandini (2012) in reference to the Reggio philosophy claims that the environment is an educator in itself and the surroundings make a constructive contribution to children’s learning. As the Reggio Philosophy is considered to represent the Gold Standard of Early Years Education, by practitioners, researchers and authors, (Lindsay, 2017, Krechevsky et al., 2014 Gandini, 2012; Gandini et al., 2005), it is deemed important to investigate how ECCE practitioner interviewees use the learning environment in visual arts experiences provided for children in their care.

4.6 The Learning Environment in Early Childhood Care and Education

According to the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2009), in Ireland the learning environment not only influences what children learn but also how children learn. Indeed, the Aistear (NCCA, 2009) ‘readily lends itself to the creation of an arts rich environment and practice’ (Rogers, 2013:10) particularly in relation to the twelve principles and four interconnected themes; Well-being, Identity and Belonging, Communicating and Exploring and Thinking. A significant finding in this
study is observations made by the majority (seven) of support personnel interviewees who highlight that practitioners have a superficial understanding only of how the various themes within Aistear (NCCA, 2009) apply to the learning environment, when it comes to using the space for creative experiences. Support personnel collective sentiments are encapsulated in the following quotation:

* Aistear themes are often just skimmed on the surface when it comes to the arts experiences within the learning environment. I’ve heard practitioners say that the wellbeing of the child is being met simply because they (the children) enjoy doing arts and crafts..... or art is a way to communicate..... or art helps them explore and think... But when you look at art examples around the room you see little actual evidence of individuality. Also, the extent to which children are communicating, exploring and problem-solving for themselves, and how the space is used as ‘the third teacher’ is minimal [SP 1].

It can be deduced from the foregoing observations shared by support personnel (1), that although ECCE practitioner interviewees may be adamant that they adhere to the principles of Aistear, evidence of product-orientated art examples on display within the learning environment contradict such conviction. This may be as a direct result of ECCE practitioner interviewee limited understanding of the types of visual arts experiences which enable rich opportunities for children to; express their individuality, communicate their ideas and demonstrate independence. This is worthy of note, given that 20 ECCE practitioner interviewees state how they endeavour to ensure the learning environment is creative, educational and stimulating [ECCE 11]. However, none of the 30 ECCE practitioner interviewees refer to Siolta (CECDE, 2009) (the Irish Quality Framework) Standard 2: The Environment which characterises the learning environment as essential in providing stimulating and enriching experiences for children’s growth and development. Moreover, none of the 30 ECCE practitioner interviewees note that the environment instills in children a positive sense of ‘identity and belonging’ as outlined in Siolta, Standard 2. These findings raise the question of the depth of understanding ECCE practitioner interviewees have of the impact the learning environment has on promoting creativity in young children. All 10 support personnel, on the other hand, refer to the environment in the context of the Quality Framework and how it plays a significant role in promoting or inhibiting creativity.
Noteworthy, are the responses of eight support personnel who claim that in their experience they have: *seen very few settings which provide visual arts experiences which truly foster and celebrate the individuality of each child*, [SP 4] (something which Eisner (2002) argues is central to a child’s sense of identity). One support personnel is unequivocal in her criticism:

_I notice that there seems to be a lack of understanding by many practitioners surrounding children’s individuality in their art and their sense of identity and belonging within the learning environment. If children are all engaged in creating the same pieces how can they possibly see themselves as unique when they look up and can’t even identify their own work on display?*_ [SP 1]

Specific to the display of children’s project and artwork, Siolta (CECDE, 2009) stipulates that the learning environment requires careful consideration in order to reflect children’s individual forms of expression. Moreover, an arts rich learning environment allows children to actively work independently or in collaboration, in order to problem-solve and to develop and share ideas. It can be suggested, therefore, that quality education of young children demands that they be provided with a variety of stimulating and challenging arts experiences within the learning environment to celebrate their unique and collective visual contribution. In discussion on the environment, the aspect of space was focused upon and how and where creativity takes place.

In reference to a flexible learning environment, or a designated space for art, only six ECCE practitioner interviewees use space freely for children to engage with creative processes driven by children’s own initiative:

*Giving children unrestricted access to move freely between the different learning spaces allows for them to try out their art ideas across the setting, whether it be in the indoor or outdoor environment. It’s important that they don’t associate art as being restricted to one single area within a room but that they can follow their own motivation and curiosity which reflects their learning style*_ [ECCE 9].
On the other hand, the majority of practitioner interviewees (24) are employed in settings which do not subscribe to the idea of a flexible learning environment. They describe how, in settings generally, a specific area is allocated to art. Children associate creative experiences with what is often termed: the art corner [SP2] and their creative exploration and discovery is restricted to that space within the physical environment. This is confirmed by seven support personnel interviewees who describe how: the arts are often restricted to the art corner or the dress-up area [SP 2]. Davis and McGregor (2016) claim that such themed areas with set goals and defined parameters within ECEC settings deny children the imaginative freedom to move and learn within and between spaces. The spatial confinement of creative experiences limits the extent to which children’s ideas emerge, germinate and flourish. This, in turn, inhibits the child’s sense of connectiveness and relationship between spaces, between learning environments, and does not allow for: children’s imagination to adapt to suit their learning needs and level of understanding [SP 9].

The majority of support personnel interviewees express concern that many Early Years settings in Ireland do not currently provide high quality arts-rich learning environments:

In most settings, unfortunately, it is limited to theme-based arts and crafts and these take place in the art area, sometimes with one child or only a few children at any one time but the tasks and results are often already decided by the adult. So, there is no opportunity for children to express themselves in a unique way and share their stories and ideas about what they are creating [SP 7].

One support personnel laments the situation and expands on this point further:

Sadly, many early years educators don’t know how to interact with children during creative experiences. They don’t always know what their actual role is or how to engage in a meaningful and beneficial way. A big problem I also notice is a lack of understanding as to the impact the environment and materials have in children’s ability or inability to express themselves creatively [SP 5].

Evidently, therefore, these findings suggest that the role the educational environment has on children’s learning is not widely understood amongst the majority of ECCE practitioner interviewees. The very potential of the learning space, materials, visual
arts interactions, and the facilitation of the adult therein are all undervalued, impacting on the child’s overall development and well-being. A flexible learning environment welcomes the child to Nature’s classroom in the Great Outdoors and conversely an ‘art corner’ or ‘dress up space’ deprives children of this incomparable inquiry-based learning opportunity. This was substantiated by six of the support personnel interviewees who note that not enough value is placed on the environment in its broadest sense, to being integral to the learning experience and development of the child. In this vein, McClure et al., (2017) identify the key features of quality visual arts practice as being the presence of meaningful interactions between children, practitioners, materials and the full range of environments. Another aspect of the learning environment which merits discussion is the aesthetics of the space which children occupy, where children learn.

### 4.6.1 Aesthetics and the Learning Environment

The importance of an aesthetically pleasing learning environment was discussed. Twenty ECCE practitioner interviewees describe how they like to decorate the room: *it has to be fun and colourful, children love bright colours and find it inviting* [ECCE 8]. Another added with enthusiasm: *we love bright walls, in yellow or orange and with lots of art displayed. We also like to suspend children’s craft from the ceiling* [ECCE 2]. These examples suggest an environment which is overly stimulating, often consisting of wall displays which are unrelated to the learning context. Fisher et al., (2014), in their study on the effects of over-stimulation on children’s learning, find that in such an environment children suffer from sensory overload and become easily distracted and unfocussed on learning. These researchers note how, by way of contrast, learning increases and children become more focused when such wall and ceiling displays are removed, as in the minimalist approach of the Reggio Emilia philosophy.

Interestingly, almost all (27) of the ECCE practitioner interviewees mention *‘hearing about’* [ECCE 8] the Reggio approach as part of their training but only twelve credit the philosophy with improving their practice. One ECCE practitioner interviewee expresses how the Reggio approach has impacted the colour scheme of the setting she manages:
We finally took the plunge this summer and painted over our bright yellow walls which have been the same for 15 years. They are now a subtle grey like the examples you see in Reggio [ECCE 29].

Another comments on how the philosophy has caused her to re-evaluate the materials within the ECEC setting in general. She asserts:

*We’ve got rid of most of the plastic and now have introduced a lot more natural materials in nice little containers like we saw from Reggio examples. We hope to get a light box in the near future* [ECCE 20].

It is apparent from the aforementioned, that both ECCE practitioner interviewees (20) and (29) have taken initial steps to address the aesthetics and quality of materials within the learning environment. While these initiatives are laudable, more than a piecemeal approach is needed to demonstrate a deeper appreciation and understanding of the philosophical principles of the Reggio approach. Additionally, twelve ECCE practitioner interviewees claim to have been heavily influenced by the Reggio approach but only six provide actual examples of visual arts experiences which closely resemble the Reggio philosophy. The Reggio Emilia approach propounds a philosophy whereby the child is central to the learning process and the fundamental rights (of the child) are respected and observed. This lack of true understanding of Reggio does not only pertain to the Irish context, as Christakis (2017) in relation to the American system notes that much of the underlying ethos of the Reggio approach has been ‘lost in translation’ and does not fit well with the ‘competitive, product-driven culture’ i.e. one rooted in consumerism (ibid:80). She argues that ‘doing’ Reggio is often interpreted as focusing primarily on the aesthetic rather than embracing the core Reggio philosophy. This is reiterated by half of the support personnel interviewees, who observe that the Reggio approach is in the main adopted only at a fairly superficial level, albeit by well-intentioned practitioners:

*There are only a small fraction of settings that have been able to truly embrace the Reggio approach. Many make reference to being influenced by the philosophy. They go out and buy Reggio type materials like a light box, get rid of plastics and change the colour on the walls, which are all steps in the right direction but when you look at the art
on the walls what you find is the same old arts and craft products [SP 1].

The aesthetics and materials within the learning environment, alone, do not define the Reggio approach as outlined by Ewing (2010). She highlights that a distinguishing feature of the innovative praxis is how the practitioner perceives the child, and how, this in turn, influences the way in which children learn. Furthermore, she argues that the image of the child enables practitioners to comprehend the role of the adult and requires them to reflect on children’s capabilities. In this regard, it can be deduced that materials and aesthetics alone may not suffice in ensuring children are given appropriate agency during the creative process to express themselves effectively within the learning environment. McClure et al., (2017) assert that a materials-rich, organised learning environment, which accommodates inquiry, welcomes discovery and interactions, promotes a sense of wonder and imagination is necessary for creative development. However, they maintain that relationships, between practitioner and child have more of an impact on children’s learning than the environment alone. These authors advocate a culture of openness and flexibility where ideas, questions, thoughts and feelings surrounding children’s art are valued and identify these as integral to the creative learning process. On the contrary, creative processes described by the majority (23) of ECCE practitioner interviewees appear to revolve around instruction with the principal objective being the execution of a final art product.

It was deemed important, therefore, to enlist the opinions of the support personnel as in how to address a shift from an overly product-driven approach to the visual arts, especially for practitioners currently working within the sector. Over half (six) comment that mentors working with the National Early Years Quality Development Service- Better Start use the National Council of Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2017) Practice Guide as a key resource. One support personnel explains how this is particularly useful given that a number of the examples reflect high quality practice in an Irish based context:

*The NCCA have published a number of podcasts created specifically around the process versus product debate in the visual arts....how to set up inviting provocations and what to consider in terms of aesthetics when designing the learning environment. These are all Irish based and so I*
find educators are more open to the suggestions than they would be if they were to see beautiful examples from abroad which they can quickly dismiss as not being relevant or achievable within their context [SP 8].

This response demonstrates that ECCE practitioners respond well to examples of good practice set in their own cultural context, rather than to educational tools from a context with which they are unfamiliar. They have greater affinity to podcasts made under the auspices of the NCCA. However, another support personnel interviewee states how in her experience there are still a number of practitioners who struggle with the visual arts content within the Practice Guide:

*I’ve noticed different reactions to the podcasts. On the one hand, I’ll mentor practitioners who are very open to change and excited to try out the ideas, while others you can tell feel vulnerable, almost exposed when they see what they have been doing for years being presented as poor practice. I have to be very careful of how and at what point in the mentoring I show them [SP 4].*

Such findings raise the question of how best to use resources such as the Practice Guide when attempting to bridge the gap between long established poor practice and what would be seen as novel and high-quality art practice. This finding is significant in indicating how the podcasts need to be explained properly, and gradually introduced, so that practitioners are not threatened by the approach advocated. Their function is to assist quality arts practice and they are counterproductive if they intimidate practitioners. Quality arts practice, as viewed by Seidel et al., (2009), centres around four key areas; learning, pedagogy, community dynamics and environment. These authors argue that high-quality art practice is operationalised when the following is reflected: prioritizing the arts, collaboration between practitioner and child, use of high-quality art materials and resources and consideration given to the aesthetics of the learning space. They also see as paramount the implementation of a multidisciplinary and holistic curriculum, modelling of authentic art processes by the practitioner and the development of a culture of inquiry. Evidently, therefore ECCE practitioners need to be mindful of the importance of engaging in reflective practice and providing a learning environment which fosters relationships, trust and dialogue. Fundamentally, practitioners need to allow sufficient time for meaningful art processes to take place within the environment. However, there are many wide-ranging challenges and
obstacles which face practitioners in the implementation of high quality arts experiences for young children. Evidently, from the responses shared in this study it is apparent that views amongst participants differ regarding the learning environment, the role of the practitioner in that process and where to position the visual arts within the child’s learning experience. Additionally, there is a multitude of challenges to effective implementation of visual arts processes, as identified by ECCE practitioners and support personnel interviewed. These challenges include; a lack of understanding of (what constitutes) inquiry-based learning and (a lack of understanding) as to how to approach the visual arts from a transdisciplinary perspective; a fear of not meeting parental expectations; a lack of motivation and conflicting ideology amongst staff; and (finally) and importantly the influence of the inspectorate process. These challenges will be discussed within the following section.

4.7 Challenges to Implementing Inquiry-Based Learning using a Transdisciplinary Approach to the Visual Arts

4.7.1 Understanding Inquiry-Based Learning

One of the main challenges to implementing inquiry-based learning is a deficit in training because it has a direct impact on the understanding, confidence and subsequent ability to incorporate it in the overall teaching programme (Lister, 2015). These sentiments are echoed by 12 of the ECCE practitioner interviewees when asked to identify possible challenges they face in the implementation of a visual art curriculum, and is encapsulated in the following quotation:

*If I were to be honest, I don’t really feel confident with doing that type of art (process-driven) with them (the children) because I don’t think I fully understand what inquiry-based learning even is about. It’s not how we did art in school and I didn’t hear it as a term or mentioned at all in the art module during my training [ECCE 5].*

In my opinion, this lack of exposure to IBL during initial professional education creates a substantial barrier to the subsequent implementation of an inquiry-based emergent curriculum, as advocated by Aistear (NCCA, 2009). Understandably, therefore, is the attendant confusion and lack of confidence, and in such instances practitioners often
have no alternative but to resort to art practices which are familiar from past art experiences. Several ECEC practitioner interviewees express concern as to the role the adult should adopt in delivering art experiences using an inquiry-based model and how they lack the competence:

*We are expected to deliver an inquiry-based learning approach according to Aistear but I don’t feel I really know how to when it comes to art. Like I don’t know what really is my role during the process* [ECCE 2].

On further questioning, it transpires that this ECCE practitioner interviewee resorts to a product-driven approach, being the only one with which she is familiar. Notably, six of the support personnel also assert similar challenges, based on their observations of practitioners at work: *Many early years educators are at odds with their role* [SP 3]. *They seem to view their role as that of teacher rather than facilitator and therefore are more didactic in their approach to visual arts delivery* [SP 7]. The importance of the role of the adult in channelling children’s interests during the creative process is stressed by McArdle and Wright (2014). These authors opine that children need to be provided with suggestions to achieve desired outcomes and that the practitioner assumes the role of facilitator and guides the child through the process of art making. When information was elicited in relation to overcoming this challenge, nine support personnel recommend that continued professional development is imperative for those who have had this deficit in training and are currently employed in the workforce. For future prospective trainees, they recommended that the inquiry-based learning model should be intrinsic to initial professional education. Schmid and Bogner (2017) highlight the importance of professional development for teachers and practitioners engaging in IBL in order to assist them in recognising their specific role as facilitators. These researchers state that being a facilitator is fundamental, as it differs from the didactic one which can hinder children’s learning and with which teachers and practitioners are more accustomed. One support personnel in accordance with Schmid and Bogner (ibid.) elaborates further, observing that:

*There is confusion amongst many practitioners as to what their specific role is during children’s art experiences. Many see themselves as teachers and therefore feel they should “teach” which they interpret, in many cases as providing the steps and instructions for children to follow*
rather than build art experiences based on children’s interests. [SP 6].

It can be deduced therefore, that as a result of lack of clarity surrounding the role of the adult within an inquiry-based emergent curriculum, together with a lack of practical training at initial professional education level, practitioners resort to adopting a more traditional didactic model, closely reflecting their own schooling. As a result, it may be that many of the visual arts experiences offered to ECCE children within the Irish context are not driven by; curiosity, individuality and creativity and are contrary to policy documents informed by educational theory and research in good practice. Congruent with this, are the responses of four ECCE practitioner interviewees who express that they struggle with how to build art experiences: *based on children’s emerging interests and which come from questions they…the children…. might have* [ECCE 12]. Five of the support personnel interviewed observe that ECCE practitioners rarely design a visual arts curriculum which incorporates other areas of learning, as in a transdisciplinary approach: *Seldom are the visual arts used as the basis for discovery learning about…. say Maths or Science* [SP 8]. This is substantiated by 26 of the ECCE practitioner interviewees who provide examples which reflect the visual arts being exclusively used for a specific learning task: *we use colouring to help the children learn their shapes, numbers, letters and colours* [ECCE 8]. Another, when asked if the visual arts are used to incorporate other areas of learning, responds enthusiastically:

*Oh yes! Like we had the local Gardai (Police) visit and the children got to sit in the squad car and ask loads of questions and we had prepared a booklet for each child with colouring-in sheets of everything to do with the Gardai so this was a great way to see their learning from that experience* [ECCE 2].

It is evident from the foregoing description by ECCE (2) that such visual arts experiences are not driven by inquiry, nor do they allow children to demonstrate their own unique response and interpretation of the experience. The above activity is closed in nature, the adult has determined the imagery to be coloured-in and unfortunately such tasks do not provide insight into individual children’s learning process. Additionally, it can inhibit children from drawing meaningful relationships between real life events and their personal connection to them. Arguably, the child is not seen as creatively capable or competent but rather as one in need of set instructions to follow and confined within set
parameters. Additionally, the interpretation on the part of ECCE practitioner interviewee (2) that the visual arts in the form of colouring sheets addresses and incorporates other areas of learning (as in a transdisciplinary approach) is superficial and potentially holds little significance for the child.

It is evident from the responses provided by half of the support personnel, and over two thirds of the ECCE practitioners interviewed, that the visual arts are not being implemented using a TDA. Essentially, it can be suggested that rather than being central to the learning process the visual arts appear to be used as a means by which to reinforce lessons on literacy and numeracy or simply to test the children’s grasp of other lesson content. Furthermore, the actual term *transdisciplinary approach* is not once used by any of the 40 participants interviewed, although provided with ample opportunity to use this terminology. However, five of the support personnel do allude to what could be interpreted as mirroring ideas put forward by Marshall (2014) who argues that embracing a transdisciplinary approach requires a change in mindset and paradigm shift in educational models. Marshall calls for a move away from the traditional model, which sees the visual arts as being separate from other subjects, to one where the arts are integrated in the curriculum and perfuse all areas of learning. Support personnel (three) echoes this sentiment and presents ideas reflective of a TDA by highlighting the need for a relocation of the visual arts within ECCE. She maintains how by positioning the arts central to children’s activities, deeper learning transpires:

*Creative experiences in many ECEC settings needs to move away from just being seen as an exercise to reflect weekly or monthly themes and be placed centrally within all aspects of children’s learning [SP 3].*

The majority of participants in the field study, state that settings they are familiar with, favour an approach to creative experiences, which are directly linked to pre-determined topics chosen by the adult and not to experiences which stem from the emerging interests of the individual child. This is further elaborated on by another support personnel, an Early Years Specialist who holds a level nine qualification in the visual arts for use in Early Years Education:

*It is through the process of art-making that children are introduced to basic ideas of Science, Maths and Language*
because they are able to draw connections and relationships between the concrete materials they use and how these are linked to other subject areas. [SP 1].

She proceeds to provide a concrete example of how this could be achieved and measures its worth in contrast to colouring-in exercises:

In 3D construction they may be creating their own representation of something through imaginative play while simultaneously exploring mathematical concepts of: balance, scale, size, weight and sequencing. This is far more effective in terms of children retaining information and the learning being meaningful than say giving them a worksheet of shapes to colour in and label. Unfortunately, such practice is rare within Ireland, and art instead is more commonly seen as a means to visually describe the theme of the week or month [SP 1].

Such ideas are reflective of research by Nicholson (2009:12), who notes that during early childhood there is no differentiation between ‘play and work, art and science, recreation and education the classification normally applied by adults to a child’s environment: education is recreation, and vice versa’. Moreover, he claims that a laboratory-type environment, where children have the facility to experiment and wonder at their own little discoveries, promotes easy learning (ibid.). One ECCE practitioner interviewee describes such an environment, where she works and gives an example of the interconnectedness between work and play in children’s learning:

We encourage children to use drawing as a means to record their ideas about what they have made and discovered. Like for example in the construction area, they might have built a series or towers and bridges and platforms and rather than just leaving it at that we provide them with sketching materials and clipboards so that they can document their work. These can then be used as the basis for learning about architecture and engineering [ECCE 9].

This example affords children the opportunity to visually express their interpretation of buildings and structures. Moreover, it enables them to draw connections between their experiences and those of architects and engineers. Children are therefore, encouraged to draw relationships between their play and real-life scenarios. This closely reflects an inquiry-based emergent curriculum, which uses a transdisciplinary
approach to visual arts, processes, as the boundaries between subject areas are clearly transcended and the learning stems primarily from children’s interests.

Fundamentally, however, only five ECCE practitioner interviewees’ note how the visual arts experiences they provide children within their respective ECCE settings focus on: *emphasizing experiences which reflect real life situations* [ECCE 1] which would resemble: *the way in which a scientist, like say a botanist records their subject through sketching, colour matching, photography* [ECCE 22]. All five ECCE practitioner interviewee examples represent approaches to the visual arts which are in line with what the Aistear Siolta Practice Guide (NCCA, 2015) advocates, in regard to the implementation of an inquiry-based learning curriculum for children under six.

By way of contrast however, almost half of the ECCE practitioner interviewees (14) believe that they do: *not feel sure of how to define IBL* [ECCE 23] and consider themselves ill-equipped when it comes to: *explaining a process approach to parents* [ECCE 29]. Similarly, Engeln et, al., (2013) state that failure to establish a clear definition of IBL results in misunderstandings amongst practitioners and this in turn has an impact on the effectiveness of the approach. One support personnel who has been involved in mentoring and training practitioners within the ECCE sector for over 10 years, believes that the greatest challenge to the effective delivery of an IBL TD approach to the visual arts lies with the practitioner:

> They have an inability to articulate why they do what they do. Many lack the necessary terminology and the theoretical underpinning as well as a belief in how their chosen approach can support children’s learning, and in my experience that is why they stick to what they know to be safe and feel can easily be explained to both the parents and inspectors [SP 5].

This reflects Page and Tayler’s (2016) stance, who claim that although practitioners ‘should ideally be able to articulate the theoretical bases of their programs many practitioners struggle in this regard’ (ibid:16). This point was further substantiated by another support personnel who observed that:

> Practitioners tend to stick to typical art activities which are clearly identifiable, to avoid having to explain to
parents why there is no concrete outcome as evidence of learning [SP 8].

This further explains why ECCE practitioner interviewees may be reticent to adopt an IBL TD Approach which is not product-based. Another confounding factor is the necessity to meet parental expectations.

### 4.7.2 Meeting Parental Expectations

In my opinion, the driving force behind many visual arts experiences within ECCE is fear on the part of the practitioner that they will not be able to meet parental expectations. Twelve of the ECCE practitioner interviewees voice how they would feel intimidated if asked to explain a particular approach which is not product based:

> Parents would question whether we are even doing art if their child didn’t come home with examples that they see as typical for pre-school [ECCE 12].

A further 10 stress that: parents have clear ideas about what art children should be doing in pre-school [ECCE 5]. These sentiments mirror claims made by Kermond (2016: n.p.) who notes that the main struggle for practitioners are ‘parents who expect their pre-schooler to bring home something pretty to put on the fridge at home, and want to see their little ones’ creations on display in the kinder room, looking exactly like everyone else’s’. When asked to give specific examples of the types of art-work parents expect children to bring home, nine ECCE practitioner interviewees list product and topic-based activities such as: *Halloween pumpkins and Witches* or *craft-like cut-outs of Santa coming up to Christmas* [ECCE 2]. Furthermore, over half of the ECCE practitioner interviewees (20) believe that: parents love to see that kind of children’s art [ECCE 15] and one ECCE practitioner interviewee provides a possible reason: because it reminds them of what they used to do when they were in pre-school [ECCE 10]. These findings align with the views of Narey (2009), who argues that parental expectations dictate that most pre-school visual art in the United States is directed-production with holiday-type themes as motifs for the end-products. Almost all of the ECCE practitioner interviewees (27) refer to parental attitudes as being a strong determinant in approaches taken to the visual arts in ECCE. They express frustration at the majority of parents having an aversion to: mess and children coming home in
ruined cloths [ECCE 11]. This is reiterated by half of the support personnel who note how parental expectations can have a stultifying effect on practitioner practice: *many educators fear having to deal with the fall-out from parents if their child has paint on their clothes* [SP 3]. Interestingly, four of the support personnel highlight how practitioners often use ‘what parents want’ as a justification for not adopting an IBL approach to the visual arts:

Parents are viewed as the consumers of the service and pleasing them is often a deciding factor when it comes to the creative experiences offered to children [SP 7].

The four support personnel note, however, that parents are rarely included or consulted when it comes to their child’s learning and are:

*Ill-informed and unfamiliar with the importance of process and open-ended art experiences and therefore place little value on it* [SP 10].

Interestingly, five ECCE practitioner interviewees add that in their experience art is not held in high esteem by parents and more especially if it is non-representational art:

Parents show minimal interest in children’s artwork and less so if they are handed something that looks to them just like a bunch of messy lines [ECCE 22].

Another ECCE practitioner interviewee gives credence to this claim and advocates that not only are some parents disinterested in art, holding it in low esteem, but she has often witnessed their visible irritation at their child’s efforts:

*I’ve seen parents stuff art work impatiently into the children’s bags, showing so little interest when the child is handing it over to them and wanting to tell them about it. Or worse still sighing and saying “Oh God…… NOT MORE ART…. to bring home”. This of course just sends a message to the child that their art is not important or of any value* [ECCE 1].

Such findings suggest, therefore, that when there is poor understanding and undervaluing of open-ended visual art processes (closely associated with IBL), among parents. It results in a reticence among practitioners to adopt such an approach. Additionally, if process-led art is met with disinterest and dismissiveness as evident in
the foregoing quotation, then the child’s efforts are belittled. Furthermore, when the expectation is for children to bring home representative seasonal or celebratory art, this is an understandable challenge facing practitioners, especially those who themselves are not entirely comfortable with the implementation of a visual arts inquiry-based emergent curriculum. A further challenge to IBL is the underlying philosophy of an Early Childhood Education and Care centre.

4.7.3 The Culture of a Setting as a Challenge to Inquiry-Based Learning

Another challenge which is identified by over half (22) of the ECCE practitioner interviewees is: conflicting ideology when it comes to the visual arts, amongst and between staff members and management within their ECCE setting. All 30 ECCE practitioner interviewees stress that the approaches to the visual arts adopted within the ECEC settings in which they work is: largely influenced by management [ECCE 10]. Furthermore, 10 ECCE practitioner interviewees highlight that they:

*Feel torn between what I would like to do in terms of art experiences and what I feel I am allowed to do by management* [ECCE 4].

This management culture is also identified by nine of the support personnel, as being an obstacle to effective implementation of visual arts experiences within ECCE. One asserts how she has observed obvious frustration amongst some practitioners who believe they are:

*Restricted by the over-arching ethos of the centre, especially when it conflicts with their training which might advocate for more of an inquiry-based approach to the visual arts* [SP 5].

Evidently, therefore, irrespective of ECCE practitioner training and expertise, the leadership, management and centre ethos are determining factors in the types of visual arts experiences put into practice. If a manager does not endorse an IBEC philosophy or is unfamiliar with this approach, then the individual fledgling practitioner is faced with an onerous task. In my opinion, to assert oneself, and act as a catalyst for change would be demanding professionally and possibly beyond the capability of most ECCE practitioners, personally. Furthermore, the value placed on the visual arts within an
ECCE setting is fundamental to influencing approaches adopted to curriculum delivery. If authentic, meaningful, creative experiences are viewed by practitioners as instrumental in fostering a sense of identity and belonging within the child, there tends to be a greater emphasis placed on providing visual art experiences which are underpinned by an IBEC philosophy. This is confirmed by six of the ECCE practitioner interviewees who believe that the ethos of an ECCE setting is often influenced by management attitudes to the arts. This concurs with observations made by Collins (2016) who describes how there tends to be a certain conditioning and an awareness that society does not value the arts and how this can in turn influence practitioner perceptions as to the status afforded the arts within children’s education. In agreement, six ECCE practitioner interviewees maintain that the types of creative processes available to children are largely determined by intrinsic motivators:

*Enthusiasm, motivation towards the subject and the value placed on children’s learning through the arts plays a massive role in the range and types of experiences offered to children* [ECCE 9].

Similarly, another ECCE practitioner interviewee notes that being in the privileged position of owner and manager gives her the freedom to:

*Decide on, oversee and maintain art experiences that I believe in and know are meaningful for the children* [ECCE 20].

Furthermore, this interviewee highlights that this is primarily due to her having: *a personal deep love and enthusiasm for the arts* [ECCE 20] rather than as a result of her training. This is expanded upon by another ECCE practitioner interviewee who describes how her chosen approach to the visual arts, which she maintains is child-led and process driven, is a direct reflection of her: *passion and love for the arts* and she also points out that:

*I’ve noticed managers who don’t really see any value in art, they tend to choose to do more product-based art with the children and they justify this because they think it’s fun and something children enjoy doing* [ECCE 11].

Evidently, therefore ECCE practitioner ability to implement an IBEC can often be determined by management. Therefore, irrespective of an individual practitioner’s
desire and enthusiasm to employ an IBEC, it may not always be possible or supported if management does not subscribe to this approach. Management attitudes are in turn, influenced by parental expectations as well as concerns regarding the various regulatory bodies. Indeed, confusion regarding the regulatory bodies is aired at many junctures throughout the interviews and warrants detailed discussion.

4.8 Challenges Posed by Regulatory Bodies

Another significant finding relates to the challenge which the inspectorate poses ECCE practitioners. As highlighted in the Literature Review, settings in Ireland face a number of inspections from different inspectorates and practitioners are not always clear about the demands of the different regulatory bodies. It is attributable to the fact that the inspectorate is not a single entity but is comprised of three regulatory bodies; Tusla (The Child and Family Agency), The Department of Education and Skills (DES), and Pobal (Department of Child and Youth Affairs). Furthermore, each one has its own inspection remit. Over half (21) of the ECCE practitioner interviewees voice confusion, in this regard, as evidenced by the following quotation:

I mean there are different inspectorate bodies and I'm not really sure how they differ from each other, in terms of what they are looking for and what exactly they are inspecting [ECCE 7].

Another ECCE practitioner interviewee stresses how she feels inundated by information, the changing nature of the inspectorate, and is challenged by the effort needed to keep up to date:

I'm overwhelmed by the abundance of new information. There always seems to be changing criteria and expectations, new publications and new developments when it comes to inspections. [ECCE 18].

A support personnel respondent confirms the above findings as evidenced by her observations when mentoring practitioners:

I find that educators are not always well versed or up to speed with recent developments pertaining to the different inspectorates and they are confused as to what exactly is expected of them by each one [SP 7].
Furthermore, two thirds (20) of the ECCE practitioner interviewees express dissatisfaction regarding the expertise/qualifications of some inspectors. This is in direct reference to public health nurses being employed as inspectors:

Isn’t it absurd to have public health nurses, with no background in Early Years Education, assessing our practice [ECE 17].

Another respondent is equally frustrated at the state of affairs:

I mean we have to explain and justify what we are doing in the visual arts to inspectors who should really be trained in Early Years Education [ECE 1].

However, it needs to be clarified that at the data collection stage of the current research, Tusla inspectorate positions were not confined to public health nurses only (as had been the case historically) but had recently been made open to ECEC graduates. Irrespective of this being the case, the vast majority of (27) of ECCE practitioner interviewees still perceive Tusla in its historical role:

Tusla is there mainly to ensure that we are compliant with health and safety regulations and their inspectors see children’s welfare as being paramount [ECCE 26].

Furthermore, within the Tusla Quality Regulation Framework (QRF) (Tusla 2018a:40) document, under the heading; ‘How the environment supports children’s learning, development and wellbeing’ it states categorically that open-ended materials such as loose parts, natural objects, twigs and stones should be made readily available to children at all times. However, 24 ECCE practitioner interviewees also express trepidation at the idea of introducing loose parts in creative play, in case they are not compliant with Tusla health and safety requirements:

I am always really anxious about including loose parts in art activities because of the risk of not being compliant with demands of the inspectorate [ECCE 22].

A possible reason for practitioners being unaware of the drive to pay attention to dynamics by including open-ended materials and loose parts within official inspectorate documentation may be due to the fact that the QRF (Tusla, 2018a) was just newly published two months prior to interviews for this research. Therefore, it is
understandable that despite the stipulation to provide diverse and creative experiences for children, 24 of the ECCE practitioner interviewees fail to mention the dynamics within creative and enriching experiences as being part of the Tusa inspection requirements. However, open-ended creative experiences are highlighted as being a risk factor, and the majority are not willing to undertake activities using open-ended materials because of inspection requirements

*Using open-ended materials and child-led processes can often lead to mess and chaos and we could be marked poorly by the inspector for that because of health and safety issues [ECCE 13].*

Another ECCE practitioner interviewee expresses how despite her desire to provide more quality-based visual arts experiences, her practice is governed by the inspectorate:

*I want to do more open-ended processes with a range of natural materials but I’m always afraid if we get inspected will I find myself in a difficult position trying to explain why we have included certain materials because depending on the inspector, they might not understand or value the creative potential of certain items and instead just see them as a safety hazard [ECCE 1].*

These fears are also highlighted by support personnel, as being areas of real concern:

*The biggest challenge for the ECCE sector are the different statutory bodies that would see things like open-ended materials such as, loose parts, stones pinecones as not being suitable. They might not view using recyclable materials as appropriate either for Early Childhood settings. I’ve even seen inspectorate reports outlining that such ‘free and found’ items are not fit for ECEC use on the basis that they do not have a “Conformité Européenne” mark on them [SP 3].*

What is apparent from these findings is that ECCE practitioner interviewees are reticent to use open-ended materials. Despite recognising their worth in inquiry-based learning, there is a hesitancy to use them in case they do not comply with health and safety requirements. Hopefully, these fears will be allayed by the recent inclusion of early years specialists in the Tulsa inspectorate and with better understanding of the new extended Tulsa regulations. Another challenge which faces practitioners is the inability to explain to the inspectorate the rationale for using more unconventional open-ended materials for inquiry-based experiences. Ten of the ECCE practitioner
interviewees believe they struggle with how to justify transient arts experiences, which do not necessarily result in an end product, the emphasis being on experiential learning:

*I actually don’t know how to explain to the inspector that this is art* [ECCE 7].

Similarly, another ECCE practitioner interviewee believes it is expected of practitioners to have product art work on display in the centre, for inspection:

*They (the inspectorate) expect to see children’s art on the walls. As well as that, it’s easier to explain art where the objectives and outcomes are clear. I’d like to just do more child-led art using open-ended, recycled materials but I actually don’t know how I would justify that to the inspectorate* [ECCE 3].

And again another ECCE practitioner interviewee stresses:

*If I don’t have the results to display up on the wall. I’d be terrified that we would get in trouble for using certain materials that they might not consider suitable for health and safety reasons* [ECCE 19].

It can be deduced from these findings that many practitioners approach art to please the inspectorate, rather than putting into practice the theory of child-centred, inquiry-based learning, to which they subscribe. Support personnel confirm the above findings and describe how practitioners tend to favour an approach to art which is easy to explain to the inspectorate, rather than one which serves the best interest of the child.

*For educators who lack the necessary confidence and vocabulary to support a more open-ended visual arts practice, they tend to deliver more product-based craft because these are often perceived to be easier to explain to inspectors* [SP 6].

What emerges from the interviews is confusion among ECCE practitioner interviewees as to what exactly the inspectorate entails and what is required in order to be compliant. They assert they have to contend with different regulatory bodies, with differing requirements and expectations, leading to bewilderment and frustration. Furthermore, the many significant developments, e.g.; Quality Regulatory Framework, DCYA 2018; Early Years Inspection Framework DCYA, 2015; ECCE Scheme DCYA, 2010; Aistear NCCA, 2009; Siolta CECDE, 2006, over a relatively brief period of time and the abundance of accompanying explanatory documentation (as new directions are taken) overwhelms ECCE practitioners. Additionally, they struggle to understand the
difference between the two regulatory bodies; Tusla and the Department of Education and Skills (DES) Early Years Education Inspectorate (EYEI) and believe that they receive mixed messages regarding individual briefs. These findings are congruent with those of the Survey of Early Years Practitioners: Consultation for the Review of Education and Training Programmes in Early Years (DES, 2016). Respondents demonstrate similar confusion regarding the difference between Aistear (NCCA, 2009) and Siolta (CECDE, 2006). The majority of those surveyed assert that Aistear (NCCA, 2009) and Siolta (CECDE, 2006) are curricula instead of curriculum framework (Aistear) and quality framework (Siolta) (DES, 2016) respectively. Additionally, there seems to be a consensus of opinion amongst the 30 ECCE practitioner interviewees that Tusla and the Department of Education and Skills Early Years Education Inspectorate may be at variance with each other. Moreover, four support personnel note that there is conflict between what most practitioners; know, do and have experienced during their own training and what the inspectorate wishes to inspect. A further concern regarding the inspectorate, raised by another support personnel is that those employed to carry out the inspections for both Tusla and the Department of Education and Skills come from a variety of backgrounds, including ECEC graduates who:

*May not necessarily have had art as part of their degree training, or participated in CPD and therefore may struggle to identify quality, process-based art experiences [SP 5].*

It can be deduced therefore, that greater attention needs to be given to the appropriate CPD training in the visual arts for representatives of both Tusla and the Department of Education and Skills Early Years Education Inspectorate. Finally, there appears to be an overlap within the two inspectorate agencies. Findings highlight that practitioners associate Tusla with its traditional remit which was primarily to inspect the more static variables within ECEC settings including health, hygiene and welfare of children (Ring, 2016). However, they associate the Department of Education and Skills inspectorate with examining evidence of quality learning within the ECCE setting. Essentially, what is of concern is the possibility of conflicting interpretations amongst the regulatory bodies as to what constitutes quality visual arts experiences for ECCE children who avail of the ECCE scheme (DCYA, 2019).
4.9 Conclusion

An important finding of this research is the differing emphasis placed on visual arts initial professional education at third-level institutions, nationwide. This inconsistency is evidenced by the number of modules on offer and whether they were in the main theory-based or practical, or a combination of both theory and practice. The type of training which initial professional education trainees are afforded has far-reaching consequences for future practice. Institutions which offer mandatory modules in the visual arts to include a major practical component, throughout the four years of the degree programme, produce graduates who are better equipped to implement a process-orientated inquiry-based curriculum, according to respondents from both study cohorts. Additionally, the expertise and educational background of practitioners who deliver the visual arts initial professional education programme is highlighted. It is recommended that lecturers, mentors and artists, who work in partnership with ECCE settings, should hold dual qualifications in pedagogy and the visual arts.

The major focus of the field study is concerned with approaches adopted by practitioners to the implementation of a visual arts curriculum in ECCE. In this regard, findings show a disconnect between theory and practice. While all ECCE practitioner interviewees speak fluidly and eloquently to demonstrate sound theoretical knowledge of the core concepts of how children learn and the importance of creativity in children’s lives, theory does not translate to practice. There is a disconnect between rhetoric and reality, as evidenced by the many examples of learning opportunities and approaches to the visual arts in practice, which are detailed during the various interviews. Furthermore, all respondents, with the exception of one, are unfamiliar with the key concept of Transdisciplinarity, which are also reflected in Aistear (NCCA, 2009) through the four interconnected themes; Well-being, Identity and Belonging, Communicating, and Exploring and Thinking, which promote integrated learning. However, on closer examination it transpires that a minority do practice that approach, even if the term is unfamiliar to them.

While practitioners, in the main, possess the knowledge and desire to deliver an IBL Emergent Curriculum, they are hampered by the overarching culture in the sector,
which subscribes to a product-orientated, adult-led approach to the visual arts despite national frameworks advocating for a IBL using a TDA. Early Childhood Care and Education practitioner interviewees and support personnel alike, highlight how the overarching culture is determined by the various stakeholders; owners, managers, leaders, parents and regulatory bodies. There is confusion among practitioners in relation to the regulatory bodies, as the inspectorate is not a single entity but incorporates three different groups, with differing remits and expectations for example, health and safety, curriculum delivery etc. In this regard, support personnel interviewees question the level and type of training among the various regulatory bodies, which may result in individual inspectors struggling to identify quality visual arts experiences when reviewing ECCE settings. It is a significant finding that inspectorate expectations can determine approaches to the visual arts curriculum implementation. Even when practitioners are aware that a product-driven approach is contrary to accepted good practice they endeavour to meet perceived inspectorate expectations.

Additional findings correspond to the Early Years Survey (DES, 2016) where the majority of ECCE practitioner interviewees demonstrate a poor understanding of the Aistear (NCCA, 2009) and Síolta (CECDE, 2006). This, in turn, indicates a misalignment between rhetoric regarding meeting the curriculum and quality framework guidelines, and what actually transpires in practice. Continuous Professional Development, is identified as being imperative to counteract the deficits in initial professional education. However, findings also show that there is a dearth of CPD opportunities available and there is an urban rural divide, in this regard. Furthermore, some CPD in visual art (when available) seems to foster a predetermined product-orientated approach to the visual arts and is thus in opposition to recognised good practice.

Finally, in an effort to address all of the foregoing findings, the following concluding chapter presents recommendations, which if acted upon, may well serve to elevate the status of the visual arts in third-level initial professional education programmes. Therefore, included in the final chapter is a set of recommendations which, if acted upon, by the various stakeholders in Early Childhood Education and Care, may well
serve to bring about changes in approaches adopted to the implementation of the visual arts to address the holistic development of each individual child in the sector.
Chapter Five

Conclusion and Recommendations
5.1 Introduction

This final chapter encapsulates the main conclusions of this study, which are derived from key research findings and subsequent analysis and discussion. Emanating from these conclusions are recommendations for policy and practice, as well as directions for possible future research. In addition, the research contribution to the educational landscape of ECCE visual arts curriculum implementation in Ireland is identified. Concluding remarks provide closure to the research.

The aim of the study was to investigate what constitutes good practice in the design and delivery of a visual arts curriculum for young children by reviewing national and international literature. Subsequent to a comprehensive literature review, a field study was undertaken to garner information on current approaches adopted by practitioners in the design and delivery of the visual arts curricula for children availing of the ECCE Scheme (DCYA, 2019) in Ireland. The study also set out to establish what constitutes good practice in this domain. As a result, the research identified that an inquiry-based emergent visual arts curriculum using a transdisciplinary approach is recognised as being optimal for holistic development and effective learning (Johnson et al., 2019, Luna-Scott, 2015; Savery, 2015; Walker, 2014; Saavedra and Opfer, 2012). Subsequently, it was also essential to identify factors which mitigate against ECCE practitioners implementing this approach.

Essentially, the research concludes that there is generally a sound theoretical understanding (by both practitioners and support personnel) of the role which high quality, creative experiences play in optimising the development of happy, competent and healthy children, during the pre-school years/ECCE Scheme (DCYA, 2019). Additionally, there is an understanding by participants of the importance of developmentally appropriate creative learning opportunities (which encourage positive relationships with and between children) and their direct bearing on strengthening brain synapses leading to positive holistic development. Furthermore, the field work concludes that while Aistear (NCCA, 2009) and Siolta (CECDE, 2006) place emphasis and value on children’s participation and active involvement in learning, practitioners continue to offer product-orientated visual arts activities instead of inquiry-based child-led creative opportunities. The emphasis is on the end product, rather, than the process
of meaningful participation. Evidently, the reality of practice is at odds with the rhetoric.

5.2 Overall Study Conclusion

The overarching research aim of the study was to investigate what constitutes good practice in the design and delivery of a visual arts curriculum by looking at national and international literature. Subsequently, a field study was undertaken to investigate approaches used by practitioners in the design and delivery of a visual arts curriculum for children in the ECCE Scheme (DCYA, 2019). Evolving from this general aim, specific research questions garnered practitioner and support personnel views on their initial education/training, continuing professional development and practice in relation to the implementation of the visual arts curriculum in ECCE. This section comprises the five overall conclusions and their attendant implications, which are outlined as follows:

i Initial professional education.
ii Continuous Professional Development (CPD).
iii Approaches currently used by ECCE practitioners when designing and implementing a visual arts curriculum.
iv Good practice in the design and delivery of visual arts in ECCE.
v The challenges associated with the implementation of inquiry-based emergent curriculum using a transdisciplinary approach to the visual arts.

5.2.1 Initial Professional Education (IPE)

Drawing from the practitioner data, it can be concluded that respondents deem their initial professional education/training in visual art pedagogy to be inadequate. This point was endorsed by support personnel interviewees, many of whom mentor practitioners. Fundamentally, existing research concurs that there is certainly variability in the experiences of degree course participants in Ireland at present (DES 2019; Fillis, 2018; Urban et al., 2017; DES, 2016) which has implications for the delivery of quality ECCE. Furthermore, a web-based perusal of the Early Years Education undergraduate programmes (Level 7, Level 8) at the National University of
Ireland (NUI) and Institutes of Technology (IoTs) shows that there is varying emphasis on the visual arts during initial professional training. Moreover, an in-depth review of the modules on offer also highlights that some institutions have mandatory visual arts modules throughout the degree course, while others offer creative arts modules on an elective basis only. Remarkably, one university programme does not offer any modules on creativity, throughout the entire undergraduate programme. In addition, the allocation of credits for creativity modules also highlights the varied status of the arts in Early Years third-level programmes, nationally. Interestingly, it was identified that some institutions allocate 10 credits to the creative arts, while others allocate five credits to individual art forms. Essentially, the overall provision is deemed inconsistent and insufficient, a point which is endorsed by individual participant experience. Findings from both ECCE practitioner and support personnel interviews show that visual arts modules also differ in approach. Some courses emphasise a practical, hands-on, workshop-approach, while others are exclusively theory-based, in the form of didactic lectures. Moreover, the expertise and experience of those delivering the programme is also identified in the study as being inconsistent amongst the various initial professional education and training institutions. This inconsistency is further highlighted at in-service/CPD training level. Of importance, practitioners attribute the foregoing findings as significantly influencing their choice of approach to the design and delivery of visual arts curriculum, on entering the workforce.

With regard to good practice in the design and delivery of visual arts in ECCE, inquiry-based learning using a transdisciplinary approach is considered to be the gold standard internationally (Thompson, 2019; Savery, 2015 Walker, 2014; Hopper, 2009) and nationally (Aistear NCCA, 2009; Siolta CECDE, 2006). Noteworthy, this research supplies substantial evidence to suggest that ECCE practitioners currently adopt approaches to the visual arts that are not in keeping with good practice or indeed with what is stipulated by the Irish National Curriculum and Quality Frameworks for Early Childhood Education and Care. This is due to a series of confounding factors but can primarily be attributed to paucity of arts training at initial professional, as well as CPD, level(s). Fundamentally, it can be concluded that an inquiry-based learning curriculum using a transdisciplinary approach to the visual arts is not being implemented, despite the extant body of current literature and existing research on the topic (Lindsey, 2018; Ryan and St. Laurent, 2016; Walker and Shore, 2015, French, 2013; Robinson, 2010;
Eisner, 1998; Malaguzzi, 1993; Dewey, 1934). Notably, it is acknowledged that the proposed 2019 Professional Awards Criteria and Guidelines for Initial Professional Education (level 7 and Level 8) Degree Programmes for the Early Learning and Care Sector (ECL) in Ireland will have the capacity to prepare graduates for the roles they will occupy. The challenge, however, is for education and training providers to design and develop programmes, which take cognizance of the importance of the visual arts, and appropriate education of professionals in this domain.

Findings from the current study overwhelmingly demonstrate that when the arts are not centrally placed in undergraduate programmes, graduates from those institutions are ill-equipped to deliver an inquiry-based emergent curriculum as per Aistear (NCCA, 2009) and Síolta (CECDE, 2006) requirements. Conversely and encouragingly, practitioner graduates from institutions which do incorporate more practical components with theoretical pedagogical underpinning, during all undergraduate years, appear to confidently deliver an emergent curriculum on entering the workforce.

### 5.2.2 Continuous Professional Development (CPD)

The Department of Education and Skills (DES) (2019:29) acknowledges the evolving nature of fundamental understandings informed by research, policy and practice within the ECCE field and asserts that it will be necessary for ECCE graduates to regularly review and update their own professional ‘qualification to practice’. The DES (2019) further expands on how this may be achieved through ‘participation in a range of formal and informal CPD activities throughout their careers’ (ibid.).

A review of the relevant literature in chapter two identifies the significance of having a clear conceptual framework underpinning good teaching and learning at the pre-service/initial professional education stage (French, 2013, The Arts Council, 2013). Essentially, it is noted that this grounding has a direct impact on practitioner visual arts self-efficacy (Lindsey, 2017, Evans-Palmer, 2016; Klopper and Power 2010) and subsequent ability to design and implement curricula which provide authentic creative experiences for young children (French, 2013). Certainly, this is also echoed very clearly in the experiences of the participating practitioners in this study. Both cohorts
of interviewees express a deep-seated interest and willingness to participate in CPD specific to the implementation of the visual arts curriculum in ECCE. However, they struggle to identify formal and informal CPD training in this area. Interestingly, it can also be established that the preferred model of CPD provision on the part of both cohorts is that of a practice-based workshop rather than a theoretical session.

5.2.3 Current Approaches in Design and Delivery of Visual Arts Curriculum

Findings from the current research predominantly yield that ECCE practitioners in this study, demonstrate an over-reliance on a product, adult-directed approach to the design and delivery of visual arts curricula. Factors, which influence approaches, are varied. However, it can be concluded that these stem from ECCE practitioner initial professional education and their ‘lived experiences’ including the art activities in which they themselves have been involved during their school years. In that regard, practitioners appear to imitate or mimic their own educational experience when adopting approaches to curriculum design and implementation.

Table 5.1 illustrates factors which influence approaches used by practitioners in the implementation of the visual arts curriculum in ECCE.

Table 5.1. Rationale for Choice of Approach for the Implementation of a Visual Arts Curriculum in ECCE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Product Approach</th>
<th>Process Approach</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adult- directed- emphasis on end- product. Closed in nature.</td>
<td>Inquiry based-emphasis on emergent interests of child and focus is on process. Open-ended and experiential based.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Influencing factors on approaches to the visual arts in ECCE in Ireland**

- Past schooling reflects product approach- thereafter ECCE practitioners implement activities based on own educational experiences
- Initial professional education and in-service training- low status afforded the arts, no hands-on process- led arts experience from which to draw.
- Expertise and experience lacking among in-servicer training personnel
- Ethos and culture of ECEC setting- influenced by leadership and management
- Ensure school readiness- art used to develop children’s concentration and fine-motor skills
- Parental expectations- perceived parental desire for product approach to art.

- Practitioners positive visual self-efficacy and ongoing engagement with the visual arts
- Practical training during initial professional education which reflects process approach
- Mentoring during CPD in process approach

Source: Egan (2019)
Findings from the current research highlight that the majority of ECCE practitioner-respondents do not adhere to good practice in the design and delivery of visual arts experiences for children availing of the Irish ECCE scheme (DCYA, 2019). Moreover, rather than offering recommended visual arts experiences, which reflect approaches promoted by Aistear (NCCA, 2009) and Siolta (CECDE, 2006), the research establishes that a product approach to creative engagement dominates.

5.2.4 Good Practice in the Design and Delivery of Visual Arts in ECCE

Good practice of visual arts curriculum implementation for use in Early Childhood Care and Education is widely recognised as being informed by inquiry-based learning (Thompson, 2019; Christakis, 2017; Lindsay, 2017; Pecaski-McLennan, 2010). Moreover, the application of a transdisciplinary approach is noted for being most effective in preparing children of today for the future (McGregor, 2017; Saavedra and Opfer, 2012; Robinson, 2010). This is further verified, within the Irish context, not only by responses provided by support personnel interviewed for the current research, but also by the NCCA, Practice Guide (2017) and previous research (French, 2013). Significantly, however, findings from the current study show that, although the majority of ECCE practitioners are well acquainted with the rhetoric of what constitutes good practice in the design and delivery of a visual arts curriculum, the reality, as stated, is different in practice. Rather than adhering to requirements, in relation to the types of visual arts experiences offered to children, which should be driven by inquiry and curiosity, and indeed based on the child’s emerging interests, ECCE practitioners demonstrate a tendency to revert to the product approach. Reasons for this reversal may be attributable to a variety of factors. Practitioners consider it necessary to display art products which demonstrate measurable outputs for the purpose of inspection and to meet perceived parental expectations. Product-based art works are easily accessible via social media platforms, e.g. Pinterest and Facebook. Themed-based activities are structured, easily controlled by the adult, all children engage in the same task and the outcomes are manageable and predictable.
5.2.5 Challenges Associated with the Implementation of Inquiry-Based Emergent Curriculum using a Transdisciplinary Approach to the Visual Arts

The current research highlights that practitioners face challenges to effectively implement an IBL with a TDA visual arts curriculum, based on the emerging interests of the child. These obstacles verify findings presented in Chapter 2, which concur with a number of international studies investigating visual arts ECEC education (Christakis, 2017; Lindsey, 2017; Chichekian et al., 2016; Ward, 2013; Robinson, 2010). The challenges identified in the current study are outlined in Table 5.2.
Table 5.2: Challenges to Practitioners in the Implementation of a Visual Arts Curriculum using a Transdisciplinary Approach

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenges which determine Irish ECCE practitioner ability to implement an IBEC using a TDA to the visual arts</th>
<th>Reasons (provided by practitioners and support personnel)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| • Initial professional education | - Lack of visual arts modules  
- Lack of hands-on practical component to creativity modules  
- Early scheduling of visual art module(s) during degree  
- Lack of continuity resulting in skill set being forgotten over time (by end of training)  
- Limited expertise and experience in; (a) the visual arts, or (b) pedagogy, of those delivering training |
| • Continuous Professional Development (CPD) | - Limited access to CPD specific to visual arts (urban/rural divide)  
- Limited availability of CPD specific to IBL in the visual arts  
- Focus on product based approaches  
- Artists delivering CPD lack pedagogic knowledge  
- Lack of workshop based CPD |
| • Practitioner low visual self-efficacy | - Lack of creative confidence  
- Unfamiliarity with process approach resulting in over reliance on social media platforms (Pinterest and Facebook) for ideas/activities  
- Uncertain how to demonstrate/assess/document children’s learning through process approach  
- Unable to articulate rationale for process approach  
- Theoretical understanding of Process approach only |
| • The learning environment | - Culture and ethos of ECEC setting places little value on importance of visual arts in children’s learning  
- Lack of buy-in by management and colleagues  
- Desire to maintain the status quo (product approach)  
- Pressure to produce measurable outcomes |
| • Parental expectations | - Celebratory and topic-based activities associated with early childhood as per their own experiences  
- Opposed to the ‘mess’ factor |
| • Inspectorate | - Confusion surrounding expectations of regulatory bodies |

(Source: Egan, 2019)
The majority of practitioners in the study regard their knowledge, skills, attitudes and competencies to be lacking in regard to the implementation of an inquiry-based emergent visual arts curriculum. In addition, challenges and uncertainties which emerge from the data suggest that for the majority of participants, although theory is understood it does not always translate to practice. These conclusions present a number of opportunities for Early Childhood Care and Education policy and practice. Recommendations are presented in the following section.

5.3 Recommendations for Policy, Education and Practice

5.3.1 Visual Arts Model for ECEC Initial Professional Education Based on the Cork Institute of Technology Model

In light of the foregoing conclusions in this study, a key recommendation of this research is the need for the visual arts to be centrally located within all Early Years Education Level 7 and Level 8 undergraduate programmes, in Ireland. This is currently apposite, as prime issues present themselves with the introduction of the new professional awards for Level 7 and 8 (DES, 2019). In addition, a visual arts model for adoption and integration into all undergraduate Level 7 and Level 8 ECEC degree programmes, nationally, has been designed as a direct result of findings from the current research (see Model Fig. 5.1). The model centrally locates IBL using a TDA to the visual arts and addresses good practice. Moreover, operationalizing the model will equip future practitioners with the wherewithal to deliver high quality visual arts experiences to children availing of the ECCE scheme (DCYA, 2019). The research study identifies an over-emphasis on the theory of learning through the arts rather than engagement in practical visual arts experiences, which currently leaves practitioners ill equipped to implement an inquiry-based emergent curriculum (IBEC). Therefore, it is of paramount importance that the proposed professional awards centrally locate the visual arts during at least three of the four undergraduate training years and should include both theoretical and practical modules. This practical experience, based on theoretical underpinning, should dominate Level 7 and Level 8 programmes. Key learning, in relation to the visual arts is evident in modules on offer on the Early Childhood Education and Care degree programme at CIT.
The initiative would provide a profound level of practical engagement in the visual arts, challenge self-efficacy, and build confidence and competencies in the design and delivery of emergent curricula, which a theoretical approach only, could never accomplish.
Fig. 5.1 Visual Arts Model for ECEC Initial Professional Education as taught at Cork Institute of Technology

Mandatory Visual Arts Modules (across degree programme)
Level 7/8 ECEC Degree programmes

Informed by:
An Inquiry Based Transdisciplinary Approach to the visual arts

Practical Application

Based on the artistic elements:
- Line
- Shape
- Form
- Space
- Colour
- Texture
- Value

Visual arts - form of expression and sensory learning through range of processes:
- Mark-Making
- Paint and colour
- Print
- Collage
- Sculpture
- Loose Parts
- Transient Art
- ICT

Theoretical underpinning

Informed by Aistear (NCCA, 2009) and Siolta (CECDE, 2006) - Principles, Themes and Guidelines
- How children learn - active hands-on exploration driven by inquiry and curiosity in a child centred environment
- Learning through the visual arts as part of STEAM
- Image of the child
- Role of the adult
- Role of learning environment

Visual arts concepts and theory:
- Aesthetics
- Visual Awareness and Communication
- Process as self-expression
- Process versus Product
- Art and display
- Visual arts a pedagogical tool
- Visual arts within an IBEC

Reflective Practice for Documenting and Assessing Learning
Develop visual arts reflective journals, portfolios and documentation of learning for use in future practice with children and families

Source: Egan (2019)
5.3.2 Staff at Initial and Continuous Professional Development Training Level

A further recommendation which stems from this research is that all third-level staff who deliver initial professional education to practitioners and, mentors who are involved in CPD be equipped with the pre-requisite knowledge, skills and competencies in the visual arts for use in early childhood education, as well as in pedagogy. Additionally, all personnel delivering visual arts modules should be provided with regular upskilling and CPD training opportunities in good practice in the implementation of a visual arts curriculum to ensure that all future practitioners are appropriately trained.

The following is a diagrammatic illustration (Fig. 5.2) of the desired professional profile of those employed in visual arts training. It pertains to initial professional education trainers, artists in residence, community art project coordinators and Early Years mentors. The diagrammatic illustration describes two professional profiles:

**Profile 1**- An educator from a visual arts background should undertake CPD in inquiry-based learning, specifically, for use in Early Childhood Education

**Profile 2**- An educator from an Early Years Educational background who lacks expertise in the visual arts using an IBL approach, should undertake CPD in visual arts.
**Fig. 5.2: Proposed Profile of Initial Professional Educators**

**Profile 1**

Holds minimum Level 8 qualification in the visual arts with 5 years’ experience as a practicing

**Profile 2**

Holds minimum Level 8 qualification in Early Years Education with 5 years’ experience in ECEC sector

Required to undertake Continuous Professional Development in:

- Inquiry Based Learning for use in Early Childhood Education
- Inquiry Based Learning in the visual arts for use in Early Childhood Education

**Desired Professional Profile:**
Expertise in both visual arts and IBL for use in Early Childhood Education

Source: Egan (2019)
5.3.3 Early Childhood Education and Care Visual Arts CPD Model: Quality and Qualifications (QQI) Special Purpose Award on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ)

It is recommended that a Special Purpose Award at Level 6 specific to the visual arts in ECEC be developed and implemented in order to address the current challenges facing practitioners to effectively implement a visual arts curriculum in ECCE. Additionally, the proposed CPD model could be adapted, whereby specific modules and content would be accessible to individuals delivering initial professional training. This would ensure that lecturers, trainers and mentors would be equipped with the necessary expertise in both pedagogy and the visual arts. The content structure of the CPD Special Purpose Award (Fig 5.3) ensures a balance between theory (which underpins how children learn though the visual arts) and practical experiential workshops. Central to the workshops would be the seven elements of art; Line, Shape, Form, Space, Texture, Colour and Value, explored through mark-making, painting, printmaking, sculpture, loose parts, transient art and ICT. The workshops would culminate in visual portfolios of learning, whereby participants would engage in recording and documenting their individual learning trajectory as well as that of the children with whom they interact within ECEC settings. Learning would translate from theory to practice, as participants implement a visual art IBEC in their respective ECEC settings, observing and documenting children’s experiences, while engaging in self-reflective practice.
Fig. 5.3 Visual arts CPD Model for *Special Purpose Award* Content Structure based on IPE model as taught at CIT

**Practical Workshops**

Based on the artistic elements:

- Line
- Shape
- Form
- Space
- Colour
- Texture
- Value

Explored through range of disciplines:

- Mark-Making
- Paint and colour
- Print
- Collage
- Sculpture
- Loose Parts
- Transient Art
- ICT

Assessment: Visual Portfolio of learning

- Reflections artwork and process
- *Documenting Learning*
  Children’s visual arts learning processes

**Theoretical underpinning**

*Learning through the visual arts:*

- How children learn – through hands-on experiences driven by inquiry
- Play-based learning
- Concept-driven learning
- Project-based learning
- Inquiry-based learning
- Image of child- as capable and competent
- Role of adult- as facilitator and scaffold
- Role of learning environment
- Aesthetics
- Visual Awareness and Communication
- Process as self-expression
- Process versus Product
- Responding to Provocations through the visual arts
- Art and display
- Visual arts a pedagogical tool
- Visual arts within an IBEC
- Visual arts in Science, Technology
- Engineering, Mathematics and Language
- Aistear (NCCA, 2009) and Siolta (CECDE, 2006)
The delivery of the CPD Special Purpose Award (Fig 5.4) should involve a combination of online learning as well as hands-on practical workshops, seminars and in-service cluster groups, to accommodate educators across the country. The vision is for them to be developed and launched at Cork Institute of Technology. Facilitators would include ECEC practitioners working in close partnership with visual artists from a range of disciplines.
Fig. 5.4 Visual arts CPD Model for *Special Purpose Award* Delivery Structure based on IPE model as taught at CIT

**In-service ECEC, City and County cluster workshops**
Opportunity for:
- in-house upskilling and training for all staff within setting of participating member
- participating ECEC settings to select specific strategy and programme content i.e. *creating an arts rich learning environment*

**Hands-on Practical Workshops**
- experiential
- visual arts skills building
- discipline based - drawing, painting, printmaking, sculpture, transient art etc.

**Delivered by:**
Visual artists from a range of disciplines
- Painters
- Printmakers
- Sculptures
- Ceramicists
- Textile artists

**Delivery Structure**

**E-learning and Blended learning to provide visual arts knowledge and theoretical pedagogic underpinning**
- webinars
- self-study
- e-learning resources

**Online Workshops**
Platform for:
- sharing learning process
- sharing documentation of children’s visual learning process
- engage in critique and reflective practice
- discuss, share and gain/provide support in delivery of visual art experiences within individual ECCE settings

**Delivered by:**
workshop facilitator with expertise in documenting children’s learning through the visual arts

Source: Egan (2019)
5.3.4 Resources to Build Visual Arts Pedagogical Knowledge, Attitudes and Skills

Concomitant to the current study, resources for visual arts which advocate inquiry based learning using a transdisciplinary approach were designed (by this researcher) for the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). These resources are available on-line on the Aistear Siolta Practice Guide (NCCA, 2015) to assist practitioners in the design and delivery of a process-based approach to the visual arts curriculum.

These resources were brought to fruition as a direct result of a variety of engagements by the current researcher: workshops, keynote addresses, publications and conference presentations held on IBL using a TDA in the visual arts for ECEC nationally and internationally (See Appendix 1). Furthermore, these resources are currently in use by professional mentors for Better Start to facilitate CPD practitioner training. In addition, City and County Childcare Committee coordinators employ the resources in training.

These resources include: Aistear Siolta Practice Guide- three podcasts [Available from: https://www.aistearsiolta.ie/en/cpd/birth-6-years/creative-arts-birth-6-_.pdf] focusing specifically on:

1. visual arts in an emergent and inquiry-based curriculum (Birth-6 years)
2. provocations and the learning environment in the visual arts in an emergent and inquiry-based curriculum (Birth - 6 years)
3. three ideas for supporting visual arts in an emergent and inquiry-based curriculum (Birth- 6 years)

A major recommendation of the current research is that the foregoing resources (detailed in the appendices) be used in conjunction with, or integral to, the visual arts CPD Model for Special Purpose Award (Fig 5.3 and Fig 5.4).
5.3.5 Partnership with Parents

It is recommended that strong partnerships with parents be established from the time children initially avail of the ECCE scheme (DCYA, 2019). The following illustration (Fig 5.5) for parental involvement in children’s visual arts experiences during their pre-school years should act as a reference point to guide ECCE practitioners. It serves to inform and share information and knowledge with parents, often with the child as conduit, forging meaningful relationships in the parent-practitioner-child tripartite.

Involving parents in a meaningful and authentic way requires practitioners to ensure that children’s learning is made visible (Carr and Lee, 2019). This is achievable when consideration is given to the types of visual arts experiences offered to children. The following diagram (Fig 5.5) outlines that visual art experiences must not only have meaning for a child but also provide opportunities to engage in complex and critical thought. The recording, documenting and display of children’s artistic endeavours enables parents to value the merit of open-ended, inquiry-based and process-driven experiences. Moreover, when measurable evidence of interactions is readily accessible to both parents and children, through display, a fundamental opportunity is established whereby children can share, discuss, and reflect on their experiences in collaboration with practitioners and parents. It is recommended, therefore that ECEC settings use the following diagram (Fig 5.5) as a foundation for authentic parental involvement in children’s visual arts learning experiences.
Fig. 5.5: Proposed Parental Involvement in Children’s Visual Arts Experiences

Meaningful interactions between child and practitioner based on: Aistear (NCCA, 2009) Síolta(CECDE, 2006) themes, how children learn, problem-solve and demonstrate they are capable of critical and complex thinking

Artistic and Pedagogic documentation of learning processes displayed alongside completed art works, readily accessible to parents

Workshops on how to support visual arts experiences at home

Opportunities for child to share work in progress within learning environment and communicate ideas both visually and verbally to parents

Source: Egan (2019)
5.3.6 National Frameworks and Guidelines

The following recommendations are made to assist ECCE practitioners in using the Aistear (NCCA, 2009) and Síolta (CECDE, 2006). It is imperative that adequate resources and in-service training for the implementation of ECCE framework guidelines should be made available to all practitioners. Continuing professional development opportunities should be offered to third-level lecturers delivering initial professional education. Additionally, an initial professional education training module should be integrated into existing programmes, to provide information on Aistear (NCCA, 2009) and Síolta (CECDE, 2006) in practice. In light of the new Professional Awards Criteria and Guidelines for Initial Professional Education (DES, 2019) this is now being advocated.

5.3.7 Monitoring and Evaluation of Visual Arts Curriculum

The following recommendations are made as a direct result of respondents’ misgivings and trepidation vis-à-vis the two regulatory bodies - Tusla and DES. The amalgamation of inspectorate bodies working in the area of curriculum evaluation is an important step in enhancing the understanding of the value of the visual arts curriculum. While inspectors are highly qualified, it is necessary that they too are afforded joint CPD opportunities so that they have the appropriate understanding of the value of the process approach over the tangible product approach. Undeniably, CPD would afford both Tusla and DES inspectors a united appreciation of the significance of the process approach to art as distinct from the product approach that allows for measurable learning outcomes, as well as evidence of work.

5.4 Recommendations for Future Research

Following a review of the critical findings in the current research, and in addition to the core recommendations advocated above, it is proposed that future research be conducted in the following areas to enhance inquiry-based emergent visual arts curriculum implementation using a transdisciplinary approach in ECCE services:
• **Tusla and DES inspectorate bodies:** An evaluation of their shared role and remit in the understanding and the monitoring of authentic visual arts experiences for children availing of the ECCE scheme (DCYA, 2019) is recommended.

• **Parents:** A study on parental and guardian opinions and views on the visual arts in children’s learning and development would help to determine if current perceptions of parental expectations are valid.

• **The child:** The inclusion of ‘the voice of the child’ would assist in establishing children’s viewpoints regarding the visual arts and meaning making. This would be a seminal study in the field of visual arts within ECCE in Ireland.

• **Initial professional education:** The value and place of the arts within IPE level 7 and level 8 degree programmes needs further interrogation as only a web-based perusal was used for the purpose of this study.

• **The adoption of the proposed visual arts model for ECEC initial professional training** (Fig. 5.1) and **visual arts CPD model for a special purpose award** would require further research, discussion and debate in order to bring both to an operational stage. In addition, it is recommended that a longitudinal study be conducted to establish if both models are instrumental in instituting change in practitioner visual self-efficacy as well as the implementation of an ECCE visual arts curriculum in Ireland.

The contribution to the field of Early Childhood Care and Education as well as the theoretical contribution to the existing body of knowledge are outlined in the following section.

### 5.5 Contribution to Knowledge: Theory and Practice

This thesis contributes in a very positive sense to the existing knowledge and research on visual arts education, as pertaining to young children, in Ireland. The current research is unique in an Irish context, as it is an area which has hitherto been under-researched and will, therefore, stimulate further research, discussion and debate. Moreover, it has contributed to a deeper understanding of the product and process approaches to the visual arts, adopted by practitioners, delivering the ECCE scheme (DCYA, 2019) within
Ireland. The study adds to the extant literature by identifying the individual roles which both initial and in-service training play in operationalizing good practice in the visual arts for children between the ages of three and six years. Additionally, this study draws attention to the current status quo of visual arts curriculum implementation in ECCE within the Irish context. Moreover, it highlights that although policy, training and knowledge of what constitutes good practice exists, evidence of process-led creative experiences for children availing of the ECCE scheme (DCYA, 2019) is not evident. Rather are creative experiences reflective of an adult-led approach and at odds with the core philosophy of inquiry-based learning. This research also substantiates findings from other studies which highlight challenges faced by educations in the delivery of an inquiry-based emergent visual arts curriculum using a transdisciplinary approach, e.g. (i) past schooling (Isenberg and Jalongo, 2018) (ii) low visual self-efficacy (Lindsey, 2017, Evans-Palmer, 2016) (iii) initial professional training (Stake et al., 1991) (iv) lack of professional development opportunities for practitioners (Whitebook et al., 2018; Moloney, 2015) and (v) ethos and culture of the learning environment (Christakis, 2017; Fisher et al., 2014; Pecaski-McLennan, 2010). Significantly, this research offers solutions to mitigate against such challenges also facing the Irish ECEC workforce through the formation of the visual arts model for ECEC initial professional training (Fig. 5.1) and Visual arts CPD Model for Special Purpose Award (Fig. 5.4). Aistear (NCCA, 2009), is currently a decade old (2009-2019) so the contribution this study makes to the Irish ECEC field is topical and apposite. Reflection on effectiveness of visual arts initial professional training is long overdue and findings from the current research may well inform training programmes. Finally, the implementation of model (Fig 5.1) and model (Fig 5.3 and 5.4) within initial professional training and in-service CPD training would act as a catalyst for change. They would ensure that the visual arts experiences offered to children under six are in keeping with nationally and internationally recognised good practice.

The current research also contributes to prior knowledge in the development of the visual arts model for ECEC initial professional education (Fig. 5.1). This model centrally locating IBL using a TDA to the visual arts, would address good practice among all training institutions while adhering to and celebrating the recommendations and guidelines of Aistear (NCCA, 2009) and Síolta (CECDE, 2006). How to approach the visual arts within initial professional education (as outlined by the model) has
formed the basis of a recent article by this researcher, published by the World Organisation of Early Childhood Education, OMEP (Egan, 2019) (See Appendix 1). Findings from this study highlight an absence of specific and practical guidelines for visual arts pedagogy in ECCE in the Irish context. The aforementioned visual arts resources and professional development materials which have emerged as a result of this study (See Appendix 1) are already in situ to provide practitioners with procedural content knowledge and theoretical inspiration for constructive, hands-on visual arts pedagogy. A recommendation is for the Department of Education and Skills or Better Start to appoint the relevant personnel to co-ordinate the above resources on IBL using a TDA to assist trainers and trainees.

5.6 Concluding Remarks

The overarching research aim of the study was to investigate what constitutes good practice in the design and delivery of a visual arts curriculum by looking at national and international literature. Subsequently, a field study was undertaken to investigate approaches used by practitioners in the design and delivery of a visual arts curriculum for children in the ECCE Scheme (DCYA, 2019). It also established what constitutes ‘good practice’ in visual arts curriculum design and delivery. Furthermore, it identified mitigating factors in the adherence to Aistear (NCCA, 2009) and Síolta (CECDE, 2006) guidelines on implementing an inquiry-based emergent curriculum as promoted by the Aistear Síolta Practice Guide (2015).

Fundamentally, both cohorts (practitioners and support personnel) endorse the IBL approach and appear to have an impressive knowledge of educational theory and the philosophy of how children learn. Practitioners cite the merits of child-centred visual art opportunities and enthuse how, in ‘good practice’ the adult does not assume a didactic role but acts as a facilitator to scaffold children’s learning and development. In this regard, all practitioner interviewees describe how they were cognisant of Aistear (NCCA, 2009), when designing and implementing curricula in the visual arts. Significantly, however, when probing questions were posed in order to garner examples of Aistear (NCCA, 2009) themes in action, the disconnect between rhetoric and practice became apparent. Support personnel interviewees, many of whom mentor practitioners nationwide, recognise this mismatch between what practitioners subscribe to in theory,
and what they actually do in practice. Furthermore, this cohort provides valuable insights into what they perceive to be the reasons for this disconnect. In essence, there is a confluence of factors facing every practitioner in the ECEC sector, which, as individuals, they cannot mitigate against. To confound the situation, these factors are often intrinsically bound, one having permutations and ramifications for another.

In summary, initial professional training does not appear to prepare, or equip, the practitioner adequately to design and implement an IBL approach, especially if training modules have been theory-based and devoid of practical, hands-on components. It emerges that even when practitioners are trained in IBL, they often struggle to implement that approach, on entering the workforce. They find themselves restricted by the ECEC setting ethos and culture, which in turn, may be influenced by parental expectations and confusion surrounding regulatory body expectations. As a result of findings from this study, a number of possible solutions are proffered, in an attempt to bridge the gap between rhetoric and reality, so that all children can be afforded creative experiences, which naturally promote their holistic development.

This research endeavours to document the real-life experiences of practitioners and support personnel in relation to approaches to the implementation of the visual arts curriculum in ECCE. In reference to the development of materials on the visual arts in ECEC by the NCCA Practice Guide (2017), findings from the current research are timely and should be included in the debate, to instigate change. The need to address the inclusion of a mandatory visual arts component across all undergraduate years is paramount. It is essential if practitioners are to effectively implement a visual arts curriculum using inquiry-based learning with a transdisciplinary approach, as per recognised good practice and in keeping with findings from this study. Essentially, the designed models (Fig. 5.1), (Fig. 5.3 and 5.4) would prove effective if used in tandem with the Professional Award Criteria and Guidelines for Initial Professional Education (Level 7 and 8) Degree Programmes. It provides a prime opportunity for change in the visual arts landscape within ECEC in Ireland and will influence the delivery of creative experiences for children in a meaningful way. Finally, in my opinion, there is a professional imperative to award the arts its true status in early childhood education by locating it centrally in children’s learning.
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Appendices
Appendix 1: Researcher Biodata, Publications and Conference Presentations

I studied Fine Art Printmaking at Falmouth College of Art and Design (UK), trained as an Art teacher and completed an MA in Art in Early Childhood Education. Prior to my current employment, as lecturer in the visual arts (BA for Early Childhood Education and Care) at Cork Institute of Technology (2006 to date), I worked at the Scuola Internazionale di Graffica in Venice and subsequently as Head of Art at the International School of Padua, Italy. My artwork has been exhibited both nationally and internationally; Ireland, UK, Italy, Gibraltar and Cyprus, and my *Book Arts* has toured Europe and is now on permanent display at the Biblioteca Nazionale Vittorio Emanuele III, Rome.

Over the past fourteen years at CIT, I have trained initial professional education students in the philosophy of inquiry-based learning using a transdisciplinary approach to the visual arts. In accordance with recognised good practice, future practitioners engage in hands-on creative processes, underpinned by sound theoretical knowledge and based on the Aistear (NCCA, 2009) themes. An overview of the CIT four year modular programme can be accessed in an article published by OMEP (World Organisation for Early Childhood Education) in their *Theory into Practice Journal* (2019) at the following link:


I have also given many presentations on the CIT experience at national and international conferences.

Additionally, I have made three podcasts for the National Council of Curriculum Assessment (NCCA), highlighting good practice in the design and delivery of a visual arts curriculum. I have held CPD workshops and training days for Better Start and conducted consultancy work in several early childhood centres. These consultations are collaborative in nature, affording practitioners and support personnel the opportunity to optimise the learning environment in accordance with inquiry-based learning, and in harmony with Aistear, the Irish National Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009) and Síolta (CECDE, 2006) the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (CECDE, 2006). As part of the Early Childhood Education and Care programmatic review at CIT, I designed a suite of creative modules informed by the visual arts model for initial professional education within this research (Fig 5.1). In addition, this has informed the further development of a suite of creative modules for a level 8 Montessori Degree programme scheduled to commence in September 2020.

The following publications, conference presentations and invitations to speak have been produced as a result of the research conducted for this thesis:
Publications:


Conference Presentations:


Egan-Rainy, E. (2017) *Promoting Inquiry Based Learning (IBL) with a Transdisciplinary Approach (TDA) to the Visual Arts (VA) in Pre-Service Training of Early Years Educators.* 7th International Association of Art in Early Childhood Conference Centre for Educational Research and Development Paro College of Education Bhutan 15 – 18th April, 2017


**Invited speaker:**


Egan, E. (2018) *Assessment in the Arts for Early Childhood Education.* Key Note Address at the University of Malta Valletta, November 9th 2018


Egan-Rainy, E. (2016) Key Note Address *How to Facilitate Language Development and Learning (in the Early Years) Through the Arts* Happy Talk Speech and Language Therapy 9th June 2016

Egan-Rainy, E. (2015) Key Note Address *Promoting Authentic Learning Opportunities through the Visual Arts in Early Years Education.* Síolta Quality Assurance Show Case 21st October 2015
Invited Blog Entries:


Appendix 2: Visual Arts in *Process-Led Arts* module at IPE in ECEC at Cork Institute of Technology

Provocation: Tonal Study: Black, White and Grey (Workshop)

Arrange items according to the artistic elements present: line, shape, space, form, texture and value. Display white on black and black on white to demonstrate contrast.
Student Response: Tonal Study through Painting and Printmaking (Workshop)

Explore; multiple shades of grey, contrast, layering, shape, pattern, texture and value.
Provocation Loose Parts (Transient Art Workshop)

Arrange loose parts in aesthetically pleasing manner, in readily accessible sorting trays so that children can give consideration to choosing individual pieces which best suit their visual ideas. Wooden pieces cut into segments of varying sizes, shapes and lengths, provide opportunities for exploring, e.g. mathematical concepts, visual expression and sensory experiences. Order teaches children valuable life-skills, e.g. respect for the art materials, and teaches students the importance of organisation, in planning provocations, as future practitioners.
Provocation: Colour Theory (Workshop)

Explore colour-theory by presenting a range of items; e.g. recyclables, glass, paper, thread and fabric of varying value. Consider, e.g. the darkness or lightness of a colour, transparent or opaque (which materials allow light through and which ones do not). Pose the why? questions. Consider all seven artistic elements. Display colour swashes alongside selection of natural materials, which reflect various colour tones, highlights, colour ranges in the Natural World. Swashes can be used in colour matching and colour grouping processes.
Create secondary colours. Explore colour value through; painting, shape, pattern and printing. When exploring colour theory, avoid using all three primary colours (red, yellow and blue) at any one time, as the end result will be brown (invariably).
Appendix 3: Visual Arts in *Learning Through the Arts* module at IPE in ECEC at Cork Institute of Technology

**Provocation: Exploring Stone (Workshop)**

Use stone as a medium for visual expression and exploration to open up the realm of possibilities for transdisciplinary learning e.g understanding different surface qualities, what happens when water is applied to the surface? (absorption, pooling, tonal and textural transformations). Hold a stone in your hand and use as a drawing tool, observe the temperature change. Use the opportunity for children to develop an understanding of mathematical concepts, e.g. size, shape, sequencing and balance. Include text within provocation to facilitate manipulation, exploration and investigation of materials, with purpose. Foster curiosity.
Student Response: Exploring Stone (Workshop)
Provocation presented in an aesthetically pleasing and inviting manner sparks children’s curiosity and promotes a desire to explore and investigate. Flowers are sorted into their botanical components with appropriate labels (illuminated from below) highlighting the artistic elements of: line, shape, form, space, colour, value and texture in greater detail.
Provocation: Exploring Botany (Workshop)

Pose open-ended questions using a TDA; Art, Science, Maths, Language. Encourage children to question and engage in research.
Students response: Exploring Botany (Workshop)

Aesthetically display an abundance of items from Nature, in an ordered and categorised way. Choose a neutral background to avoid visual distraction and to highlight the visual qualities and artistic elements within each item. Use mirrors, tinker trays, glass jars and light tables for display and to house and observe items. Pose questions which will stimulate respect for the environment- a valuable life skill.
Appendix 4: Visual Arts in *Arts in an Emergent Curriculum* module at IPE in ECEC at Cork Institute of Technology

Provocation: Mark-making using non-conventional drawing and painting tools  
(Final year interactive exhibition/workshop at the James Barry Exhibition Centre CIT)

Encourage children to engage in a collaborative drawing/tonal painting by creating expressive marks of varying thickness and length. The large surface encourages whole-body movement and gestural expressive marks. Limit the tonal range to emphasise the possibility of different marks.
Provocation: Visual storytelling through projections
(Final year interactive exhibition/workshop at the James Barry Exhibition Centre (CIT))

Organise transparencies and silhouettes in separate containers according to tonal qualities to facilitate choice. A visual dialogue takes place between the display surface (the overhead projector) and the wall used for projection. Draw attention to the increase in scale and how some items appear in colour while others are in shadow.
Provocation: Exploring scents of Christmas
(Final year interactive exhibition/workshop at the James Barry Exhibition Centre CIT)

Provide children with an alternative to commercially generated Christmas craft by using a range of items from Nature, e.g. pinecones, leaves, spices (cinnamon, cloves, dried orange peel). Children release the aromas and scent their play dough as they create patterns and textures on the surface.
Provocations addressing a variety of concepts act as an invitation to participate and entice children to engage in hands-on exploration, driven by their individual interests and curiosity. Blank walls, clear spaces devoid of clutter and visual over-stimulation, provide a calming atmosphere which facilitates rich exploration and inquiry, reminiscent of Reggio Emilia settings.
Appendix 5:

Information Sheet for In-Depth Interviews with ECCE Practitioners and Support Personnel

Invitation to take part in Research Study

Dear ……..
I am a lecturer in the Visual Arts for use in Early Childhood Education at the Cork Institute of Technology and I am currently undertaking a PhD. I wish to invite you to partake in research which I’m conducting, entitled *Inquiry Based Emergent Curriculum using a Transdisciplinary Approach to the visual arts in Early Childhood Education and Care: Implications for Practice*

The research has three aims: (1) determine which approaches Early Childhood Care and Education practitioners use when implementing a visual arts curriculum; (2) establish what constitutes *good practice* in the design and delivery of a visual arts curriculum in Early Childhood Care and Education (3) identify factors which mitigate against Early Childhood Care and Education practitioners implementing an Inquiry Based Emergent Curriculum using a Transdisciplinary Approach to the visual arts.

Research participants need to belong to one of the following two professional categories to be eligible to partake in the research

- Early Years practitioner working in an ECEC sector with children aged 2 years and 8 months - 5 years and 6 months availing of the ECCE Scheme (DCYA, 2019).

  **OR**

- Early Childhood Education and Care Support Personnel i.e. mentor, trainer, researcher, author, representative of Better Start, Early Childhood Ireland, City and County Childcare Committees, or the Department of Child and Youth Affairs.

Participation is by way of one in-depth interview (approximately 45-60 minutes duration) at a mutually agreeable location and time.

Anonymity and confidentiality are guaranteed.

If you require any additional information, please do not hesitate to contact me Evelyn Egan at evelyn.egan@cit.ie

Thank you for your kind consideration,

Yours sincerely,
Appendix 6:

Consent Form for Research Participants

Study Title: *Inquiry Based Emergent Curriculum using a Transdisciplinary Approach to the visual arts in Early Childhood Care and Education: Implications for Policy, Education and Practice*

I am writing to invite you, in your capacity as practitioner working with children availing of the ECCE scheme, to participate in a research study which I am undertaking as part of my PhD. The purpose of the research is to determine what approaches Early Childhood Care and Education practitioners use when implementing a visual arts curriculum

By submitting this form, you are indicating that you have read the description of the study, are over the age of 18, and that you agree to the terms as described. The types of questions asked will revolve around but are not limited to pre and in-service training in the visual arts as well as approaches adopted to visual arts curriculum implementation within the ECEC setting in which you work. The interview may take 40 minutes to 1 hour approximately to complete. The information you provide will be kept confidential, however, Cork Institute of Technology hold the right to review and approve research studies and so, may inspect and copy records pertaining to this research. You will be kept anonymous; you or your service will not be identified. The notes and recordings will be destroyed three years after the completion of the research process.

However, it is hoped that this research, with your generous help, can improve approaches to visual arts curriculum implementation within the ECCE sector in Ireland. Research of this kind, acts as an agent of change and can help inform policy makers and the wider public in the future. Moreover, participation in this research is voluntary.

If you have any further questions regarding this study, please feel free to contact me at evelyn.egan@cit.ie

Thank you for your participation in advance.

Sincerely,

Evelyn Egan
1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions. □

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving reason. □

3. I agree to take part in the above study. □

Please tick box

1. I agree to the interview being audio recorded □ □

2. I agree to the use of anonymised quotes in publications □ □

Name of Participant ____________________________________________________________________________________________
Name of Researcher ____________________________________________________________________________________________

Evelyn Egan  
T: 021 432 6109. E: evelyn.egan@cit.ie  
Dr Judith Butler  
T: 021 433 5930. E: judith.butler@cit.ie  

Prof. Margaret Linehan  
T: 021 433 5930. E: margaret.linehan@cit.ie
Appendix 7:

Interview Schedule for ECCE Managers and Practitioners

1. How long have you been employed in the ECEC sector?
2. What is the highest qualification you hold?
3. Where did you train?
4. How many modules did you take specifically related to the visual arts? Could you describe what these entailed?
5. Please describe the role the visual arts played during your training?
6. Do you feel this has added to your practice?
7. What does ‘visual arts’ in Early Education mean to you?
8. How would you describe a typical visual art activity for children in your care?
9. How often are children involved in visual art activities in this centre?
10. What purpose do these activities serve and how do they benefit children?
11. Can you describe the most common type of visual artwork on display in your setting?
12. Is visual art approached as an end in itself, as an activity, in this setting or does it incorporate other areas of learning?
13. What challenges /obstacles (if any) do you find in the delivery of a visual arts curriculum?
14. Describe the ideal visual arts activity/process?
15. Have you participated in any visual arts CPD post qualification?
16. Is there anything we haven’t covered in this interview that you would like to add?
Appendix 8:

Interview Schedule for Support Personnel

1. What are the most common approaches to the visual arts in ECCE in Ireland?

2. What approach to the visual arts should Early Years organisations advocate?

3. What factors influence a particular choice of approach to the visual arts among ECCE practitioners?

4. Are current approaches to the visual arts in line with the Aistear Curriculum Framework for Early Childhood Care and Education?

5. What challenges face the ECEC sector when implementing visual arts as per Aistear Curriculum Framework recommendations?

6. How might these factors/challenges be addressed?
FIELD WORK - RECRUITEMENT OF ECCE PRACTITIONERS

Two Stage Sample

Purposive Random Sample

Accessed Tusla register

Identified registered settings

Randomly selected initial participants

Inclusion Criteria

- Offering ECCE Scheme
- Min Level 7 qualifications in Early Childhood Education
- Graduates from each of HEI offering IPE in ECEC

Did not Identify Qualifications or HEI

Suggested potential participants who met the inclusion criteria

Contacted ECCE Organisations/support personnel to identify suitable potential participants

- ACP
- ECI
- Better Start

Appendix: 9: Recruitment of ECCE Practitioners