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The Irish Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) scheme is free and universal, but at whose expense?

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The Irish Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) scheme is free and universal, but at whose expense? A qualitative study on ECCE practitioners' and stakeholders' views on quality.

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Abstract

Johanna Forde, The Irish Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) scheme is free and universal, but at whose expense? A qualitative study on ECCE practitioners' and stakeholders' views on quality.

This research addresses the historical and current influences on quality practice and provision by reviewing national and international literature debating quality in the Irish Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a). To understand quality components the regulations and policy frameworks that inform and guide the ECCE scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a), including ECCE practice and the implications for provision standards, are explored. Four research questions ask: (1) What constitutes quality provision for children attending the ECCE scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a)? (2) What has informed ECCE regulation and policy in Ireland? (3) What are the identified challenges associated with the ECCE scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a)? (4) What recommendations can enhance the ECCE scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a) for children, families, and practitioners? The bio-ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007), which considers the child as a construct of their immediate surroundings and the more prominent beliefs of the society in which they reside, underpinned this study. A qualitative research approach involved semi-structured interviews with practitioners (n=10) and stakeholders (n=6) (employed in leadership positions in support/mentoring/advocacy roles). Findings depict six interconnected components that indicate quality practice (i.e., Initial Practitioner Education (IPE), leadership, regulation and evaluation, professional recognition and development, an emergent curriculum, and consultation). The challenges for providing quality ECCE include a lack of investment and professional recognition, inconsistency and irregularity of inspection, and disruption to children's interactions and communication between practitioners and policymakers. Three qualification levels, Level 6/7/8 permitted as ECCE room leader with additional responsibility for the manager without any management training challenges compliance and services alignment. To enhance quality practice and provision, this study recommends mandating a professional graduate workforce supported with management training involving distributed pedagogical leadership. Integrate one quality framework utilising an emergent curriculum. Introduce standardised professional salary scales. A single inspectorate should monitor and evaluate quality ECCE provision.

Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis is entirely my work and has not been submitted for any other awards at this or any other academic establishment. Where use has been made of other people's work, it has been fully acknowledged and referenced. This research has complied with the University's Code of Good Practice in Research.

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"Sometimes it is the people no one can imagine anything of who do the things no one can imagine."

— Alan Turing

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Acronyms

ACP	Association Childcare Professionals
ADM	Area Development Management
AIM	Access and Inclusion Model
CCC	County Childcare Committee
CE	Community Employment
CECDE	Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education
CPD	Continuous Professional Development
CRA	Children's Rights Alliance
CSER	Centre for Social and Educational Research
DCYA	Department of Children and Youth Affairs
DCEDIY	Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth
DEI	Diversity, Equality and Inclusion
DES	Department of Education and Skills
DIT	Dublin Institute of Technology
DOHC	Department of Health and Children
DJELR	Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform
DPER	Department of Public Expenditure and Reform
ECCE	Early Childhood Care and Education
EC	European Commission
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
ECI	Early Childhood Ireland
ECNC	European Commission Network on Childcare
ELC	Early Learning and Care Sector
ELC/SAC	Early Learning and Care/School-Aged Childcare
EOCP	Equal Opportunity Childcare Programme
ESRI	Economic and Social Research Institute
EU	European Union
EYCE	Early Years Care and Education
EYEI	Early Years Education-focused Inspections

EYEPU	Early Years Education Policy Unit
EYI	Early Years Inspectors
FETAC	Further Education and Training Awards Council
GCVU	Garda Central Vetting Unit
GDP	Gross Domestic Profit
GNI	Gross National Income
GOI	Government of Ireland
HOI	Houses of the Oireachtas
HSE	Health Service Executive
IHREC	Human Rights and Equality Commission
INMO	Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation
IPPA	Irish Preschool Playgroup Association
IPE	Initial Professional Education
ISB	Irish Statute Book
LINC	Leadership for Inclusion Coordinator
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NCIP	National Childcare Investment Programme
NESF	National Economic and Social Forum
NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications
NQAI	National Qualifications Authority of Ireland
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development
OMCYA	Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs
PACG	Professional Award Criteria and Guidelines for Initial Professional Education (Level 7 and Level 8) Degree Programmes for the Early Learning and Care (ELC) Sector
PIP	Programme Implementation Platform
PEC	Professional Education Continuum
PLÉ	Pedagogy Learning Education
PUP	Pandemic Unemployment Programme
QAP	Quality Assurance Programme

QQI	Quality & Qualifications Ireland
QRF	Quality and Regulatory Framework
RTÉ	Raidió Teilifís Éireann
SIPTU	Services, Industrial, Professional and Technical Union
TWSS	Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Emergency Fund
WDP	Workforce Development Plan

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

The State's commitment to early childhood care and education was demonstrated by introducing the Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme (ECCE) (DCEDIY, 2021a), effective from January 2010. The ECCE scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a) replaced the universal Early Childhood Supplement of €1,000, which was a payment to parents of children less than six years of age to offset the high costs of childcare introduced in 2006 (Horgan *et al*., 2014). Initially, from 2010 –to 2016, children between the ages of three years two months, and four years seven months at 1 September in the applicable pre-school year were eligible to receive three hours of pre-school, five days per week for thirty-eight weeks, accessible in both community and private crèches at an approximate investment of €175 million from the state (Ibid). The ECCE scheme (2010) was extended in Budget 2016, and the entry age was reduced to three years and further developed in 2018. Since 2018, it has enabled children to enrol from two years and eight months and receive two years of funded pre-school (DCEDIY, 2019e). Even though 806,359 children have participated since the ECCE scheme began in 2010, and the number of four-year-olds attending Primary school has significantly decreased (DCYA, 2019d), the *"*one-size-fits-all approach" (Hayes *et al.,* 2017:151) has created many deficits in providing quality ECCE practice and provision. Ireland's ECCE scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a) was significant, as for the first-time fixed capitation was associated with levels of qualification; however, the current levels of capitation have remained set at standard (€69.) and higher (€80.25) since 2018 (DCEDIY, 2019). The ECCE scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a) is neither compulsory nor a legal entitlement (Duffy, 2019).

Over the last three decades, the development of the ECCE scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a) is primarily due to EU and OECD influence rather than the child's needs (Urban *et al.,* 2017). The ECCE scheme's (DCEDIY, 2021a) restrictive age criteria, to access the single-entry point to avail of the scheme, and the lack of parental support due to the sessional nature of the scheme (Horgan *et al.,* 2014) indicate the unfavourable impact of regulations may have on the family and child. Furthermore, the annual staff turnover rate of 18%, reported in the Annual Early Years Sector Profile Report – 2019 / 2020 (DCEDIY, 2021c), confirms that the ECCE sector remains one of the lowest-paid sectors in Ireland (SIPTU, 2019). The Report on the Working Conditions of the Early Years Education and Care Sector (2017) (HOI, 2017) acknowledges a professional crisis in the ECCE sector due to the inadequate State investment and lack of professional recognition. The findings in *Pathways to Better Prospects: Delivering Proper*

Terms and Conditions for the Early Years Workforce in Ireland (ECI, 2020d) indicate an enhanced qualification profile; however, retention and turnover are significant issues owing to the absence of appropriate funding and pay scales for the ECCE workforce. Therefore, investment is the residual issue affecting the workforce, with current levels being five times less than the UNICEF recommended criterion of 1% GDP (Santanna, 2020). Early year's provision necessitates leadership, political vision, and professional recognition (Ibid).

Existing research suggests that the current ECCE scheme is insufficient, and the ECCE workforce is unnecessarily overburdened (Moloney, 2018). Murray (2019) emphasises that the ECCE workforce is uniquely positioned to positively influence children's lives as children "need rights-informed and resourced educators*"* (Long, 2021:32). However, regulation, policy and research are rapidly evolving without adequate State investment or inclusion of the ECCE workforce. The absence of professional management skills, professional recognition with remuneration and CPD "to engage with Aistear in a rights-respecting way*"* (Long, 2019:10) negatively impacts quality ECCE provision. Furthermore, O' Sullivan (2021) asserts that the ECCE workforce needs space to reflect. Consequently, the lack of training challenges the implications for using the emergent curriculum (Duignan, 2019), affecting children's development (Douglass, 2019). Additionally, findings in the study by Oke *et al.,* (2019) found that investment was needed to support appropriate salaries and the implementation of the national frameworks.

1.2 Study Rationale

This study focuses explicitly on the ECCE workforce to explore ECCE practice and the implications for provision standards to identify and evaluate critical components of quality, "which matters most for their (children's) development, learning and well-being*"* OECD (2021:1). This research aims to investigate the key components that equate quality practice and provision from the perspective of practitioners and other stakeholders working in the Irish Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a). This study aims to identify what constitutes quality ECCE provision for children from two years and eight months of age and not older than five years and six months of age (DCEDIY, 2021a). Furthermore, this study identifies the changes and improvements required to enhance quality ECCE practice and provision. The following research questions are posed.

1. What constitutes quality provision for children attending the ECCE scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a)?
2. What has informed ECCE regulation and policy in Ireland?
3. What are the identified challenges associated with the ECCE scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a)?
4. What recommendations can enhance the ECCE scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a) for children, families, and practitioners?

1.3 Context

This study explores the multi-faceted components of quality, including the structural aspects (e.g., child-staff ratios, staff education requirements) and process aspects (e.g., meaningful child/staff and peer interactions, partnership with parents and practitioners) of quality and what this means for children attending ECCE services. In addition, this study identifies how regulation and policy have influenced quality provision and practice to date, reviewing National Frameworks and guidelines, including Siolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (CECDE, 2006a) and Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009). Moreover, this study examines the elements that incorporate quality, as informed by the principles of Síolta (CECDE, 2006a) and Aistear (NCCA, 2009) and national research related to ECCE and inspection. A review of policies identifies how the practice evolved to meet the ever-changing needs of children in ECCE settings and associates with the child's transitions. This study fundamentally explores the meaning of quality ECCE provision among sector professionals, including practitioners and other stakeholders (employed in leadership positions in support/mentoring/advocacy roles). It provides recommendations for future ECCE policy and practice.

1.4 Objectives

The concrete experience of practitioners and stakeholders working in the ECCE sector is essential to the study objectives.

1. Provide an in-depth study of ECCE practitioner and stakeholder perspectives on what constitutes quality ECCE practice.

2. Determine best practices concerning quality provision for children attending the ECCE scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a) (i.e., children aged two years and eight months and not older than five years and six months of age).
3. To explore how policy and regulation have impacted quality ECCE practice and the consequential impact on the ECCE workforce.
4. Explore challenges and the merits of providing quality provision for children participating in the ECCE scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a).
5. To contribute to the extant body of existing literature concerning quality early childhood care education.

1.5 Structure of Thesis and Chapter Content Outline

The structure and content of all chapters within the thesis are outlined in this section. The study comprises five chapters.

Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter presents an overview of the context and rationale for the study. It defines significant terms associated with quality, including the structural aspects (e.g., qualification levels, floor-space requirements) and process aspects (e.g., nurturing reciprocal relationships, children's development and well-being) of quality. This chapter poses the research questions, identifies the study's main objectives, and outlines the subsequent chapter content.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter presents a review of the current literature and research related to Early Childhood Education and Care. The literature reviews policy, practice, and theoretical sources, identifying effective regulations and procedures and critiques their impact on ECCE practice in Ireland.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The third chapter describes the research methodology employed in this study and justifies the selection method. The chapter includes a review of the concepts of validity and reliability and how they are applied to this study, ethical considerations, and limitations involved in this research. The rationale for undertaking a qualitative study and participant selection is justified in the chapter. This chapter also identifies the strengths and limitations of the study.

Chapter 4: Discussion

This chapter presents a discussion on the findings, analysis, and subsequent themes from the in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted with ECCE practitioners (n=10) and other stakeholders (n=6). The thematic analysis identified a series of key themes, including, 1). Quality ECCE experiences for children and their families- Rhetoric Vs Reality. 2). The ECCE workforce: unprepared, unseen, and unheard. 3). The Identified Challenges with the ECCE scheme. 4). Inspection. 5). Supporting the ECCE workforce. 6). Relationships Matter in ECCE.

Chapter 5: Conclusion and Recommendations

This chapter provides an overall conclusion to the study and proposes recommendations from analysing the key findings directly related to the ECCE scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a). The recommendations focus on enhancing quality ECCE provision utilising and implementing Síolta (CECDE, 2006a) relating to the critical themes identified in this study, including the relational approach among children, parents, staff, management and external professionals, professional identity and recognition, and improved working conditions for the ECCE workforce.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews national and international research on quality in ECEC that has informed Irish policy and practice. Specifically, this chapter explores regulatory policies that underpin Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) practice in Ireland. The ECCE scheme is a universal two-year programme for the Department of Children Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY, 2021a:1).

> "with entry at the beginning of the programme year, and available to children who have turned two years and eight months of age before September 1st as long they won't turn five years and six months of age on or before June 30th of the programme year."

This chapter opens with scrutiny by introducing the first preschool regulations in 1996. Then, the chapter addresses the impact of the experiences on the children and families and the practitioners and sector professionals to inform regulation and policy concerning quality ECCE practice and provision. Finally, the components associated with quality ECCE provision are critiqued, including the two distinct aspects of quality, structural and process. Structural features are perceived to be mandatory preconditions for process aspects of quality (Slot, 2018; OECD, 2018a) and underpin the supporting framework, for example, the accessible environment, personnel, and tangible resources (OECD, 2018a).

2.2 Historical overview of ECCE regulation and policy in Ireland.

For centuries, the role of the women in Ireland remained confined to the home, and motherhood became the distinctive role in both social and legal contexts (Sheehan *et al*., 2017). The authoritarian part of the Church dominated teaching and service delivery (Smith, 2019) and influenced the endorsement of Article 41 of the Irish Constitution (1937) (Sheehan *et al*., 2017). As a result, women were legally obliged to leave their jobs after marriage and remain at home, taking care of the children (Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC), 2018). Indeed, how women's roles were constructed in the constitution and the influence on their roles in society, including Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), is interpreted, acknowledged or invested in, is arguably still the case. Residual implications of the *Marriage Bar* inhibited equal access to the contributory pension scheme (IHREC, 2017). The subject of judicial review is raised in the work of the Commission, Article 41.2 (Irish Statute Book (ISB), 2019a). Moreover, the Commission's report, 2017 United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women initiated equality and human rights concerns (Ibid).

Aligning national policies to comply with EU directives helped change women's role when Ireland joined the European Union (E.U.) in 1973 (Wallström, 2009). The Civil Service (Employment of Married Women) Act, 1973, known as the *Marriage Bar*, was lifted (ISB, 1973) hence, changing the traditional nuclear family structure with the unprecedented participation of women in the workforce (Duignan *et al*., 2004) as its consequence. As employment opportunities for women increased, particularly in the service sector (DES, 2002), the promotion of women multiplied in the labour market and elements of the Church's prejudiced control was diminished (Ó Corráin, 2017). The high interest in providing Early Childhood Care and Education primarily supported economic and social mobilisation from 1960-1990 (Duignan *et al*., 2004).

Until the 1990s, service provision was directed by the community and voluntary sector, namely the Irish Preschool Playgroup Association (IPPA) and the Comhchoiste Réamhscolaíochta (Irish medium playgroups). Charitable organisations such as the Civics Institute, the Daughters of Charity, and Barnardos supported disadvantaged children (Douglas, 1984). Since 1969, the IPPA has been embedded in Ireland's history of ECEC (Douglas, 1984) to implement instruction to both community and private ECEC services (Whyte *et al*., 2007). Without the work of IPPA and other collective organisations, there would have been little childcare provision for policies, programmes, and funding to engage in recent years (Corrigan, 2004).

The increasing trend of married women in employment, "going from16.7% in 1981 to 45.3% in 1999" (Fine-Davis, 2007:4), influenced the growth of the IPPA, the Quality Childcare Organisation (IPPA, the Quality Childcare Organisation, 2001).

2.3 The Child Care Act (1991)

The Child Care Act, 1991, legally defines the child as "a person under the age of 18 years, excluding a person who is or has been married " (ISB, 1991:2). The objective of the legislation relates to "the care of children, particularly children who have been assaulted, ill-treated, neglected, or sexually abused or who are at risk*"* (Explanatory Memorandum to the Child Care Bill 1988:1). The statutory duties of practitioners are to fulfil the child's right, as in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, to be cared for in a professional setting depicted in Part VII Child Care Act, 1991 (McPartland, 2020). Ireland's assurance to support and advocate for the rights of children and families was demonstrated by ratifying the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in September 1992 (IHREC, 2020). The guidelines *Children First: National Guidelines for the Protection and Welfare of Children (1999)* were guided by the UNCRC, particularly articles 19 and 37. Moreover, the guidelines provide the structure concerning children needing care and protection (DOH, 1999).

2.4 The Children First Act, 2015

The Children First Act, 2015, enacted on 19th November 2015, commenced in full on December 11th, 2017 and placed statutory obligations on distinct groups of professionals and organisations providing services to children (Tusla, 2020b). This legislation outlined the roles of the key statutory bodies, namely, Tulsa - Child and Family Agency and An Garda Síochána and explained the required reporting process and procedures (Ibid). The Children First Act, of 2015 outlines the legal responsibility of each practitioner as a mandated person to report abuse regarding a child or children in their care (McPartland, 2020). The review of the Child Care Act, 1991, prepared by the Law Reform Commission (2019), ensured comprehensive legislation, acts, and statutory instruments were considered and congruent to the Revised Act (Law Reform Commission, 2019). This review responds to the pledge by the Government to "review and reform as necessary the Child Care Act 1991*"* (GOI, 2019a) as part of Better

Outcomes Brighter Futures – The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014-2020 (DCEDIY, 2022a).

An Open Policy Debate involving representatives of Tusla, service providers, academics, experts, membership organisations, advocacy groups, legal professionals, officials, and inter-agency forums identified the necessity to support children and families as a recurrent issue (Roe, 2019). Hence, the demand for standardised approaches and procedures to ensure consistent services and equality of access prevailed (Ibid). Also, written submissions to the DCYA asserted the development of independent legislation that prioritises pre-school in both centre and non-centre-based settings because of the growth and expansion of ECCE over recent decades (ECI, 2017). The need for increased preventative measures and relevant legislation for child development, child protection and welfare practice, and legislative and constitutional changes concerning children, was asserted by Barnardos (2018). The obligation to audit and govern the quality of childcare provision by ensuring the safeguarding and security of children and sustaining children's rights is affirmed by the Children's Rights Alliance (CRA) (2018).

2.5 Staff qualifications

The first Preschool Regulations (1996) empowered the state to regulate practice and standards within Early Year services (Pettersen, 2020) yet failed to stipulate formal qualifications to work in an early childhood setting (DES, 2009). Consequently, young children and their families' needs depended on the female-dominated sector, often reliant upon Community Employment (CE) and Job Initiative schemes in voluntary and private services (DES, 2009). Even though the report *Strengthening Families for Life* (Government of Ireland (GOI), 1998) pledged to protect the stability of the family through the provision of political, economic, and social support services to develop childcare services (Corrigan, 2004); the predominantly low paid, female workforce, with low investment is reflective of the view of the role of women as unpaid carers established in the constitution. The Census of Childcare Provision (1991) conducted by Area Development Management ((ADM), 2003) reveals the extent of the precarious working conditions experienced among the workforce, including the discrepancies in the types and levels of qualifications, the lack of qualifications, the meagre salaries for full and part-time staff and the dependency on volunteer staff.

The Dublin Institute of Technology/New Opportunities for Women (DIT/NOW OMNA) early childhood training project (2015) continued to elevate the profile and quality of early childhood programmes in association with practitioners (Collins, 2009; CSER, 2006; OMNA, 2000). The National Forum for Early Childhood Education (1998), in collaboration with stakeholders (Duignan *et al*., 2004), identified five core criteria for objectively achieving quality, including Child indicators, Staff indicators; Physical Environment Indicators; Social Indicators; Natural Indicators (Coolahan, 1998:55-56). This work coincided with The National Childcare Strategy (2000) and The Expert Working Group on Childcare, Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform (DJELR), established under Partnership 2000 for Inclusion, Employment and Competitiveness in 1996 (GOI, 1996). Notably, the Expert Working Group Report on Childcare (1999) endorsed the elements of care and education and recognised that they are "inextricably linked elements in a child's holistic development" (DJELR, 1999a:45). Extensive consultation emerged among stakeholders and members of the Certifying Body Subgroup, resulting in a Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development in the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector (DJELR, 2002). The Workforce Development Plan (WDP) by the DES (2010) was the first publication in Ireland to clarify the levels of qualification required for the variety of roles associated with the ECCE sector (Duignan, 2017). The achievement of qualifications realises the

> 'skills and qualifications of adults working with young children is a critical factor in determining the quality of young children's ECCE experiences' (DES 2010:6).

For the first time, the 2016 Preschool Regulations introduced a minimum qualification (Level 5 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ)) for ECCE professionals in Ireland that became operational in 2017 (Walsh, 2017). Despite that, the initial professional education of ECCE professionals is crucially important (Melhuish *et al.,* 2015), the pursuit of qualifications is compelled by funding incentives or regulatory requirements (Urban *et al*., 2017). However, the evaluation of ECCE quality is calibrated only by paying higher capitation to services (French, 2019). Moreover, the revised regulations specific to Management, Regulation 9 and Staffing, Regulation 11 significantly impact compulsory obligations in providing early childhood care and education services (Tusla, 2018d). As a result, there are high turnover and attrition rates among the workforce, creating substantial implications on the quality of the services (DES, 2018b). Moreover, the onerous demands of working in the early childhood

education and care profession include long working hours, poor terms and conditions, low pay, and discrepancies amongst qualifications (Moloney, 2017).

The *Review of Occupational Role Profiles in Ireland in Early Childhood Education and Care* (Urban *et al*., 2017) provided the evidence that led to the Professional Award Criteria and Guidelines for Initial Professional Education (DES, 2019). In association with the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI, 2002), the core elements of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) were developed (Ibid). Kerrins (2020) highlights the publication of The Professional Award Criteria and Guidelines for Initial Professional Education (Level 7 and Level 8) Degree Programmes (PACG) for the Early Learning and Care (ELC) Sector in Ireland (2019) as "an important milestone in the enhancement of quality in Ireland's Early Learning and Care (ELC) services*"* (Kerrins, 2020:1). In addition, the introduction of The Code of Professional Responsibilities and Code of Ethics, 2020 (Moloney *et al.,* 2020) aims to influence and demonstrate a shared approach, to model and implement quality practice, and advocate for the ECCE sector to maintain professional integrity (Ibid).

2.6 Evolution of the Inspection Regime

Arguably, early childhood care and education progressed as a policy issue in Ireland in 1996 following the signing of the Child Care Act, 1991 and the implementation of the Child Care (Preschool Services) Regulations, 1996 in January 1997 (Hayes *et al*., 2006). The changes included the introduction and legal definition of a child and identified the need for regulation in ECCE services (ISB, 1996). Whilst asserting concern of the divide among interdepartmental Government agencies, The Working Group on Childcare Facilities for Working Parents (Dept. Of Equality and Law Reform, 1994) highlighted national policy on ECCE that endorsed pre-school regulations. The legal requirements for pre-school provision in Part VII of the Child Care Act 1991 (GOI, 1991) marked the beginning of the critical change in pre-school regulation in Ireland (Corrigan, 2004). Despite that, the IPPA - the Early Childhood Organisation, the NCNA, An Comhchoiste Reamhscoliochta and the Montessori organisations promoted codes of good practice and regulations, to which providers were enrolled on an individual basis (Ibid).

2.6.1 Child Care (Pre-School Services) (No 2) Regulations 1996

The introduction of the Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations under Part VII of the Child Care Act, 1991, enacted the first judicial authority over early education in Ireland (O' Kane, 2004) and provided the requirements for centre-based services, defined as pre-schools caring for children under six years of age and not attending full-time education (McPartland, 2020). From the beginning of the Childcare (Preschool Services) Regulations (1996), challenges included a decline in 1,864 childcare places (Kelly, 1999) due to the adult/child ratio and space criteria requirements outlined in the National Childcare Census (DJELR, 1999b). Whitebread *et al.*, (2015) explain that the primary focus was on equipment and materials, first aid, heating, lighting, and sleeping facilities, even though some providers considered the Regulations minimum standards (O'Kane, 2004).

The Expert Working Group on Childcare (1999) expressed the lack of uniformity in applying the regulations across Health Boards and the insufficient training for inspectors. Fourteen Pre-school officers participated in Professional Development in Early Childhood Care and Education at Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) in 2002; however, service providers questioned their knowledge of ECCE (O' Kane, 2004). Findings in the HSE Inspection Survey Summary (ECI, 2012) illustrated inconsistencies between different HSE areas and the inadequate qualifications of the HSE inspectors. As a result, the Regulations demanded that Pre-school Inspectors attain comprehensive knowledge of child development and centre-based supports (Moloney, 2016).

2.6.2 Child Care (Pre-School Services) (No 2) Regulations 2006

These Regulations revoked the Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations 1996 and (Amendment) Regulations 1997 and came into effect on 2nd September 2007 (HSE, 2006) "and placed greater emphasis on the health, welfare and the development of the child*"* (Rouine, 2019:3). The Regulations necessitated implementing an extensive level of child/adult interaction, strong analytical skills, and the progression of the standard of qualifications (Moloney and Pope, 2013). The service provider was obliged to validate Garda vetting for all staff, students, and volunteers with the Garda Central Vetting Unit (GCVU) and ensure reputable references were obtained from the most recent employer (GOI, 2006). In addition, the service provider had to ensure that a designated person remains in charge with a named

deputy, to deputise in the event of absence and to maintain a register of child and staff records daily (ISB, 2006). Even though the adult's skilled role substantiates the quality of the child's experience, the omission of statutory qualifications remained prominent in the ECCE service (Peeters *et al.*, 2014; European Commission (EC), 2011).

Although problems in the ECCE sector had been raised previously (Hanafin, 2014), Ireland's national public broadcaster, *Raidió Teilifís Éireann* (RTE), aired an exposé of verbal, physical and emotional abuse of young children attending three early childhood care and education (ECCE) services in Ireland (RTE, 2013a). The onus on the State was apparent, and the former Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Frances Fitzgerald, T.D. publicly condemned the actions of the adults and wider practices and issues uncovered by it, stating,

> "The need for more inspectors will also be addressed, she said, adding that staff in childcare facilities needed more training and more qualifications*"* (RTE, 2013b).

Integrating the services for the development, welfare and protection of children and the support of families became compulsory (Tusla, 2019). This amalgamation included the HSE Children and Family Services, the Family Support Agency, and the National Educational Welfare Board (Tusla, 2020a). Tusla, The Child and Family Agency, established on January 1st, 2014, was

> "responsible for improving wellbeing and outcomes for children. It represents the most comprehensive reform of child protection, early intervention and family support services ever undertaken in Ireland" (Tusla, 2020a:1).

Responsibility for inspecting pre-schools, playgroups, day nurseries, crèches, day-care and similar services that cater to children aged 0-6 years was assigned to the National Early Years Inspectorate of Tusla, governed by the Child and Family Agency Act 2013 (Ibid).

2.6.3 Child Care (Pre-School Services) (No 2) Regulations 2016

The former Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Katherine Zappone, enacted the Child Care Act, 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016 and the Child Care Act, 1991 (Early Years Services) (Amendment) Regulations on 4th July and 30th December 2016 (Tusla, 2018c). These regulations included the school-aged services within the definition of Early Years and intensified the enforcement capacity of the Inspectorate (Ibid). Indeed TUSLA

(2018a:7) states, "the revised regulations place a significant emphasis on the governance of services". Primarily, The Pre-school Regulations (2016) helped elevate the status of the ECEC workforce through several key reforms, namely, registration, qualifications, and management (DCEDIY, 2019g). In addition to mandatory engagement with charity regulations and company law (Rogers, 2018), a registration process requires notification to the authorities and requires existing services to comply with registration standards (Wayman, 2016). However, the additional responsibility for the manager without any management training challenges compliance with regulations.

The Quality and Regulatory Framework (QRF) aims to establish and enhance quality for children and families by Tusla's Early Years Inspectorate (Tusla, 2018d); however, the lack of a strategic approach in differing policy agendas is due to societal and socio-economic demands at national and international levels (Urban *et al*., 2017). These demands include the evolving needs of children and families, governance, investment, fragmentation of services, and marketisation (Ibid). In addition, the extent of statutory duties demands a joint inspection process by the Inspectors and Regulatory Departments, promoting inspection that supports children's learning (Atanackovic, 2020). The monitoring of practice and regulatory compliance must be undertaken by the Inspectorates of Tusla and DES (Ibid).

Petterson (2020:10) posits the rationale for the introduction of the Childcare Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016 and states, "they were designed to ensure the elimination of any future misconduct". However, the lack of investment to support the provision of CPD, staff training and the provision of non-contact time has affected the implementation of the regulation (Ibid). Furthermore, Wayman (2016) asserts that the mandatory Child Protection Policy and inspection regime were not coordinated with the education-focused inspections by the DES. In contrast, Tusla (2018b) identified the Pre-school Regulations (2016) challenge as the requirement for all services to implement policies, procedures and statements specific to each service in operation. Tusla further acknowledged that the ECCE sector is constantly evolving and intended that the QRF (Tusla, 2018b) intensify service quality and safety and promote consistency within the inspectorate (Ibid).

The fragmented monitoring and evaluation systems of three bodies inspecting the sector (DES, TUSLA and POBAL) cause confusion and inefficiencies for providers, parents, and stakeholders (ECI, 2019a); therefore, the inspection system is inadequate unless a quality-focused, parallel approach is developed (Pettersen, 2020). Owing to the extent of

> "centralised functions and responsibilities spread across thirty city and county childcare committees to national bodies such as POBAL, DES, TUSLA, DCEDIY (DCEDIY, 2021i),

it ultimately results in "inefficiencies and potential duplication of resources" (ECI, 2019a:2). Essentially, "there remains a need to align and coordinate the policy, practice and implementation of inspection systems for early childhood settings" (CRA, 2020:106).

2.7 Quality Frameworks

The Ready to Learn White Paper (1999) focused explicitly on promoting quality ECEC practice and provisions involving parental involvement, and a system of inspection in early education was proposed. A comprehensive Early Childhood Education strategy for children's education from birth to six years of age resulted in developing a quality framework and curriculum framework (O'Donnell, 2018). The advancement of universal provision demonstrated a relevant attempt to include Early Years on the policy agenda. Childhood investment was "vital to the continuing success*"* (GOI, 2000:7) of the National Children's Strategy. Policy advanced twofold, comprising the state involvement in ECCE and the growth of women's participation in the labour force (Smith, 2019). The endorsement of European funding, Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme 2000-2006 (EOCP) and National Childcare Investment Programme 2006-2010 (NCIP) facilitated the formation of several pilot childcare projects at the local and community level. It coincided with the establishment of European Childcare Networks and City/County Childcare Committees (CSER, 2006).

The initiatives supported by the EOCP were the most significant investment in child policy in the history of the state (DJELR, 2002). Although funding is necessary to provide training and networking (Duignan *et al*., 2004), allocation alone does not assure enhancement in quality ECEC practice. Many policy documents from no less than eleven different government departments laboured in administering policies relating to ECCE in Ireland in 1999 (French, 2013a). The DCYA oversaw the Regulations and relevant policy development, while the HSE controlled inspection and regulation (Goodbody, 2011). As a result, "various departments and agencies develop policy on specific aspects for the sector, often with insufficient examination of the overall totality of expectations and requirements" (Walsh, 2016:69). This lack of cross-

departmental cohesion provoked demands for developing an integrated service NESF 2005; NCCA 2004; Hayes 2002, 2001, 1995; DES, 1999 (Hayes *et al.*, 2006).

2.7.1 Síolta, National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Care and Education (CECDE, 2006a)

In Ireland, The Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) developed Síolta (CECDE, 2006a), The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education. The Centre developed Síolta, meaning seeds for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE), in consultation with participants from the early childhood care and education sector (ECCE) on behalf of The Department of Education and Skills (DES) (CECDE, 2020). Síolta (CECDE, 2006a) is defined as *"*a quality assurance process which addresses all aspects of practice in early childhood care and education services*"* (McMonagle, 2012:3). Síolta (CECDE, 2006a) was the beginning of prominent support to develop quality ECCE practice and provision (Murphy *et al.*, 2013). The quality framework comprises twelve principles and sixteen standards, subdivided into components. The framework was designed for all ECCE services and types of service provision. The principles and standards of Síolta are outlined in Appendix 6.

The principles of Síolta (CECDE, 2006a) are explained as the "vision", and the standards and components are those which "define*"* quality within an ECCE service (CECDE, 2017:6). The principles of Síolta (CECDE, 2006a) are mutually dependent and advocate the child being "an active agent*"* (CECDE, 2017:8). Specifically, Standard 1, Rights of the Child, promotes the child's right to participate and exercise choice where developmentally appropriate practice in an emergent curriculum is playful and fun. Play is the foundation of learning, and when involved with relational pedagogy, play promotes the "whole child*"* development (CECDE, 2017:9), resulting in quality practice. Fundamentally, Síolta (2006) asserts the uniqueness of childhood; therefore, providing support and resources should be unconditional to meet children's needs. Síolta (2017) quotes *Article 2 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and in the Equal Status Acts 2000 to 2004*, advocating that all children benefit from accessing and attending early childhood care and education services equitably. To achieve this, Síolta (CECDE, 2006a) advocates promoting cultural diversity that enhances and respects individual rights and maintains a safe environment where trusting relationships are critical for the child's holistic development.

The quality of ECCE practice "is built upon the unique role of the adult" (CECDE, 2017:8), and one of those roles is mediating children's rights. Moreover, relationships, including the child's parents, peers and staff, are reciprocal and are the foundation of the child's well-being and social and emotional development. Page (2018:125) posits the "child–parent-practitioner love as a Triangle of Love" as essential. Indeed, the term *Professional Love* (Page, 2014:1) illustrates the extent of the practitioner's role "to love the children in their care" and, consequently, emphasises the significance of the ECCE practitioner (CECDE, 2017). Furthermore, Elfer (2007) posits the *Triangle of Trust* and how the role of the practitioner and parent supports the child equally. Similarly, Síolta (CECDE, 2006d:1) Standard 3, Parents and Families, promotes a "proactive partnership" as "an integral component of quality provision". Consequently, prioritising the reciprocal relationship between the family and child benefits all involved (Elfer *et al.*, 2011).

Therefore, to fulfil the components of Siolta (CECDE, 2006b) Standard 11, Professional Practice, the dispositions and qualities of the ECCE practitioner are associated with engaging with reflective practice individually and collectively with a team. Furthermore, Síolta highlights the significance of the ECCE practitioner, emphasising the need for professional recognition, remuneration, and appropriate support (CECDE, 2017). Reciprocal working relationships between the adults who work in the sector are critical for the child. Still, collaboration and participation must be promoted and valued in the ECCE sector and supported at regional and national levels. Also, the environment directly impacts the child's learning and development, and Siolta (CECDE, 2006a) advocates including both the home and the indoor and outdoor setting of the ECCE service (Ibid). The CECDE was closed in 2008, having developed the Síolta Quality Assurance Programme (QAP) before implementing any strategic roll-out of the framework (Walsh, 2016). Since 2008, The Early Years Education Policy Unit (EYEPU) in the DES has held responsibility for the implementation of Síolta (EYEPU, 2013).

2.7.2 Aistear, National Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009)

The Framework for Early Learning (NCCA, 2009) underpinned the collaborative work, namely the Technical Working Group and the Early Childhood Committee; consultation findings (NCCA, 2005); portraiture study (NCCA, 2007); and background papers (Dunphy 2008; Hayes, 2007; French, 2007; Kernan, 2007). Ultimately leading to the development of Aistear,

the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009), which signalled an essential milestone for early year's education and care in Ireland in 2009. The publication of Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009), represented Ireland's first curriculum framework "for all children aged birth to six years of age*"* (Walsh, 2016:79). Moreover,

> *"*Aistear describes the types of learning (dispositions, values and attitudes, skills, knowledge and understanding) that are important for children in early childhood" (McMonagle, 2012:4).

Aistear, meaning journey, is based on twelve early learning and development principles, as outlined in Appendix 7. Fundamentally, Aistear (NCCA, 2009:27) advocates that "relationships are at the heart of early learning and development". (Joyce, 2019) signifies the building of these relationships as the initial element to support early learning and development. Aistear uses four themes to describe learning and development, as outlined in Appendix 8.

The four themes, Well-being, Identity and Belonging, Communication and Exploring and Thinking, emerge from the twelve principles of Aistear (NCCA, 2009). Each theme is outlined with four aims, and each is associated with six learning goals. The themes interpret learning and development in early childhood education and provide supplementary guidelines (Mannion, 2019). Such policies relate to play-based learning and the significance of learning and development through interactions, partnership with parents and practitioners, and encouraging learning and development through appraisal (NCCA, 2009). Conversely, Mannion (2019) insists on assurance and investment to implement Aistear (NCCA, 2009) and states;

> *"*If this is not aspired to and ultimately achieved, excellence in pedagogical practice may continue to remain aspirational in the Irish early childhood context*"* (Mannion, 2019: 47).

Although curricula differ in form and objective (Yoshikawa *et al.,* 2013), the curriculum frameworks across international curricula commit to psychological and educational theories that inform pedagogical practice (Frede and Ackerman, 2007). Aistear (NCCA, 2009:54) defines curriculum as;

> "all the experiences, formal and informal, planned and unplanned in the indoor and outdoor environment, which contribute to children's learning and development*"*.

The curriculum frameworks provide direction during levels of education, and suggestions towards continuous professional development (OECD, 2018c; Sylva et al., 2016), which encompass the broader education systems, including the system's organisation, governance and sectors of responsibilities, and the education system's overall goals and integral pieces (OECD, 2019c). Critically the curriculum framework provides principles that underpin pedagogical work to achieve positive developmental outcomes (OECD, 2018c).

The development of Aistear in Action (2011–2013) by the NCCA and Early Childhood Ireland (ECI) incorporated on-site mentoring, facilitation of cluster groups, and delivery of workshops to support curriculum development (Mannion, 2019; Roe *et al*., 2017). From 2009 to 2013, the EYEPU coordinated the pilot implementation of the Síolta QAP (Roe *et al.*, 2017) to deliver training and continuing professional development opportunities in preparation for the role of Síolta mentor (EYEPU, 2013). Interestingly, the criteria developed by the EYEPU for selecting Síolta mentors required a bachelor's degree in ECCE (or equivalent) and a minimum of five years' practice-based experience delivering an early childhood programme (Ibid). However, the implementation of this pilot of Síolta (CECDE, 2006a) was affected by the varying contractual time allocated to the mentor's role, the time spent with services and the geographical location of participating services (Goodbody, 2011). Moreover, Woods *et al.*, (2021:5) posit that "no national strategy was in place to ensure Aistear was implemented in early education settings".

Arguably, the introduction of each of the frameworks, Síolta (CECDE, 2006a) and Aistear (NCCA, 2009), with individual objectives, illustrates the lack of cohesion and consultation among the variety of ECCE policy departments (Neylon, 2014). The proximity in time and the unique scale of each framework not only confused (Walsh, 2016) but lacked proper resourcing and strategic planning to implement (French, 2013b). The frameworks were, however, the first guidelines available for ECCE services to provide for the diverse needs of children in Ireland, which was congruent with the Child Care (Pre-School Services) (no 2) Regulations 2006 (McMonagle, 2012). The aim was to support practitioners in developing consistency in delivering an integrated approach to early childhood education and care for children from birth to 6 years (Ibid). Moreover, the Better Start National Quality Development Service was introduced to effectively mentor and coach practitioners to implement Síolta (CECDE, 2006a) and Aistear (NCCA, 2009) (Better Start, 2022). Ultimately, the meagre funding allocation resulted in a lack of training, creating challenges for ECCE practitioners to engage with Aistear

(NCCA, 2009) in daily practice and limited effective implementation (Roe *et al*., 2017; Gray and Ryan, 2015). Furthermore, the implementation of Síolta (CECDE) and Aistear (NCCA, 2009) has remained reliant on the capabilities and the inclination of individual services (Roe *et al.*, 2017).

The Programme for a Partnership Government (GOI, 2019b) committed to establishing and enforcing a consolidated mechanism to examine and measure the quality of early childhood services participating in the ECCE Scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a). However, it was redirected due to incomplete tender applications in the procurement process in 2018 (CRA, 2020). Hence, the commitment to create an amended self-evaluation framework to encourage practitioners to self-evaluate and contribute to independent inspection elevates quality standards (First 5, 2019b). While the development of the self-evaluation framework began in 2019, it is expected that a national baseline study of the quality of practice will be commissioned and carried out by the end of 2021 (CRA, 2020). The external monitoring tool will need to correlate to the children, families, staff, society, and relevant stakeholders; with sufficient training (Ibid).

2.8 The Early Childhood Education and Care Scheme (ECCE) (DCEDIY, 2021a).

The State's commitment to early childhood care and education was demonstrated by the introduction of the Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme (ECCE) (DCYA, 2010), effective from January 2010, albeit strictly in economic terms (French, 2013a). The colossal cuts in state investment were apparent (O' Kane, 2013). The ECCE scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a) was estimated to cost €170 million per annum compared to the €480 million annual costs of the Early Childhood Supplement (Ibid). Consequently, the investment in young children and early years' services was considered profitable in financial terms and accounted for the series of initiatives in Ireland (Jenson, 2017; Kvist, 2015).

The ECCE scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a) has significantly developed and broadened awareness of providing early childhood care and education in Ireland (Heeney, 2018). Share *et al*., (2013) acknowledge the significance of universal access to ECCE for all children irrespective of parents' income or work status. Key findings in the Childcare Barometer 2022 (ECI, 2022) indicate that 71% of respondents equally value education for children under five years as for children over five years; yet, accessibility to the scheme is restrictive to a specified age cohort

(GOI, 2014). Furthermore, the child-adult ratio increased from 10:1 to 11:1 in Budget 2012 (Hanniffy, 2017), despite evidence suggesting that smaller ratios are assumed to enhance positive staff-child relationships in ECCE settings (Schleicher, 2019). In comparison, The Leadership for Inclusion (LINC) initiative (2016) and The Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) (2016) have both enhanced accessibility and assured inclusion for children with additional needs (Heeney, 2018) in the ECCE scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a).

The ECCE sector developed practices and procedures with increased quality, compliance, and transparency across different sectors (Rogers, 2018). Service providers undertook online applications despite the ineffective online platform and the lack of appropriate IT support to respond to provider queries efficiently (ECI, 2020c). An increased qualification level was required for early childhood leaders participating in the scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a). Furthermore, ECCE services are contractually required to implement Síolta (CECDE, 2006a) and Aistear (NCCA, 2009) (Roe, 2018), but the principles and themes of Síolta (CECDE, 2006a) and Aistear (NCCA, 2009) are not compulsory (O' Sullivan, 2013). Findings in the Survey of Early Year Practitioners (DES, 2016a:28) revealed alarming results that "42% of respondents felt unprepared about Aistear, 46% in relation to Síolta". The level of preparedness in implementation was a worrying concern and identified the significant gaps and issues impacting quality in ECCE (Ibid).

Nevertheless, the ECCE scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a) was extended in Budget 2016 and further developed in 2018, enabling children to enrol from two years and eight months and receive two years of funded pre-school (DCEDIY, 2019e). Shortcomings in the ECCE Scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a) highlighted the need for increased capitation, continuous professional development and allocation of special needs assistants (ECI, 2014); in addition to the withdrawal of capitation due to children's non-attendance; despite this being beyond the service provider's control (ECI, 2016b).

Despite the increasing uptake of the ECCE scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a), the initial weekly capitation rate of €64.50, or €75 for services where pre-school leaders held degree qualifications in Early Education, was reduced by approximately 3% to €62.50 and €73 respectively in September 2012 (Murphy, 2015). This lack of remuneration in return for enhanced qualifications, implications of regulation and policy and the lack of professional recognition has "led to a situation and context that is becoming increasingly complex and

untenable for the sector" (Walsh, 2016:88). Although funding through learner funds has galvanised training qualifications (Rogers, 2020), most ECCE practitioners are employed on an "average hourly wage of €12.45*"* (DCEDIY, 2021b:83). The fixed capitation fee paid to services per child increased in 2018 (Walsh, 2017), yet, the ECCE practitioner is without sick pay, pension scheme, or paid maternity leave (Greer-Murphy, 2019). Although the ECCE programme receives the most significant proportion of State funding in the early year's sector; the capitation rates of €64.50 and €75 per child per week; the low remuneration levels are unacceptable due to the established links between staff turnover, low-quality provision, and child development (DCYA, 2020).

Both Irish and International research indicates the adverse effects of high staff turnover (HOI, 2017; Cassidy *et al.,* 2011). In addition, the extent of wage asymmetries within the ECCE sector provides little scope for wage progression and continuous professional development (ECI, 2020b). The ECCE sector's crisis is due to insufficient financial investment, causing a significant staffing and funding shortage (HOI, 2017). Notably, in 2018, former Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Dr Katherine Zappone, introduced First 5 (DCEDIY, 2019d). Ireland's first-ever strategy for early childhood targeted to revolutionise the structure of ECCE services (Ibid). Figures from the 2018/2019 Annual Early Years Sector Profile (Pobal, 2019) illustrate that 26,882 (87%) worked directly with children representing an increase of 4% on the previous year. Hence an increasing growth in the number of staff in comparison to the number of children enrolled (2%) (Ibid).

Fundamentally, the early childhood profession in Ireland is discounted and disregarded (Moloney and Pope, 2013) as education policy reforms are generally developed without the consultation or inclusion of practitioners (Stadler-Altmann and Alexiadou, 2020). Despite that, practitioners interpret the policies during daily implementation (Ibid). Similarly, a steering group for reforming the early childhood workforce was established in 2019 without their representation to contribute to the Workforce Development Plan (WDP) announced by the DCYA, part of the First five strategies (Urban, 2019a). The reoccurring theme of being undervalued is well discussed (Urban *et al.,* 2017), as professionalism for the ECCE workforce is not equivalent to other professions in Ireland (French, 2019).

2.9 What constitutes quality? Defining the components of quality ECCE provision, including structural and process quality components.

The 11th principle, The European Pillar of Social Rights (Council of the European Union (EU), 2017), states, "all children have the right to affordable early childhood education and care of good quality*"* (Council of the EU, 2017:1). In the context of the Irish ECCE scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a), and Síolta (CECDE, 2006a), the national quality framework is central in attempting to ensure quality across ECCE services in Ireland (OECD, 2017b). The OECD (2021:1) posits,

> "It is the quality of interactions that children experience, known as process quality, which matters most for their development, learning and well-being*"*.

The European Commission Network on Childcare (ECNC) shared this perspective, and their report Quality Targets in Services for Young Children (1996) depicts quality as a progressive and everlasting approach comprising of ongoing review without reaching a definitive end (ECNC, 1996). Similarly, Urban *et al*., (2012) maintain that quality cannot be achieved without the consultation between all stakeholders and that each dimension is vital; including experiences and outcomes for children; experiences of parents and carers; interactions; structural conditions and systems of evaluation, monitoring, and quality improvement. Hence, UNICEF (2020:8) defines quality as "the sum of many parts, including teachers, families, communities, resources, and curricula*"*, thereby demonstrating the different dimensions to the concept of quality (Child Forum, 2020).

Children who have attended quality ECCE services have, on average, higher levels of educational accomplishment, improved lasting academic outcomes, and increased social maturity (OECD, 2017a; Sylva *et al*., 2014; Heckman, 2011). Essentially, "early learning begets better learning later on; a poor start translates into persistent inferior learning abilities*"* (Esping-Andersen, 2013:293). Hence, producing higher economic returns, especially for disadvantaged children, enhances growth within an integrated society (Kinsella, 2021). The positive outcomes for children having attended quality ECCE services in terms of participation are classified into Educational and labour market outcomes; Economic outcomes, and Social outcomes (OECD, 2018a; Janta *et al.*, 2016). The potential factors that influence the quality of child/adult interactions in all environments and quality interactions must be established to achieve positive outcomes (Tonge *et al.*, 2019); therefore, the structural characteristics and

process aspects of quality are distinctive elements of quality in early childhood education and care.

2.9.1 Structural aspects of quality

Traditionally structural characteristics include aspects of the ECCE system that have been more obvious to regulate, including child-staff ratio, group size and staff training/education (Slot *et al*., 2015). Structural features are perceived to be mandatory preconditions for process aspects of quality (Slot, 2018; OECD, 2018a) and underpin the supporting framework, for example, the accessible environment, personnel, and tangible resources (OECD, 2018a). Síolta (CECDE, 2006a) Standard 10 Organisation (CECDE, 2006f) requires effective management and mechanisms to implement and support teamwork and promote continuous professional development. Policy and practice have ramifications for defining and deepening the quality and enhancing child development, well-being, and learning beyond the traditionally regulated indicators (Slot, 2018; OECD, 2018a). Even though studies are limited and mixed in results (Anders, 2015), structural factors consolidate as a primary strategy for improving the quality of ECCE programmes and, ultimately, imposing staff qualification requirements is a popular quality enhancement approach (Early *et al.*, 2007). The calibre of staff is considered central to quality in ECCE, while the precise expertise of the practitioners is pivotal to developing quality (Peeters *et al.*, 2014).

The revised 2016 Regulations underpin several vital reforms to improve quality standards, namely, registration, qualifications, and management (ECI, 2016a). Structural standards are proportionately manageable to enact and scrutinise, by inspectors and parents, compared to the complexities of professional development (OECD, 2018a). Although Vandenbroeck *et al*., (2016) argue the necessity for intelligent systems to promote quality, Peeters *et al*., (2016) highlight the importance and connection between the components associated with quality at individual, governance, and international levels. Peleman *et al*., (2018) assert that quality comprises accessibility, workforce, curriculum, monitoring, evaluation, management, and funding.

2.9.2 Process aspects of quality

Research on process aspects of quality has shown that quality interactions underpin the role of educators as powerful role models for children (French, 2019). However, before the ECCE scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a), the statutory regulations focused on the structural quality of the settings (i.e., environmental health and safety) with limited attention to quality, staff qualifications or curriculum (GOI, 2014). The inspectorate conducted monitoring without a pedagogical background (Ibid). Moreover, the Aistear Síolta Practice Guide (2018) supports the key person approach (Goldschmied and Jackson, 1994), yet, the key person approach is not mandatory in Ireland (French, 2019). Notably, the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (DPER) cited that the objective of investment of the ECCE scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a) "was the impact on children*"* and not on the provision of places (GOI, 2014:6).

The introduction of the Early-Years Education-focused Inspection (EYEI) model in 2016 was synchronised to appraise the provision and implementation of quality within the ECCE Programme (DCEDIY, 2019e). However, the *Report on the Working Conditions of the Early Years Education and Care Sector 2017* (HOI, 2017:27) acknowledge the professional crisis and state,

> *"*These include a lack of recognition of the sector by government, chronic underinvestment, high staff turnover, burnout, an exodus of qualified staff from the profession, and sustainability issues for services*"*.

Consequently, ratios relate to working conditions for staff, and learning and well-being environments for children, thereby challenging the implications of working conditions on process quality (Sammons, 2010). Although the DCYA acknowledged the need for quality and the proposed linkage of subsidy links to quality, Moloney (2016) asserted that the provision of quality and affordability remained incoherent without financial support for providers.

2.9.3 International Level

The Barcelona European Council (2002) priority enforced early childhood care and education via a policy structure to incentivise the participation of women in the workforce (Stadler-Altmann and Alexiadou, 2020). Consequentially, this changed the focus of the family support programmes of the EU Member States by providing childcare services and parental leave

instead of providing financial benefits (Plantenga *et al.,* 2015). Albeit female labour market participation has increased, more women work part-time in Ireland due to caring responsibilities (Labour Force Survey 2006-2013) because of lack of care provision (EC, 2022).

As part of the EU Policy cooperation process, the ECEC Thematic Working Group (2012-2014) prioritised the multiple challenges in providing universal early childhood care and education and quality in ECCE provision (EC, 2014). By collaborating with experts from two working groups (Thematic Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care (ECECTWG) and a stakeholder group (Lazarri, 2018), fundamental principles of a quality framework for early childhood care and education were developed (EC, 2014). Agreement on the components of quality ECCE were adapted into ten principles over five areas and facilitated ECCE quality framework approaches across Europe (Ibid). Coincidentally, the National Conference, Early Years Education Forum: Transforming Vision into Practices (2015), co-occurred at the first meeting of the Early Years Advisory Group in Ireland (Lazarri, 2018).

The EU ECEC QF (2017) was integral to the reinforcement and preservation of the existing curriculum and quality frameworks, such as Aistear (NCCA, 2009) and Síolta (CECDE, 2006a) and regarding the initiation of Early-years Education-focused Inspection (EYEI) (Duignan, 2015); Learner Fund Initiative (DCEDIY, 2022b); and through local initiatives delivered by the City and County childcare committees (Ibid). The introduction of EYEIs by the Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Skills in 2016 provided "evaluative information, advice and support regarding the quality of education provision*"* (CRA), 2020:105). However, the extent of the gaps in practice are articulated by (DES 2018; DES, 2016a) and further emphasised by Thornton *et al.*, (2019: 134), who state,

> "The lack of in-depth knowledge of the Aistear/Síolta frameworks and a theoretical understanding of play-based and social processes of learning has created major obstacles and challenges for practitioners*"*.

Data in the OECD report Starting Strong III: A Quality Toolbox for Early Childhood Education and Care (OECD, 2011), Starting Strong 2017: Key OECD Indicators on Early Childhood Education and Care (OECD, 2017a) and Education at a Glance, 2018 (OECD, 2018b), each indicate the prevalent challenges that countries endure in establishing a quality workforce. Such

challenges include increasing staff qualifications, recruiting, retaining, attrition, diversifying a qualified workforce, continuously upskilling the workforce, and safeguarding the quality of the workforce in the private sector (Schleicher, 2019). Legislative and statutory requirements are enforced to reduce the pertinent challenges (Ibid). The benefits of ECCE for economic, educational, and social reasons are well substantiated and relative to changing demographics, thereby compelling governments to provide for the financial necessities and invest in quality ECCE (Vanderbroeck, 2015).

Europe has mutual objectives and directives of the European Commission (EC, 2014; Council of the European Commission, 2011) to furnish quality within ECCE (Campbell-Barr, 2019). However, a cross-European study by Oberhuemer *et al*., (2010) indicates the varying job titles and associated responsibilities across job titles, the lack of accord regarding the workforce structure, and conflicting interpretations of the ECCE and professionalism. The number of contact hours required with children attending ECCE services varies from country to country compared to any other level of education (Schleicher, 2019). Hence, the levels of critical discussions on what encapsulates a profession and whether ECCE is perceived as a profession (Osgood, 2006; Brock, 2006).

2.10 How has regulation and policy impacted quality practice and provision

Following the Memorandum of Understanding (2018) (MOU) between the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, the Minister for Education and Skills and the Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Skills (DES, 2016b), the DES Inspectorate are responsible for appraising the quality of education provision in services facilitating the ECCE Programme (Ring *et al*., 2016). The urgency for the realisation of the national curriculum and quality frameworks, Aistear (NCCA, 2009) and Síolta (CECDE, 2006a) are emphasised in *A Review of the Early-Years Education-Focused Inspection April 2016- June 2017, Insights and Future Developments,* published by the DES (2018a). The diversification detected by Early-Year Education Inspections in early education practice is tangible and comprises internal and external challenges, namely, staff training, funding, and accessibility to support and advice (Duignan, 2019).

In 2019, only 1,889 EYE inspections concluded in services, participating in the ECCE Programme nationally since the commencement of EYEIs in April 2016, representing almost

45% inclusion of the designated early years' services (GOI, 2019b). However, the joint MOU between Tusla and Better Start permits the EYEI to submit referrals to the Better Start National Quality Development Service for providers to receive mentoring support to enhance their services' quality since 2018 (CRA, 2020). In addition, to the emerging need from the Early Years sector itself and, as a result of research undertaken by Tusla in 2014, the development of a QRF for the Early Years sector began in 2015 (Tusla, 2018a). The need for accuracy to conform to the Early Years Regulations is specified (Ibid) with emphasis "On the quality and safety of the care provided directly to children using the service" (Moore, 2020:5).

Trial use of the framework was applied to inspections since 2019, and the results will decide the investigation instrument to suggest a more inclusive reporting template (CRA, 2020). Challenges during the collaborations included the copious amounts of administrative requirements, the number of policies, procedures, and statements legislated in the 2016 Regulations and the absence of payment for non-contact hours (Tusla, 2018a). Fundamentally, the CRA (2020) recommends coordinating the independent inspection administered by Tusla and DES EYEIs to include a Single Quality Framework, consolidating the experience and expertise to a single inspection system (Graham, 2014).

Discrepancies in evaluating quality have raised concerns because of the RTÉ Investigates documentary: Crèches, Behind Closed Doors (Hegarty, 2019). The extent of the breaches in the Hyde and Seek crèches consisted of non-registration, non-compliance of staff ratios and sleeping conditions; failure to retain records; non-adherence to Garda vetting requirements, and numerous non-compliances identified in Tusla inspection reports (Ibid). Consequently, the remit of Tusla came under increasing scrutiny, specifically concerning Tusla's authority to expel and terminate the operation of services with severe breaches of the regulations (CRA, 2020). Hence, the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs has committed to working with Tusla, in the form of Ministerial Order, to safeguard the safety and welfare of children attending early childhood settings (Ibid). Oversight includes the authority to close services for non-registration and breach of regulations; the authority to provide a process to facilitate continuity of service under temporary management where appropriate when a service is removed from the register; and the authority to communicate efficiently with parents concerning inquiries (HOI, 2019c).

2.10.1 Regulations and policies associated with the ECCE scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a)

The existing policy, research, and literature Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016, Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY), 2019) has identified that the ECCE sector has developed over the last three decades. It is widely accepted that ECCE contributes to the government's agendas of financially supporting parental models and investing in children's long-lasting education (Campbell-Barr and Leeson, 2016). However, research must identify

> *"*whether increased expenditure on childcare programmes is effectively improving the affordability of childcare as well as the accessibility and quality*"* (HOI, 2019b: 8).

Such is the drive towards greater professionalisation (Rogers, 2018) that tens of thousands protested in Dublin on 5th February 2020 to pressure the government to introduce "a living wage for early years, educators, and improved funding model and less red tape*"* (O' Brien, 2020). The Together for Early Years, a coalition of groups, including Siptu, Federation of Early Childhood Providers, Association of Childhood Professionals, Seas Suas and National Community Childcare Forum, organised the protest to assert underfunding and over-regulation across the sector (Ibid). The challenge remains to implement an emerging curriculum (Duignan, 2019), owing to the lack of Aistear (NCCA, 2009) by some early-year practitioners (Mannion, 2019). Therefore, the integration of quality pedagogical practice may remain aspirational until Aistear (NCCA, 2009) and Síolta (CECDE, 2006a) are appropriately resourced by the Irish educational system (Mannion, 2019).

The reality of not having a capable and adept Early Childhood Education and Care system in Ireland is more apparent due to Covid-19 (ECI, 2020a). The government's failure to support frontline and health care workers because of the closure in ECCE settings was widely criticised (INMO, 2020). Policymakers had to exert responsibility to protect the system and survival of services due to closing on the 12th of March 2020 (ECI, 2020a). The reliance on a primarily market-based model of early years' service provision has highlighted broader policy challenges due to the pandemic experience, with increased demand for access to services and new costs to parents (ESRI, 2020). Furthermore, the over-reliance on the private provider (Russell *et al.*, 2020) due to the low "average hourly wage of €12.45*"* (DCEDIY, 2021b:83) and "annual staff turnover rate of 18%" (DCEDIY, 2021b:89). The Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP)

and the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) introduced by the government were temporary measures to decelerate the reduction in income (Beirne *et al.*, 2020). Inevitably, the continuing loss of employment and withdrawal of financial support result in lower living standards (ESRI, 2020).

Notwithstanding that, the government "promotes quality, better outcomes for children, and makes a career in childcare more attractive*"* (GOI, 2020:80); the OECD (2018d) has instructed Ireland to increase the availability of affordable childcare and promote labour participation. Still, the fact remains that, the current ECCE provision has disintegrated, is unaffordable and not favourable to children, families, and the state (Urban, 2020).

2.11 Quality and the practitioner: Training and qualifications.

Even though the ECCE sector has been regulated since 1996, the ECCE workforce comprises early childhood degree-level graduates with other qualifications (Peeters *et al.*, 2016). Over 500 qualifications from thirty-seven countries are admissible to work in the ECCE sector (Moloney and Pettersen, 2017), indicating the ECCE sector's disproportionate disintegration within Ireland (Peeters *et al.*, 2016). The requirement for staff to hold a minimum qualification at Level 5 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) since 2017 is remarkable, as some FETAC Level 5 courses are accessible solely online (Greene *et al.*, 2014). Furthermore, it is difficult to detect the training content and scope of learning practice attained from degree qualification (PLÉ, 2018) as qualifications and training requirements are disjointed at national and international levels (Hordern, 2016). An exploration of the evidential base for Early Childhood Education and Care professional practice placement in Higher Education Institutes in Ireland (PLÉ, 2018) addresses the anomalies in training and the funding concerns in the Higher Education sector. Findings conclude that a standardised approach to practice placement is crucial and must include consideration of the following components: Duration of placement; student preparation; practicum supervision and criteria defining supervisor suitability; standards for host placement settings; the role of placement coordination; supervision/mentoring by the college to support the host placement settings including continuous professional development opportunities (Ibid). As a result, introducing the Level 8 Special Purpose Certificate in Professional Mentoring for Early Childhood Practice by Mary Immaculate College (2021) (MIC) in July 2021 is significant in developing mentoring to support the quality of the ECCE sector. Consequently, the need to standardise placement

remains and the need and allocation of funding for full-time placement coordinator positions is essential (Plé, 2018).

The development of the Professional Award Criteria and Guidelines for Initial Professional Education (Level 7 and Level 8) Degree Programmes for the Early Learning and Care (ELC) Sector (PACG) in Ireland (DES, 2019) was introduced by the working group of the Early Years Education Policy Unit (EYEPU) in 2017. To collate information with good practice and research-based evidence is crucial (Fillis, 2018). Conversely, the PACG (DES, 2019) highlights the discrepancies and lack of consistency in the varying undergraduate training courses and inconsistent student experiences (Ibid). Key findings of the report PACG (DES, 2019) highlighted; the need for the supervision of students to be undertaken by qualified and experienced mentors; agreement on the minimum hours required for placement practice; progression towards a graduate-led workforce and development of a professional registration body (Fillis, 2018).

It is, essential to have a formal coaching/assessment by a university/college to realise professional responsibility (PLÉ, 2018) to develop acumen and insight into practice (Waddell *et al.,* 2015). Hence, participation in a range of formal and informal CPD activities throughout the career of an ECCE practitioner is essential for graduates to remain current with research and evolve with the sector's ongoing policy and practice developments (EYEPU, 2017). The DCYA and DES collaboration has promoted quality, specifically in practice, through qualifications (DCEDIY, 2021f) and measures of capitation associated with qualifications and the Learner Fund (DES, 2016a). It is, however, at the discretion of individual services to designate the expenditure of the higher capitation on recruitment at the graduate level (GOI, 2015). Without recognition of the profession by the state, there remains

> *"*Limited support for professionals to advance their qualifications, the remuneration of early years professionals, the absence of appropriate designated salary scales and the general terms and conditions of employment within the sector*"* (Ibid:21).

2.11.1 Continuous Professional Development

Jensen *et al.,* (2015) identify the increasing universal demands experienced in present-day societies and the repercussions of socio-economic, political, and cultural influences on early childhood care and education. The worrying outcome of the empirical evidence (DES, 2018B; Pobal, 2018) highlights the extent to which the services are ill-equipped to integrate the quality

guidelines within Aistear (NCCA, 2009) and Síolta (CECDE, 2006a). Despite being a contractual requirement for all participating ECCE services (GOI, 2018), findings from the EYEI report (DES, 2018b) indicate shortcomings among practitioners regarding observation, evaluation, educational planning and delivery and insufficiencies to contemplate and differentiate appropriate strategies to the range of diverse needs. The shortcomings primarily included providing training and children's oral language skills, social and emotional awareness, and problem-solving skills (Ibid).

The deficiencies concerning early childhood teachers' knowledge, skills, and awareness of assuring and enhancing the inclusion of children with mixed abilities are serious regarding the Professional Education Continuum (PEC) in Ireland (Urban *et al.,* 2017). Extensive research illustrates the effects of the level of qualifications and professional development of those working in ECCE on the positive outcomes for children (Slot *et al.,* 2015; EC *et al.,* 2014); it is, however, the professional competence that promotes quality in ECCE (Pramling *et al.,* 2011). Furthermore, Initial Practitioner Education (IPE) and Continuous Professional Development (CPD) are essential to quality practice and the delivery of quality provision (Oke, 2016).

Practitioners encounter continuous challenges resulting from evolving demographics (OECD, 2020a). The nuance of ideas and cultural factors that often influence the development of independent professional practice in different locations (Lofdahl *et al.,* 2019) highlights the importance of engaging with practitioners to develop policy reform of early childhood care and education (Stadler-Altmann and Alexiadou, 2020). The evolution of acquiring professional knowledge of child development and how children learn (McMonagle, 2012) is intrinsic to the growth in professional development (PLÉ, 2018). Peleman *et al.,* (2018) highlight the far greater need and demand for CPD to enable practitioners to deliver quality, thus emphasising a shared approach to meet social goals. Moloney *et al.,* (2020) further assert the need for CPD and the opportunity to apply the Code of Professional Responsibilities as the platform to integrate training, including induction, CPD and critical reflection. Hence, the shared publication of the Code of Ethics and Code of Professional Responsibilities, Professionalisation Subgroup of the Early Years Forum outlines the values and standards expected of the sector's workforce (Ibid). Notably, First 5 (DCEDIY, 2019d) advocates for developing a skilled and sustainable workforce by acknowledging the need for improvements in training, the provision of CPD for practitioners, the professionalisation of the sector, and supporting employers to attract and retain a trained workforce, reducing staff turnover (Ibid).

2.11.2 Professionalisation of ECCE

The OECD reports (Starting Strong III: A Quality Toolbox for Early Childhood Education and Care (OECD, 2011), Starting Strong 2017: Key OECD Indicators on Early Childhood Education and Care (OECD, 2017a) and Education at a Glance 2018 (OECD, 2018b) illustrate the scope of the strategies implemented to mitigate the challenges including enacting legislative requirements; economic impetus; institutional restructuring; and circulation of data to policymakers (Schleicher, 2019). The prevailing challenges in developing a quality workforce include increasing staff qualifications, recruiting, retaining, and diversifying a qualified workforce, continuous professional development, and assuring the calibre of the workforce in the private sector (Ibid). The Council of the European Union recommends that member states endorse the professionalisation of the ECCE workforce. To include developing professional standards and career prospects; access to initial and continuous training that is current to meet the range of diverse societal demands, including children's individual needs and relevant to children's rights; and the provision of time for participation in professional collaborations (Council of the EU, 2019a). The academic level of qualification is crucial for quality and indeed the professionalisation of the sector (Urban *et al*., 2012). Moreover, professionalisation is paramount for better developmental outcomes for children as more advanced levels of preparation correspond with quality service and quality staff/child interactions (EC, 2011).

Campbell-Barr (2018) asserts that professionalism is not singular but comprises practice-based experience and continuous professional development. Moreover, professionalism requires exploring the knowledge base and combining it with the interchangeable ways of working in ECCE (Campbell-Barr, 2019). It is, however, the Code of Professional Responsibilities that identifies the obligatory duties and liabilities of the workforce. The Code of Professional Responsibilities is a source for preliminary training, CPD and reflective practice (Moloney *et al.,* 2020). The sector's professionalism is imperative to provide higher levels of meaningful child/staff and peer interactions as prominent elements of quality (Council of the EU, 2019b). Findings in the Early Childhood Ireland Childcare Barometer (2021) indicate general agreement among the public regarding the professional recognition and terms and conditions deserved for the ECCE workforce (ECI, 2021b), even though the ECCE workforce seeks social welfare assistance during July and August (Kennedy, 2019). Undoubtedly, the low pay rates and inadequate working conditions contribute to the high staff turnover even as the qualification profile increases (CRA, 2020).

The exclusion of the early childhood workforce in establishing the Workforce Development Plan for the sector is questionable (Urban, 2019b). Furthermore, the introduction and use of the term Early Learning and Care/School-Aged Childcare (ELC/SAC) introduced in First 5 (DCEDIY, 2019d) was without consultation and required immediate addressing (Ibid). Moreover, 92% of 3550 respondents choose the title ECEC over ELC in an online survey undertaken by the Association of Childhood Professionals (ACP), indicated the difference in opinion between the officials and the professionals (Quinn, 2019). The lack of consultation and publication of the title "demonstrated a deep-rooted disregard for the voice of the workforce*"* (Quinn, 2019:14). The absence of a coordinated and coherent professional identity is a significant shortcoming as crucial decisions are made externally for the sector (Urban *et al*., 2012). Also, the lack of an integrated public, professional and political accord regarding the value and role of early childhood educators is concerning (Urban, 2019b).

2.12 Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Bioecological Model

Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological model (1979) renders an appropriate framework to scrutinise associations between research evidence and practice and the significant changes because of the evolving exosystem and macrosystems (Egan *et al.*, 2019) and in the context of this study, include TUSLA, POBAL, and DES. Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model (1979), introduced in 1979 and updated and amended over the years, embodies an "evolving theoretical system*"* (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007: 793). Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological model (1979) explains how everything in a child and the child's environment affects how a child grows and develops. Therefore, practitioners must recognise practice that enhances children's holistic development (Hayes, 2013). Furthermore, to explain children's development, the factors synthesise into crucial elements relating to process, person, context, and time (PPCT) (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Crucially, to be effective, each must occur interdependently (Tudge *et al.*, 2017) and repeatedly over an extended period (Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

The microsystem involves the child's direct experiences (Paquette and Ryan, 2011), the closest of which is their family (Hayes *et al.*, 2017). However, "development never occurs simply in one microsystem*"* (Tudge *et al.*, 2017: 53). Other microsystems include the child's family, preschool and community (Hayes *et al.*, 2017). Crucially, Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model (1979) considers the context of the interaction concerning the practitioner's regularity

and skill. Consequently, staff-child interactions can have an unequivocal effect on children's learning, development, and well-being, directly influencing quality (Douglass, 2019). It is, therefore, essential that practitioners respond to children appropriately (Hurley, 2021) and must enact their legal responsibility to promote child participation (Long, 2021).

According to Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2007, 1998), a system of two or more microsystems is known as the mesosystem. The mesosystem connects "the various elements of the individual's microsystem" (Hayes *et al.,* 2017:7). Such is the impact of interactions between parents and practitioners on ECCE when various micro-systems connect (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Moreover, it is the paradigm of cooperation (Joyce, 2019), whereby practitioners guide the emerging curriculum, following the child's intuitive aptitude by exploring their environment. The practitioner must recognise practice to promote a *"*child rights-based approach*"* (Long, 2019:2). The exosystem, such as the ECCE practitioner's training and qualifications, does not include the child but indirectly influences the child's proximal process (Tudge *et al.,* 2017). Even though ECCE practitioners have articulated their limited knowledge and ability to implement Aistear (NCCA, 2009) and Síolta (CECDE, 2006a) (DES, 2016a), only tenuous supports have been provided (Hanniffy, 2017).

The macrosystem involves "the wider pattern of ideology and organisation*"* (O' Toole, 2016:29), promoting shared beliefs and practices with a shared identity (Tudge *et al.,* 2017). However, the inconsistencies exposed across inspections (Moloney, 2016) highlight the inadequate quality assessment due to settings experiencing disjointed and uncoordinated inspections from different agencies with contradictory expectations (ECI, 2020c).

The chronosystem encompasses the child's transitions and the evolution of their environments, including the determinants of quality change over time (Bronfenbrenner 1995; Bronfenbrenner and Morris 1998). The ECCE programme associates with the chronosystem level encompassing the child's transitions and the evolution of their environments, emphasising "the importance of the individual over time*"* (Hayes *et al.,* 2017:8). Consequently, the ECCE programme is integral to the development of many Irish children and the policy changes and provisions regarding the availability of quality care and education (Egan *et al.,* 2019). For this reason, this study investigates the development of the ECCE sector in Ireland "as a property of the surrounding environment*"* (Bronfenbrenner and Ceci, 1994:40).

Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological systems theory showcases the interrelated aspects of quality provision in ECCE and the effects on the child's early learning experiences (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007). Moreover, Bronfenbrenner (1979) explains how the biological process associated with finance and influence can affect children's development and the behaviours of responsible adults. Furthermore, Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model (1979)

> "highlights the importance of considering the nature and quality of interactions in the mesosystem" (Hayes *et al.*, 2017:150).

Therefore, it is essential to improve the working conditions and salaries for the workforce to achieve the quality of education and care envisioned for our young children (HOI, 2017).

2.13 A Profession in Crisis

The former Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Katherine Zappone, endorsed the ECCE workforce "to support the introduction of a Sectoral Employment Order and sustainability of Childcare Providers*"* (DCEDIY, 2019a) in Budget 2020; however, staff recruitment and retention crises continue to escalate across ECCE settings. Ireland has the highest dependency on private services in ECEC within the OECD (HOI, 2020), even though an additional 990 posts for primary school children were announced in Budget 2021 (Moloney, 2020). Providers are overwhelmed by daily bureaucratic and administrative requirements, resulting in many unpaid providers and staff fulfilling administrative duties (ECI, 2020c). Indeed, Pobal (2019: 135) states, "Relief staff, assistants and non-ECCE room leaders, besides earning below the sectoral average, earn below the national living wage*"*. Furthermore, increased challenges to adhere to public health guidelines while managing Covid 19 staff-related absences (Matson, 2020) further exposed the impact of underinvestment, staff retention and rising costs for providers and parents (HOI, 2017). Additionally, there are multiplying insurance costs and limited choices for ECCE service providers to secure quotes and insurance policies (ECI, 2021:1)

Covid 19 accelerated the need and demand "that early childhood education and care is an essential part of a nation's critical infrastructure" (Urban, 2020:26). The reopening of the economy was only possible because of the ECCE workforce, as 200,000 children returned to services on the 29th of June 2020 (Moloney, 2020). Yet, only 16% of workers receive sick pay

(Horgan, 2020). Such is the impact of the rigorous adult-to-child ratios, the additional need for extra staff to manage pods, and the potential for inadequate staffing numbers, creating further delays to Covid-19 testing (Ibid). Moreover, Darragh O' Connor, SIPTU, reiterates the oversupply of qualified staff but affirms the demand to the government to establish a living wage and sick pay agreement to support the retention of staff (Matson, 2020).

Byrne (2019) acknowledged the increased investment of €54 million in Budget 2020 and asserted that; "this is not enough to address the legacy of historic and significant underinvestment in the sector*"* (ECI, 2019d). Moreover, the *Review of the Cost of Providing Quality Childcare Services in Ireland* (DCEDIY, 2020) affirms that the average "unit cost*"* of providing early learning is €4.14 per hour. Despite that, the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Roderic O'Gorman, states "that the unit cost is based on pay rates in the sector that are unacceptably low*"* (Keena, 2020); the ECCE sector remains one of the lowest-paid sectors in Ireland (SIPTU, 2019). Investment of just 0.1% GDP is the lowest among the EU countries (ECI, 2021a).

2.14 Conclusion

Despite Ireland's relentless efforts over the past three decades to promote, enhance and improve quality for children and families, unresolved challenges remain. The challenges for providing quality ECCE include a lack of investment and professional recognition, inconsistency and irregularity of inspection, and disruption to children's interactions and communication between practitioners and policymakers. By highlighting the problems associated with staff recruitment and retention, low pay, increasing administrative challenges, quality of service, three qualification levels, Level 6/7/8 permitted as ECCE room leader with additional responsibility for the manager without any management training, rising costs and insurance issues, the vulnerability of the ECCE sector is even more exposed and concerns exacerbated.

The next chapter presents a discussion of the methodologies applied to acquire insight into practitioners' and other stakeholders' perceptions regarding the implications for policy, practice, and education for the ECCE scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a).

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter comprises a report on the data collection, data analysis and interpretation and a review of the concepts of validity and reliability, ethical considerations, and limitations involved in this research. Ethical approval was applied for and approved by the Munster Technological University Research Ethics Board. Findings in *Pathways to Better Prospects: Delivering Proper Terms and Conditions for the Early Years Workforce in Ireland* (ECI, 2020d) emphasises that degree graduates' retention and turnover are detrimental issues due to the absence of appropriate funding and pay scales for the ECCE workforce. Therefore, the design methods were open to the study's intricacies and represent the content of the diversity of the practices and interactions in daily life (Flick, 2018). Hence, in-depth semi-structured interviews were the most suitable data collection methods for this study. Participants included qualified, experienced ECCE practitioners and stakeholders working with children participating in the Irish ECCE scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with Early Childhood Care and Education practitioners (n = 10) and stakeholders (n = 6) to answer the research questions, which asked:

Table 3.1: Research Questions

1. What constitutes quality provision and practice for children attending the ECCE scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a)
2. What has informed ECCE regulation and policy in Ireland?
3. What are the identified challenges associated with the ECCE scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a)?
4. What recommendations can be made to enhance the ECCE scheme for children, their families, and practitioners?

3.2 Qualitative Research Methodology

Creswell (2018) informs that qualitative research involves applying an inquiry process to explore a social problem conducted in a natural setting. This critical study includes the perspective of ECCE practitioners and other stakeholders working in the ECCE scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a) to challenge, transform, and analyse power relations (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016:59). This research critiques the current ECCE scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a) with the overall aim of informing policy associated with the awareness and appreciation of children's interests

and needs (Moser *et al.*, 2017). Moreover, the research attempts to identify how future policy should support implementation and how ECCE practitioners and stakeholders can inform future policy. As an experienced ECCE practitioner, the researcher has lived experience of the ECCE scheme's issues (DCEDIY, 2021a) and, consequently, a deep understanding of the complexity of the lack of resources for ECCE practitioners. The researcher is therefore described as an "insider researcher", and their work is an "attempt to improve practice through understanding, influencing and changing the direction and position of others" (Fleming, 2018:312).

3.3 Philosophy of Research Design

By adopting a critical lens to interpret data (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016), the application of Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model (1979) considered the context of the interaction concerning the regularity and skill of the practitioner. Therefore, a constructivist paradigm was selected to gather individual opinions and experiences (Holmes, 2014). Constructivism is subjective knowledge constructed from participatory action research (Creswell and Poth, 2018) and therefore, exploring the participant's knowledge presents detailed findings by telling the story from the participant's perspective.

3.4 Recruitment of participants

Using a purposeful sampling strategy to recruit participants, the criteria required QQI Level 6/ Level 7/ Level 8 Degree ECEC practitioners working with children from 2 years and eight months of age and not older than five years and six months of age availing of the ECCE scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a) and stakeholders/ sector personals working in a supportive and collaborative role in the ECCE scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a). Using TUSLA's register of Early Year Services (TUSLA, 2020c), the researcher compiled a list of urban and rural community and private-based ECCE services to ensure diversity across the study (Hesse-Biber, 2016). The researcher contacted ten individual services located in rural and urban areas and invited participation in the study from ECCE practitioners that met the selection criteria. The study involved conducting in-depth semi-structured interviews with ECCE practitioners (n = 10) working with children participating in the ECCE scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a), thereby attaining expert insight from within the ECCE sector (Patton, 2015). Also, the researcher contacted individual stakeholders, and in-depth semi-structured interviews (n = 6) were conducted, including support organisations with personnel in leadership positions in their roles. The

researcher adhered to the Munster Technological University Code of Good Practice in Research (CIT, 2019), thus ensuring the participants' anonymity during the data collection process and compliance with legal and ethical responsibilities.

3.5 Scope of the Research

Table 3.2: Profile of Practitioners

P*	Qualification	Years of service	Role	Setting type	Philosophy/ curriculum	Length of interview
P1	Level 8 BA (Hons) Early Years Education & Care.	22 yrs.	Manager/ Relief Cover	Community	High Scope / Play-based	1 hour
P2	Level 8 BA (Hons) Montessori Education	3.5 yrs.	Room leader	Community	Montessori / Play-based	1 hour
P3	Level 7 BA Early Childhood Studies	20 yrs.	Manager/ Room Leader	Private	Play-based	40 mins
P4	Level 9 MA. Management + Leadership in the EYE	14 yrs.	Team Leader	Community	Play-based	40 mins
P5	Level 8 BA (Hons) Early Years Education & Care.	7.5 yrs.	Manager/ Room Leader	Private	Montessori	40 mins
P6	Level 7 BA Early Childhood Studies	21 yrs.	Manager	Community	High Scope	1 hour
P7	Level 7 BA Early Childhood Studies	27 yrs.	Manager	Private	Montessori	1 hour
P8	Level 6 QQI ECEC	27 yrs.	Manager	Private	Play-based	1 hour
P9	Level 6 QQI ECEC	8 yrs.	Assistant	Private	Montessori / Play-based	40 mins
P10	Level 8 BA (Hons) Montessori Education	10 yrs.	Manager/ Room leader	Private	Montessori / Play-based	1 hour

** P - Practitioner*

Table 3.3: Profile of Stakeholders

S*	Qualification	Role	Experience	Duration
S1	Level 9 Masters Child, Family and Community Studies.	Leadership position in the support/mentoring role	9 yrs.	1 hour
S2	Level 9 Integrated Provision for Children and Families	Support/mentoring/advocacy role, Policy Influencer.	20 yrs.	1 hour
S3	Level 9 Masters Child, Family and Community Studies.	Coordinator, Collaborator, Policy Influencer	24 yrs.	1 hour
S4	Level 8 BA (Hons) Early Childhood Education and Care	Support/mentoring/advocacy role	14 yrs.	1 hour
S5	Level 9 Masters, Leadership in Early Years Care & Education.	Leadership position in the support/mentoring role	27 yrs.	1 hour
S6	Level 9 Masters Education and Early Intervention	Support/mentoring/advocacy role	7 yrs.	1 hour

** S – Stakeholder*

3.6 Data collection

This data collection comprised two parts: interviews collecting practitioners' and stakeholders' perspectives in the ECCE sector from February to March 2021. The data were analysed using a thematic approach, and the findings indicate both the challenges and merits of the ECCE scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a). Moreover, the study design's flexibility reflects the cognisance of the complexity of issues across the study and evoked deep and meaningful participation (Mack *et al.*, 2005).

3.6.1 In-depth semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews with practitioners and stakeholders were conducted to determine good practices concerning quality provision for children participating in the ECCE scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a). Essentially, semi-structured interviews provide rich data, enabling authenticity in the findings to identify clear recommendations to contribute to the ECCE sector. The selection of interview questions was thematic and derived from the literature review. Thus, according to Grey (2014), the researcher could attain authentic and insightful perspectives to the study (Boru, 2018). The interview schedule for practitioners (Appendix 3.3) and stakeholders (Appendix 3.4) follows the Interview Guide.

3.6.2 Interview Guide

The interview schedules are framed on a thematic approach, enabling the structure and method to test concerns depicted in the research questions. Thus, the language is particular to the ECCE sector and relevant to each participant. Interviews were conducted at the availability of each participant and held virtually due to Covid-19 restrictions. A series of introductory questions nurtured and promoted rapport and respect for each participant. These included; where they were working, for how long, the level of qualification attained to date and any current studies (see Appendix section).

3.7 Ethical considerations

This research study received Ethics approval from the Munster Technological University, Cork. The Ethical Approval Number for this study is **MTU21003A.** Fundamental principles were applied when researching to avoid deceptive practices (Bryman *et al.,* 2018, and the ethical considerations represented the relevant professional code of conduct (Hickey, 2018). Notwithstanding that the insider researcher's perception is advantageous to engage with participants, the researcher was acutely cognisant of the relational ethics between the participants and the researcher (Tracy, 2013:245). Ultimately, "the researcher's positionality affects research designs and processes*"* (Clough and Nutbrown, 2012:10); therefore, the researcher ensured credibility and transparency by adhering to methodological rigour. This research respected each participant's rights and well-being, and the information sought was general and specific only to the ECCE scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a).

Confidentiality

Confidentiality is a process that protects an individual's privacy (Miller *et al.,* 2012). When conducting this study, the researcher informed all participants that any information disclosed would be used solely for the research and remain confidential. Stake (2005:459) articulates the importance of protecting anonymity and confidentiality. It states,

> "Qualitative researchers are guests in the private spaces of the world. Their manners should be good, and their code of ethics strict".

For example, an assigned code number, Practitioner 1; Stakeholder 1, eliminated the identification of any individual or ECCE service. The data's edit protected anonymity without distorting or changing the opinions expressed (Surmiak, 2018). Moreover, limits to confidentiality may include concerns for the duty of care and protecting confidentiality may lead to legal issues (Hickey, 2018).

Consent and providing the right to withdraw

Participation and consent are always voluntary; hence, each participant's right to revoke or withdraw during the study. Trainor and Graue (2013) assert that obtaining informed consent ensures that individuals are voluntary participants and fully understand the relevant risks and benefits involved. The participants confirmed their willingness to partake and read the study's

information sheet by signing the Consent Form. If a participant chose to withdraw from the research process, their rights were respected and not coerced to prevent them from withdrawing (Melham *et al.,* 2014).

Rapport

Rapport is established concerning the participant and communicating honestly and openly regarding the study and the use and storage of data collected. Each participant was thanked for their time and contribution to the study and treated respectfully. At the beginning of each interview, the initial introductory questions enabled trust between the participant and the researcher. Hence, the researcher and the participant's responses and body language during each interview fostered rapport (Prior, 2017). A good rapport is essential for contribution and an effective outcome from the interview (Lavrakas, 2008), as positive interaction enabled the researcher to "extract true data from the participants*"* (Saidin, 2016:2).

Minimising the risk of harm

To minimise the participant's risk of harm (Carpenter, 2018), the language used in the interviews is specific to the sector and appropriate to the study. The proper precautions were taken to minimise the risk of harm, such as avoiding the use of leading questions, protecting individual information and promoting the well-being of each participant at all times (Stith *et al.,* 2006).

Avoiding deceptive practices

Roberts (2015) asserts that research should avoid deceptive practices or conceal research identities due diligence. The Information Sheet (Appendix 1) and Consent Form (Appendix 2) informed participants of the research topic and their role before participation. The researcher introduced the study, highlighting that the research seeks to identify how future policy supports through implementation and future policy informed by practitioners/stakeholders. Participants could stop the interview at any time and were encouraged to seek clarity during the interview as required.

Bias

Arguably, "insider researchers always have a passion about the topic they been working on*"* (Saidin, 2016:2) and have increased awareness of the pertinent issues involved for participants.

In comparison, Simmel (1950) asserts that a researcher should be an outsider, furthering suggestions that an insider researcher increases the risk of bias and loss of objectivity. Consequently, the researcher sought to provide an honest and objective report with all the information delineated in the results and eliminated any bias by reporting on all the findings irrespective of expressed opinions (Hickey, 2018). Furthermore, the researcher engaged with reflective practice to increase transparency on any potential bias.

General Data Protection Regulation (EU GDPR)

Clarke *et al.,* (2019) explain the significance of GDPR awareness and the requirements for compliance. Essentially, the researcher has assumed responsibility for collecting, using, storing, and destroying personal data gathered for the study. Each interview was recorded using Zoom and labelled accordingly. Once complete, the interview recordings were downloaded from Zoom and stored on a specific hard drive. The recordings were deleted from Zoom and computer downloads. Files are not for sharing and will remain stored and appropriately destroyed after three years from completion. To maintain participant anonymity, identification codes were assigned to each research participant. Information was anonymised by applying a random identification code to ensure that the research participant is not identified. The information provided was combined with the other participants in this study to inform the research findings, presentations, and publications. When reporting on the study's conclusions, identification codes were used rather than the participant's name.

3.8 Information sheet and Consent Forms

Practitioners and stakeholders were required to sign an Information Sheet (Appendix 1) and a Consent Form (Appendix 2). The information sheet outlined the criteria for each participant and included the researcher's details in seeking further information. The Consent Form included the rationale for the study and the purpose of its use. This data is used as intended and is stored and maintained by the researcher following regulatory data guidelines.

3.9 Pilot Study

In advance of completing the main study, the use of a pilot study emphasises the importance of piloting regarding the research questions, interview scheduling, timing, and ethics (Holmes, 2014). "To increase research quality by enhancing reliability and validity" in the study (Malmqvist *et al.*, 2019:3), the researcher took a "neutral stance" (Merriam, 2014: 92) not to assert bias or influence the impact of the study. The researcher confirmed responses to eliminate inaccurate reporting or conclusions. The practitioner interview was piloted with one participant with a Level 8 B.A. (Hons) Montessori Degree, working with children participating in the ECCE scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a) since 2011. The virtual interview taking approximately one hour from start to finish, comprised a themed approach, consisting of open-ended questions including; Quality, ECCE scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a), Inspections, and Professionalism. Even though identifying new emerging issues was encouraged, the participant repeated the need for job security with professional pay scales, and employee/employer well-being supports as the critical issues concerning the sector. The participant reinforced the professional responsibility of everyone working in the industry and endorsed the need for cooperation and collaboration irrespective of role. Consequently, the researcher amended the interview schedule by including quotes from the current literature that prioritised the sensitive issues, namely, wages, sick pay and job security, as echoed by the participant. Moreover, the questions were adjusted in style by gathering individual opinions and experiences (Holmes, 2014). Consequently, the study benefitted greatly from the piloting phase as a range of additional questions were subsequently added. The pilot study was a worthwhile process in ensuring that the interview schedule was appropriate for the study.

3.10 Grounded Theory

The qualitative research approach, Grounded Theory, was used to analyse the primary data from the ECCE practitioners and stakeholders employed in leadership positions in support, mentoring, and advocacy roles. Grounded Theory, founded by Glasser and Strauss (1967), enabled the researcher to collect rich and unbiased data (Sebastian, 2019) "to generate novel theory as it emerges from data gathered and analysed" (Howard-Payne, 2015:1). The researcher repeatedly read the interview transcripts, analysing the data to identify and collate similar points. Similar points were categorised from the interview transcripts, and the researcher referred back to the literature review to support the data analysis. After an extended

period of analysing the categories of data and literature, the researcher selected the key emerging points to culminate the grounded theory process.

3.11 Thematic Analysis

A key difference between grounded theory and thematic analysis is that "grounded theory is a methodology*"* (Chue Tie *et al.,* 2019:1) and thematic analysis is a flexible method to identify themes within qualitative studies involving semi-structured interviews (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017). The researcher was guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) step-by-step process, as outlined in Table 3.4.

Table 3.4: Braun & Clarke's 6 Step Framework for Thematic Analysis

1. Becoming familiar with the data by transcribing the interviews and reading attentively.
2. Generating initial codes
3. Searching for themes
4. Review themes
5. Define and name themes
6. Produce the narrative

Thematic Analysis involves "transcription, reading and familiarisation, coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and finalising the analysis*"* (Sage, 2019:4). The audio recording of each interview allowed the researcher to transcribe and listen attentively, allowing for a greater understanding of the data. The "line by line*"* (Strauss, 1987: 28) analysis of the semi-structured interviews enabled the comparisons to create findings (Charmaz, 2014). Each interview was assessed separately and then comparatively. The researcher organised the data systematically, from the descriptions by the practitioners and stakeholders to determine the best practice concerning quality provision for children participating in the ECCE scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a). The frequency and relevance of findings decided the emergent subthemes and themes (Sarantakos, 2013) to answer the research questions. The repetitive process of revisiting the themes selectively (Braun and Clarke, 2013)

identified the primary themes among both cohorts in preparation for the final presentation in chapter four.

3.12 Research Validity and Reliability

Validity of the research refers to the integrity and application of the methods undertaken and the precision in which the findings accurately reflect the data, while reliability describes consistency within the employed analytical procedures (Noble and Smith, 2015). The research's validity and reliability are dependent on both the participant and the researcher's contribution in an ethically correct manner (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016).

> "Ultimately, the trustworthiness of the data is tied directly to the trustworthiness of those who collect and analyse the data—and their demonstrated competence" (Patton, 2015:706).

The primary data sources involving ECCE practitioners (n=10) and stakeholders (n=6) working in the ECCE scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a) enhanced the validity and reliability of this study. The research's validity and reliability were further improved by including participants' descriptions with some direct quotations (Noble and Smith, 2015) and the correlation with the relevant literature in Chapter 2 and discussed in Chapter 4. The reliability of the study is paramount, and the researcher has adhered to methodological rigour and engaged with reflective practice, as previously mentioned, to increase transparency on any potential bias held by the researcher. Also, the researcher's ability to "be reflexive when undertaking fieldwork*"* (Jones and Smith, 2017:98-100) and acknowledging the study's limitations is understood to enhance the validity and reliability of the research.

3.13 Strengths and Limitations

Strengths of this study

This study had many strengths, notably, the contribution and time dedicated by the participants: their working knowledge, expertise and insight are integral to the study. A themed approach from the literature review enabled structure and method purposefully and methodologically and defined the underpinning theoretical framework of the study (Maxwell, 2013). Moreover,

by conducting in-depth semi-structured interviews, the data collection process was enriched by the contribution of individual perspectives of those working in the ECCE sector despite social distancing challenges due to Covid 19 restrictions. The insider researcher's knowledge and experience are integral to collecting and analysing this data (Merriam and Tisdell). The researcher was consistent in approach irrespective of participants' perspectives and recommendations and presented an accurate and unbiased representation. The researcher took care and consideration to develop a positive rapport with each participant during the period of uncertainty of the pandemic. The researcher connected with participants via LinkedIn to network and offered the participants assurance and reliability of the study and developed initial rapport. Indeed, this was very advantageous, enabling more effective engagement across a broader remit of participants.

Limitations of this study

The current study presents specific sample sizes, and participation limitations. The nature of qualitative inquiry requires careful selection of sample size. The researcher cannot assert the generalised consensus on this study due to the purposeful sampling that selected a small sample of the total population of practitioners and stakeholders working in the ECCE scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a). The National College of Ireland (2019) reports that 1% of the Irish early childhood workforce are men; however, all participants in this study were female. In addition, this study was limited as the child's, and parent's voices were not represented, even though the study directly involved them. Furthermore, this study was limited as Better Start Mentors were not represented, even though the researcher sought to include them.

3.14 Conclusion

This chapter presented the methodological approach, the rationale and the data collection method for this study. The researcher's passion and commitment to the study indicate "the importance of self and professional development*"* (Saidin, 2016:4). Thus, promoting the multiple, subjective data collection to attain a deep, meaningful understanding of the pertinent issues involved. Chapter four presents and discusses the research findings of this research study.

Chapter 4: Discussion

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a discussion and analysis of the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) practitioner (n=10) and stakeholder (n=6) perspectives on quality ECCE practice and provision. The national quality framework, Síolta (CECDE, 2006a), is central to quality practice and provision in ECCE services and ECCE services are contractually required to implement Síolta (CECDE, 2006a) and Aistear (NCCA, 2009). A total of sixteen in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders and ECEC practitioners delivering the ECCE scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a). The sixteen in-depth interviews revealed significant findings and mirrored much of the literature findings. The results from the primary data are analysed and discussed in this chapter using direct quotes under the six themes (listed below) which emerged from the data in both practitioner and stakeholder semi-structured interviews.

Table 4.1: Themes

Quality ECCE experiences for children and their families- Rhetoric Vs Reality
The ECCE workforce: unprepared, unseen, and unheard.
The Identified Challenges with the ECCE scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a)
Inspection
Supporting the ECCE workforce
Relationships Matter in ECCE.

4.2 Quality ECCE experiences for children and their families- Rhetoric Vs Reality

Compared with several factors that remain unknown in promoting quality in ECCE (OECD, 2019a), the practitioner and stakeholder interviews identified both structural and process components of quality practice (Table 4.2). The findings concur with The Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE, 2004), which indicated that different dimensions contribute to the concept of quality ECEC suggesting that quality components are dynamic and interconnected. For example, Practitioner 1, an experienced practitioner currently managing a community-based service, explains that quality is multi-faceted,

> *I think there's no one component; it's something that has to run through an organisation or a service. It has to go right from top to bottom and from the bottom to the top.*

Likewise, Stakeholder 1, employed in a leadership position in a support/mentoring role, emphasises the environment and states, *I think the environment, very much is the third teacher and that's kind of quality for me* . Similar to, Síolta (CECDE, 2006a) that promotes playful learning experiences for exploring and creativity and "meaning-making", Practitioner 4, with fourteen years of experience and managing a community-based service, explains the need to promote a shared child-focused approach daily,

> *I think quality in ECCE is your practice, and everything you do every day is centred around the children in your group. It is each practitioner getting to know their key children, getting to know their interests, and building their curriculum and the environment around that as much as possible.*

Table 4.2: Components of Quality in ECCE.

Structural aspects	Process aspects
Regulation and Evaluation	The relational approach includes the teacher's attitudes, values, and beliefs.
Qualifications, Initial Professional Training	Developmentally appropriate practice, including emergent curriculum.
Policy, National Quality (Síolta, 2006) and Curriculum (Aistear, 2009) Frameworks for Early Childhood Care and Education	Consultation and collaboration

The practitioner's role

The findings correlate with the adult's intrinsic role as a dominant quality provision factor in ECCE. Indeed, Practitioner 2, a room leader in community-based service, states the need to

> *learn what you can about their* (children's) *background, their* (children's) *family* and the need *to understand the children better* and *being sensitive to their* (children's) *needs.*

Equally, Page (2018) posits the concept "of a Triangle of Love*"* and Elfer (2007) the "Triangle of Trust" between the child, parent and practitioner in association with the awareness and appreciation of children's interests and needs (Moser *et al.*, 2017). Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model (1979) hypothesises the quality of each interaction between the adult/child, child/child, and adult/adult (Bronfenbrenner, 1981). For this reason, Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological systems theory is appropriate to showcase the interrelated

aspects of quality provision in ECCE and the effects on the child's early learning experiences (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007). Moreover, the quality of the interaction encompasses "Professional Love" (Page, 2018) and "Professional Purpose" (Oke *et al.*, 2019). This is echoed by Practitioner 8, a private service manager with twenty-seven years' experience, who distinguishes among those entering the workforce *with a passion for education, educating children* as opposed to those who *just saw a job advertised on the paper*. Similarly, Stakeholder 3, employed as a policy coordinator, signifies the adult as *key* in prioritising *the adult's competencies, experiences, and qualifications*. Furthermore, practitioners must enact their legal responsibility to promote child participation (Long, 2021), as illustrated by Practitioner 2, a room leader in community-based service,

> *Children are free to do whatever they want to do in a particular morning, so if they want to spend the whole morning doing one thing, I think, then that's fine. And that time is given to children, and their needs are listened to. So, if a child wants to do something, you make an effort to try and set that up so that they have access to what they're interested in at that particular moment on a particular day or week.*

Continuous Professional Development

The value for CPD was reflected as Practitioner 2 states *you need to be continually learning*. Indeed, participation in a range of formal and informal CPD activities is essential for graduates to remain current with research and evolve with the sector's ongoing policy and practice developments (EYEPU, 2017). Similarly, Practitioner 4, who manages a community-based service, identifies the negative impact of being insular within the ECCE sector states,

> *unless someone is updating and has gone out to see what's new, the practice is not changing*.

Moreover, Murray (2019) emphasises that the ECCE workforce is uniquely positioned to positively influence children's lives as children "need rights-informed and resourced educators*"* (Long, 2021:32). Without funded CPD to support leadership training and Diversity, Equality, and Inclusion (DEI) training and training on child rights and participation with remunerated time to implement, this study indicates an increased risk to quality provision.

Practicum Placement

Fundamentally, the significance of practicum placement is highlighted as Practitioner 5, employed as a private service manager, states,

> *placement was huge because you want to relate all your knowledge and theory to practice.*

Notably, introducing a minimum of 35% "structured, supervised assessed professional practice placement" (PACG, 2019:24) similar to other disciplines signifies mandatory learning. However, the varying level of qualification Level, 6/7/8 permittable in the role of room leader, can negatively impact student practitioners learning. Stakeholder 3, employed as a policy coordinator, illustrates,

> *where there isn't good practice and then sometimes those placements can kind of imprint on your practice going forward.*

Interestingly, introducing the Level 8 Special Purpose Certificate in Professional Mentoring for Early Childhood Practice by Mary Immaculate College (2021) (MIC) in July 2021 is significant in developing mentoring to support the quality of the ECCE sector. The findings show consensus among the practitioners and stakeholders that the quality of the practitioner determines the quality of the ECCE sector, influenced by their training, IPE, and CPD (Oke *et al.*, 2019; Proulx and Aboud, 2019).

Leadership

Hayes *et al.*, (2017) explain that leadership requires developing and nurturing learning in real authentic experiences. Moreover, (Moloney and Pettersen, 2017) further endorses the manager's role as an essential component of quality ECCE provision. Interestingly, Stakeholder 5, employed in a leadership position in a support/mentoring role, highlights the multiple challenges associated with management such as staff supervision, mentoring, administration tasks, and the challenge of achieving collaboration due to the gaps related to IPE training. In addition, Practitioner 1, a manager in community-based service, illustrates the lack of training

to direct staff despite the obligatory engagement with new operational measures. Practitioner 1 states,

> *They don't teach you how to get staff to follow them. That's something that you have to pick up yourself.*

The interview results concur that leadership is associated

> "with children's care and education, pedagogy, engagement with parents, the local community, staff management and organisation" (EC, 2020:15).

Therefore, the absence of accredited management training and or qualification criteria to meet regulations (DCEDIY, 2019G) "seems illogical and unacceptable" (Knox, 2021:135). Consequently, the ECCE workforce is "under inordinate pressure" (Moloney, 2018:6), thereby emphasising the need for management training and standardising room leader qualification to support ECCE practice.

Inspection

Interestingly, before the ECCE scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a), Whitebread *et al.,* (2015) explained that the State's primary focus was on equipment and materials, with limited attention to the issue of quality, staff qualifications or curriculum (GOI, 2014). In congruence with the Child Care (Pre-School Services) (no 2) Regulations 2006 (McMonagle, 2012), it is notable that the introduction of each of the frameworks, Síolta (CECDE, 2006a) and Aistear (NCCA, 2009), were the first guidelines available for ECCE services to provide for the diverse needs of children in Ireland. Nevertheless, it was not until Child Care (Pre-School Services) (No 2) Regulations 2016 that the State stipulated

> "to meet higher standards of quality in developing and providing safer, more efficient and more effective services for children and families" (TUSLA, 2018d:1).

In the context of this study, TUSLA, POBAL, DES are the evolving exosystems and macro systems (Egan *et al.,* 2019). The results indicate a consensus among both cohorts that the inspection process has improved over the years, as Practitioner 7 with twenty-seven years of experience states,

> *Inspection used to be daunting and very hard. It is better now, much more understanding from the Inspector to sit down to talk to you.*

However, intricate regulation processes create reoccurring challenges. Presently, Garda Vetting aligns to individual settings, and Practitioner 2 explains that *every single person has to be Garda vetted by the actual individual preschool.* Practitioner 2 also states that in the event of staff absences, *the ratios are incorrect, and they haven't any staff*. The results primarily point to Garda Vetting, which is beyond the service provider's control. For this reason, the results indicate the need to review the Garda Vetting process to support quality in ECCE. Reviewing the process would support quality in ECCE by facilitating relief cover and maintaining service delivery.

The Quality and Regulatory Framework (QRF) (Tusla, 2018d) was established to enhance quality for children and families. However, Practitioner 1 implies a lack of regard for individual family cultural preferences and states,

> *They* (POBAL) *don't take into account people's circumstances, the funding, basically, all they want to see is bums in seats, and for a lot of communities that does not happen daily, particularly with the Community I was working with, the Traveller community. When there's a death in the family, the whole family would up and leave; they could have to go to Donegal, which is part of their culture. And who are we to say you can't do that?*

Indeed, Murray (2019:1) states,

> "much remains to be done to introduce a comprehensive diversity, equality, and inclusion (DEI) approach to policy, training, and practice".

Consequently, the findings indicate the far-reaching impact of the fragmented inspection system (Urban *et al.*, 2017), which suggests a lack of support for parental cultural preferences and personal circumstances. The results indicate significant sustainability risks to services because of children's absences. Practitioner 1, currently managing a community service, says, *It's not my job to get a child out of bed to get into school on time,* indicating the workforce's tangible impact. Practitioner 6, an experienced manager in a community-based setting, asserted *that parents need to be more accountable.* Despite the shared consensus among both cohorts of participants that *POBAL has a job to do., it's really important that public money is spent properly* (S2); an area of concern arose around absenteeism and business sustainability.

Furthermore, the lack of consistency and some inspectorate inspecting outside their remit is frustrating for the ECCE practitioners involved. Stakeholder 2, employed in

support/mentoring/advocacy role, emphasises the *detrimental* impact on quality due to the lack of consistency. Stakeholder 2 anecdotally recalls that

> *The DES commended somebody on an outdoor play area, and TUSLA said it was unsafe*.

Instead of insufficient quality assessment from different agencies (ECI, 2020d), these findings indicate the need to consolidate the inspection system to promote "a child rights-based approach*"* (Long, 2019:2), focusing specifically on children's learning (Atanackovic, 2020).

The Key Person Approach

Aistear (NCCA, 2009) advocates that "relationships are at the heart of early learning and development" (NCCA, 2009:27), yet, the key person approach (Goldschmied and Jackson, 1994) is not mandatory in Ireland (French, 2019). Interestingly, Stakeholder 1 and 3 indicate occurrences in practice where the key person approach (Goldschmied and Jackson, 1994) would benefit the child's understanding of their environment and association with Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological model (1979). Equally, Joyce (2019) signifies that the key person approach (Goldschmied and Jackson, 1994) promotes relationships to support early learning and development. Stakeholder 1, employed in a leadership position in a support/mentoring role, states,

> *Children receive very mixed signals from adults, and it's very difficult for them to interpret what is the required standard of behaviour*.

Providing the key person approach (Goldschmied and Jackson, 1994) would support "children's agency*",* focusing on the individual child associated with the child's family, community, and culture. (Hayes *et al.*, 2017:81). For this reason, the results prioritise the key person approach (Goldschmied and Jackson, 1994) to enable meaningful relationships and ″a link between the setting and home″ (Aistear Síolta, 2021:1).

Quality Frameworks

Despite that, the DES inspection is part of the ECCE contractual requirement (Eurydice, 2018); the interview results indicate mixed perceptions among the respondent's questioning availability, accessibility, and participation in training. Practitioner 6, who has twenty-one years of experience, refers to the lack of availability of training, stating,

> *I can honestly tell you I've done Level 5, Level 6, and my degree, and I've never had any Aistear training.*

Moreover, Practitioner 10, who has ten years of experience and currently manages a private service, alludes to the optional engagement of a setting with CPD, stating,

> *It is very much up to the service whether they want to complete training* (Aistear/Síolta) *or not.*

In stark contrast, some participants' naming Aistear as a curriculum, *I think the Aistear curriculum is amazing* (P5), indicates the extent of the gaps in practice articulated by (Thornton *et al.,* 2019: DES 2016a). Stakeholder 1, employed in a leadership position in a support/mentoring role with nine years of experience, suggests a lack of accessibility due to non-remuneration for associated costs. The recommended

> "development of Aistear CPD by the working group (Clearing House) with representation from the key stakeholders including NCCA, Better Start, EYEI, and both Coordinators" (DES, 2018b: 57)

findings correlate to those detected by Early Year Education-focused Inspections (EYEI) (Duignan, 2019). Equally, the lack of training challenges the implementation of applying the emergent curriculum (Ibid), impacting children's development (Douglass, 2019). The identified challenges affecting quality in ECCE (DES, 2016a) remain inevitable without support and funding.

The ECCE workforce: Undervalued and underpaid

The theme of being undervalued is palpable, as Practitioner 7 states,

> *They* (ECCE Practitioners) *love what they do, and they are continuing in different countries, but our pay here in Ireland is ridiculous.*

In addition to being poorly paid, Practitioner 10, who currently manages a private service,

> *disagrees with the pressure some are under to compete with ECCE rates in their settings.*

Compared to the primary school sector, where salaries, benefits and annual leave are paid, there is little job security in the ECCE sector (OECD, 2021a). Notably, French (2019) explains that the evaluation of ECCE quality is calibrated only by paying higher capitation to services. Therefore, pursuing qualifications remains bound by funding incentives or regulatory requirements (Urban *et al*., 2017) without remuneration for the practitioner. Moreover, education policy reforms generally develop without the consultation or inclusion of practitioners (Stadler-Altmann and Alexiadou, 2020). Practitioner 1, an experienced practitioner currently managing a community service, demands that the Government include the ECCE workforce to inform policy and influence decision-making agendas instead of someone *who's never worked in service and never seen a child*. Furthermore, Practitioner 3, a private service manager with twenty years of experience, outlines the lack of collaboration regarding the contractual requirements, stating, *The contract is laid down by the government, and I just have to sign it.* This study highlights that most ECCE practitioners are without job security or career progression options (Greer-Murphy, 2019), which strongly relates to increasing staff turnover. Furthermore, the results reaffirm that the quality of the ECCE sector is determined by the practitioner's quality, including IPE and CPD (Oke *et al.,* 2019; Proulx and Aboud, 2019) in addition to employment terms and conditions.

4.3 The ECCE workforce: unprepared, unseen, and unheard

Congruent with the European Commission (2020:7), that

> "the quality of ECEC provision is highly dependent on the professionalism, competence and commitment of staff working in the sector",

the Official Journal of the European Union Council Recommendation of 22 May 2019 on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems (2019/C 189/02), (Council of the EU, 2019a) identifies professionalism as a critical quality element of ECCE practice. However, this study suggests that the inadequacies of poor terms and conditions risk employees' "well-being and financial security and the welfare of the children in their care" (Greer- Murphy, 2019:6). Practitioner 3, who manages a private service, explains the negative association of precarious working conditions and the lack of remuneration experienced among the ECCE workforce (HOI, 2017). Practitioner 3 states,

> *Ireland is one of the lowest, it's lower than average OECD country for investing in Early Childhood Education and Care, and I think that affects the whole sector very negatively .*

Unsurprisingly, all practitioners felt undervalued and underpaid. The results show that the capitation per child for 38 weeks is insufficient because the Government spends only 0.16% of Gross National Income (GNI) on ECCE (Sweeney, 2020). Stakeholder 2, employed in support/mentoring/advocacy role, highlights the financial impact for the ECCE workforce, many of whom take on additional employment to supplement their income,

> *It's seasonal, part-time, and so as well as the rate per hour is the fact that it seasonal and part-time is impacting on incomes.*

Part-time employment is associated more with the ECCE sector than other employment sectors (NERI, 2020), explicitly concerning low hours and problematic consequences (SIPTU, 2020). The annual staff turnover rate of 18%, reported in the Annual Early Years Sector Profile Report – 2019 / 2020 (DCEDIY, 2021c), reveals that the ECCE sector remains one of the lowest-paid sectors in Ireland (SIPTU, 2019).

This study indicates that it is inexplicable that ECCE services deliver a 52-week programme over 38 weeks without comparable remittance for the increased workload (HOI, 2017). The

financial outlay and costs incurred to attain graduate-level qualifications are expressed by experienced Practitioner 3 and Practitioner 8. Practitioner 3 implies that the Higher Capitation is the only rationale to undertake Level 7 and states, *For Level Seven, the only carrot for me was the financial reward at the end*. Practitioner 8 highlights the associated costs with undertaking studies, stating, *The Level 7/8, there is no incentive to do that; there is the increased capitation*. For this reason, this study emphasises that pay rates do not reflect the work and commitment to undertaking studies while working as an ECCE practitioner (DCYA, 2020).

The findings in the *Focused Policy Assessment of the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Higher Capitation Payment* (DCYA, 2020) increased recruitment of graduate ECCE room leaders and raised qualification profiles. However, the challenge remains that the additional capitation rewards the ECCE service, not staff *per se* (DCYA, 2020). Practitioner 5, a manager in a private setting, is acutely aware that *they'd* (ECCE practitioners) *be better paid to go working in somewhere like ALDI or LIDL*, where fewer qualifications are required. Practitioner 10, an experienced manager, indicates the ongoing financial challenges due to the lack of investment *The ECCE funding is very unfair, and a lot is expected for the money we receive*. ECCE room leaders earn on average €13.69. per hour (DCEDIY, 2021c) in stark contrast to two directors' salaries totalling €215,139 (Keena, 2021). Such findings indicate critical issues of "a profession in crisis" (HOI, 2017: 27); one could argue that this is due to the private model's dominance and the failure to address financial reward, professional status, and career progression (Simmie and Murphy, 2021: Sweeney, 2020: DES, 2019).

Similarly, from the practitioner's perspective, the Leadership for Inclusion Coordinator (LINC) programme financially rewards the ECCE setting with additional capitation, while the practitioners assume the roles and responsibilities of the Inclusion Coordinator (LINC, 2016). This could indicate the problem with not being financially rewarded as practitioners leave the sector (Simmie and Murphy, 2021). Practitioner 2, a room leader in community-based service, refers to many who are unable to qualify for mortgages stating,

> *The high turnover is obviously because the pay is so bad. They* (ECCE practitioners) *can't get a mortgage on the income of €10.20 a week, and especially if they can't get enough hours.*

Stakeholder 2, currently employed in a support/mentoring/advocacy role, reveals that some of the ECCE workforce transfer employment for nominal financial increase, stating,

> *Even people staying within the sector are moving for maybe a fiver, which doesn't sound much. But as it builds up, or if you can get an extra hour a day, potentially that's €40/ €50 at the end of the week* .

As a result, and despite the state-funded ECCE scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a), this study indicates a lack of consistency compared to the rewards allocated to Primary school teachers who undertake accredited courses during summer holidays (INTO, 2021).

Furthermore, the indifference of sector experience, as Practitioner 4, who manages a community-based service, explains that regardless of experience, salaries remain incredibly low.

> *The team here are very experienced, and regardless of that, they come into a new setting and, for the most part, are on a reasonably low wage, despite having between 15- and 20-years' experience each*.

Equally, Stakeholder 1, employed in a leadership position in a support/mentoring role, expresses concern among the sector owing to the lack of incremental salaries, explaining that

> *somebody with a Level Five or Level Six is potentially being paid the same as somebody who has a degree or Level 9 within the sector*.

Fundamentally, the adverse implications are absent salary scales, no opportunities for career progression, and having to *sign on every summer* (P4). The ECCE workforce seeks social welfare assistance due to closures for summer (Kennedy, 2019), but legalities prohibit private sector providers from doing so (HOI, 2017). The urgency for investment is tangible as Practitioner 8, an experienced manager in a private service, highlights the harsh reality of receiving funding for only thirty-eight weeks and being unable to seek social welfare assistance due to closures for summer.

> *It is tough when you do not get funded beyond the 38 weeks. I am dependent on numbers; every year, my funding is dependent on numbers. That depends on staff, how many staff to employ will be different every year. When it comes to the summer holidays, I do not get paid, and I cannot sign on because I am self-employed, so I have zero income over the holidays*.

Notably, the publication, *Nurturing Skills: The Workforce Plan for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare 2022-2028* (GOI, 2021b) envisages increased funding to implement appropriate salary scales in the Employment Regulation Order. In addition to advancing qualifications further and improving contributing factors to quality practice "such as non-contact time, planning, training, and curriculum implementation*"* (Ibid:38).

4.4 The Identified Challenges in providing and delivering the ECCE scheme.

In the context of this study, the macrosystem involves the "sociocultural beliefs about the value of early childhood care and education*"* (Hayes *et al.,* 2017:16); hence the ecological perspective concerns the consequential effects *"*if different settings have different developmental effects*"* (Bronfenbrenner, 1981:183). Practitioner 4, who manages a community-based service, expands on issues affecting the parental choice and personal circumstances and states,

> *Some parents don't want to start a child when they're two years eight months, and if they leave them until three and a half, a lot of preschool places are full. So, they may only get one year. On the contrary, I have one parent, and they don't want to wait to five years, six months before going to primary school so that the dates of entry are problematic*.

Likewise, Stakeholder 5, with twenty-seven years of experience, currently employed in a leadership position, suggests that the level of consistency in engaging with families depends on the service.

> *For years, there was an awareness, in disadvantaged areas, for a more substantial family support element, but now every service has that remit and has that engagement with families, and there is a family support element for every child and family to engage with. I do not know how consistent it is across the board; it depends on the service.*

Therefore, the ECCE scheme's (DCEDIY, 2021a) restrictive age criteria and single-entry points have substantial implications despite the increasing recognition of *"*the importance of educational and pedagogical programmes*"* (Schleicher, 2019:13). Practitioner 1, currently managing a community service, considers the single-entry point *unfair on some children,* referring to children who may miss the age criteria

> *by a day or by a week and have to wait an entire year,* compared to *children enrolled in the programme who are two years and eight months who are nowhere near ready to partake in a programme like that*.

Likewise, Practitioner 3, who manages a private service, refers to the effects of promoting school readiness instead of "supporting the development of the fundamental, foundational aspects of learning*"* (Hayes *et al.,* 2017:118). Reviewing the age criteria and entry points would support quality in ECCE by enabling parents to choose when to send their children instead of availing of the service, which fulfils legislative requirements (Schleicher, 2019).

The *Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016* (DCEDIY, 2019g) outlines the statutory obligations of the ECCE workforce; however, the interview findings indicate the unfavourable impact regulations may have on the relationship between the family, practitioner, and service provider. To support the ever-increasing needs of children and families availing the ECCE programme, Practitioner 5, with seven and a half years of experience, asserts that continuous support is needed *we need more.* Long (2019:2) posits "a child rights-based approach to the education and care of young children*"*. Therefore, the National Framework for Children and Young People's Participation in Decision Making (DCEDIY, 2021d) is welcomed (Long, 2021). However, funded DEI training with funded IT solutions to assist with regulatory documentation must be provided.

Undoubtedly, The LINC initiative (2016) and The Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) (2016) have both enhanced accessibility and assured inclusion for children with additional needs (Heeney, 2018). Equally, Practitioner 9, with eight years of experience, currently employed as an ECCE assistant, states that

> *The ECCE scheme is accessible to all regardless of family background, race, gender, needs*.

Nevertheless, the "disconnect between the LINC and DEI training programmes*"* (Murray, 2019:1) is another example of the fragmented system that concerns quality in ECCE. Critically, the findings concur with the report *Early Years Education and Care sector 2017* (HOI, 2017) that the holistic benefits to the child are questionable regarding individual care and time needs. For example, it is remarkable that the AIM allocation remains without special needs assistants

(DPER, 2014) to help with individual care needs; physical, medical or intimate. This study supports *An End of Year One Review of the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) Final* (DCYA, 2019) to provide training to service providers to support children with specific additional needs appropriately.

Despite the Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Charter Guidelines for ECCE (DCEDIY, 2019b), the range of disparities affecting inclusion within the ECCE programme included the child/adult ratio, qualifying age, single entry point, administration, and the low 38-week funding. While Practitioner 2, a room leader in community-based service, explains the challenges related to ratio and space, *The ratios should be looked at more, and I think that's an issue.* Practitioner 6, currently managing a community-based service, reveals the lack of additional funding to support the ancillary costs and states,

> *For example, AIM is working remote and won't come to the service to observe a child. We must video the child and send it to them. ECCE funding is not enough. AIM didn't send out tablets to do this.*

Furthermore, Practitioner 4, who manages a community-based service, shows that staff recruitment to a child-related post is challenging, depending on the number of eligible children and the extension of the second year, stating

> *It's very difficult to recruit people for posts tied to a specific child, and the extension of the ECCE scheme it's something that we face every year*.

As a result, the AIM worker relies on part-time employment, and the child remains unsupported beyond the ECCE programme. This study supports the recommendations of *An End of Year One Review of the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) Final* (DCYA, 2019) to increase funding to expand the level of support among staff and beyond the ECCE service.

Fundamentally, findings reveal that the meagre investment of "0.5 per cent of GDP in the sector" (OECD, 2021b:1) impacts quality provision in ECCE. Despite being beyond the service provider's control, the fact that services had funding withdrawn when attendance did not collate with registrations indicates the funding challenges and negative association with the POBAL inspection. There was consensus among both cohorts that POBAL should cease to revoke funding related to child absence and remove the "uncertainty around the so-called four-week

rule"(ECI, 2016b). Equally, Stakeholder 1, employed in a leadership support/mentoring role, advocates for change, suggesting funding individual services instead of individual children, thereby eliminating the penalty associated with absence, stating, *The* (ECCE) *funding must stop going to the individual child and go to the service*. Consequently, the results of this study support the view (DCYA, 2020) that the low remuneration levels are unacceptable due to the established links between staff turnover, low-quality provision, and child development. Therefore, this current study notes that The Department of Enterprise and Employment accepts the establishment of a "Joint Labour Committee for the early years' services and childcare sector" (GOI, 2021a; Wall, 2021) to commence in July 2021. This study acknowledges establishing the Joint Labour Committee as a potential channel to effect change.

4.4.1 Inspection

Due to the discrepancies evaluating quality raised in the RTÉ Investigates documentary: Crèches, Behind Closed Doors (Hegarty, 2019), the absence of EYEI (DES, 2022) was palpable. Primarily, Practitioner 3, who manages a private service manager, questions the omission of inspection regarding the staff/child interaction and states,

> *The DES is the most vital to check how I work here with the children? How do I teach them? And nobody has come and checked*.

Considering that the objective of the DES was to promote quality (DES, 2018Bb), Practitioner 1, with twenty-two years of experience, highlights the inconsistency of inspection and states,

> *Every centre is supposed to be inspected within 12 to 18 months, and we don't see that on the ground*.

Moreover, Practitioner 4, with fourteen years of experience, explains that announced inspection is inexplicable and illustrates how changes are made to satisfy compliance.

> *Unfortunately, I have worked in settings in the past for short periods, where had an inspector indicated that there were coming. Then additional staff were on-site, and changes made because they would have been aware of not being compliant*.

Practitioner 5, with seven and a half years of experience, reflects on receiving differing advice from the DES and TUSLA inspectors and states that *There's just a lack of cohesiveness between them*. Practitioner 8, with twenty years of experience, explains the confusion caused due to a DES inspector inspecting *beyond her remit*. Practitioner 8 states,

> *The DES was a tough inspection. The inspector was supposed to be covering my curriculum, but then she was asking about TUSLA stuff which was not in her area or field*.

Moreover, Stakeholder 6, with seven years of experience, employed in a support/mentoring role, expands on *an inconsistency that should be addressed* and highlights the lack of a system to support consultation,

> *We all want the best for children, I think the problem is the communication breakdown sometimes. There should be more dialogue there. There is no system in place for us all to have a consultation*.

The findings reiterate inconsistencies due to the lack of coordination during the inspection process between the inspectorate agencies DES and TUSLA. Additionally, participants from both cohorts explained their concerns, with some Practitioners emphasising the different areas of qualification held by some existing inspectors instead of degree graduates from Early Years Care and Education. Notably, degree graduates from Early Years Care and Education are only eligible since 2018 to apply to the recruitment of Early Years Inspectors within Tusla (DCEDIY, 2019c). Practitioner 4, with fourteen years of experience, asserts the need for

> *an inspectorate office from an early year's trained background to be fully able to assess the quality*.

Both cohorts of participants were critical of the lengthy duration of inspection and the challenges to maintaining staff ratios during the ECCE programme amid a global pandemic. Primarily, the challenges included maintaining and responding to administration whilst combining the role of manager and room leader. Practitioner 6, currently managing a community service, criticises the short turnaround time provided by TUSLA, stating,

> *They* (TUSLA) *don't give you a lot of time, if you are working in a room and they want the pages scanned to them, they need to be a bit more accommodating for that*.

While, Practitioner 1, employed as a community service manager, asserts that the POBAL inspection is *hugely unsettlin*g, disrupting children's contact time and

> *takes a huge chunk out of your working day. Sometimes its two days, and a lot of managers in our sector, particularly in community-based settings, are working on the floor.*

Similarly, Stakeholders 3 and 5 shared consensuses for the review of the POBAL inspection due to the lack of funding for the extent of administration involved. Stakeholder 3, currently employed as a coordinator, highlights regulatory administration's added responsibility, especially for services *that don't have administrative staff, again the manager is trying to do it.* Stakeholder 5, employed in a leadership position in a support/mentoring role, indicates the negative implications of incomplete paperwork *mainly because of the administration level.* For this reason, the results show the need to review the inspection administration process to support quality in ECCE. Reviewing the process would support quality in ECCE by investing in administration supports to support all ECCE services with administrative tasks. Equally, the accessibility of TUSLA inspection reports online was also relevant as Practitioner 6 cited reports indicating compliance or non-compliance, even, *If you have a little thing or a large thing with TUSLA, it makes no difference*. Fundamentally, findings in this study highlight inconsistency exposed across inspections (Moloney, 2016) and support the view that "continued support and investment in improving quality in practice are certainly warranted" (Duignan, 2019:31). Pettersen (2020) posits that the lack of investment affects engagement with practice and has provoked the regulation's deficiency. Without training and CPD to implement regulatory standards for compliance, this study supports the view of Thorpe *et al.*, (2020) that the meagre investment impacts children.

4.4.2 Supporting the ECCE workforce

Compared with the individual responsibility envisioned by Síolta (CECDE, 2006b) for all working in the ECCE sector, HOI (2017) suggests that ECCE quality correlates with the ECCE workforce's working conditions, communication, and educational approach. Perceiving the role from the individual's perspective is crucial to the microsystem from an ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1981); hence the OECD (2021a:3) asserts that "leadership is key to supporting and sustaining quality". The contextual leadership model (Nivala,1998, 1999)

founded by Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1989) ecological theory outlines leadership as a "cultural system" (HUJALA, 2004:54); thus, the necessary correlation among all those involved, including children, families, stakeholders, staff and service providers connecting leadership across the macro, meso and exo levels. Critically, Stakeholder 6, currently employed in a support/mentoring/advocacy role, recalls when leadership was unsupportive and states,

> *I went to my annual appraisal, and they said to me. Oh, you need to work on your partnership with your parents, and it ended there; I never got any support*.

Similarly, Practitioner 8 explains the impact of the lack of planning, team meetings, and supervision and notes the importance of having dedicated time for reflection and evaluating by stating, *We need time to evaluate, instead of downing tools*. Likewise, Stakeholder 5 relates to professional experience and the need for shared awareness to develop child-focused outcomes and states,

> *From my experience, there is no point in coming in and telling staff; this is what I want to see without them understanding the implications of the changes or understanding where it will lead in improving the child's life. To start, everyone needs to understand the curriculum's philosophy and ethos. They need to understand what that looks like in practice and are given opportunities to evaluate and monitor consistently*.

Consequently, the absence of management training and the varying levels of qualification permitted as room leaders contribute to leadership challenges. This current study indicates that leadership is integral for management, and support and supervision are intrinsic to developing relationships. The findings also concur with INFORM (2020) that supervision and overall strategic planning must coordinate efficiency and competency in an ECCE system.

Síolta (CECDE, 2006a) Standard 5 Interactions (CECDE, 2006c) and Standard 11 Professional Practice (CECDE, 2006b) specifically focus on professional practice through peer interactions, respectful and reciprocal relationships. Moreover, Strehmel (2016:350) states,

> "Beside the tasks of educational leadership and personnel management, leaders are responsible for work conditions, quality development and networking".

However, this study suggests a lack of collegiality due to a lack of management training and extensive regulation (Skovholt and Trotter-Mathison, 2011). From the Practitioner's

perspective, the interview results highlight multiple challenges associated with administration tasks and achieving collaboration. Practitioner 4, who manages a community-based service, explains the difficulties undertaking administrative functions as a standalone provider compared to when supports are available with an HR department,

> *Trying to coordinate leave entitlements, contracts and all those kinds of aspects if you're a standalone provider trying to navigate that would be quite difficult.*

Compared with Practitioners 6, who has twenty-one years of experience, highlights challenges achieving collaboration by stating,

> *It's difficult in the middle of the pandemic to get the staff together and get them on your side, have to rally them around like a politician.*

As a result, this study indicates the magnitude of the leadership role immersed in ECCE services and highlights challenges of the duties and responsibilities affecting a service's alignment.

According to Hayes *et al.,* (2017:128), "relationships and interactions are central to a nurturing pedagogy". Hence, the correlation with Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological model (1979) regarding the context of the interaction concerning the Practitioner's skill. However, Practitioner 6 relates poor pay and the negative personal impact due to exposure to "emotionally challenging situations and people" (Penning, 2018: 14), stating,

> *If somebody pays you pittance, you feel disrespected and unworthy. And you become bitter, and you don't want to do the work, and you don't want to put the effort in.*

Worryingly, Stakeholder 4, employed in a support/mentoring/advocacy role, asserts that

> *Children realise that adults are stressed, and they know when they are not actively listening to them.*

Consequently, this study supports the view of Douglass (2019) that staff-child interactions can have an apparent effect on children's learning, development, and wellbeing, directly influencing quality. Similarly, Stakeholder 1 employed in a leadership position in a

support/mentoring role reflects on children's exposure to inappropriate behaviours due to hostile demeanour, lack of collegiality, trust, and communication by stating,

> *You see practitioners in the room who are speaking to a child that's halfway across the room. And then they're wondering why the child is not being responsive to those interactions or bombarding children with questions rather than listening to children when they speak.*

Without funded CPD to support pedagogical leadership training to help staff develop an appropriate curriculum within a structured environment (OECD, 2021a), this study indicates an increased risk to quality provision. Furthermore, the need for pedagogy of listening and child participation training is highlighted.

4.4.3 Relationships Matter

Relationships with children

Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model (1979) hypothesises the quality of each interaction between the adult/child, child/child, and adult/adult (Bronfenbrenner, 1981). The interview findings corroborate that meaningful interactions are crucial to quality ECCE provision. Stakeholder 2 asserts,

> *Relationships are probably more important than the environment; it is more important if the relationships are good.*

Practitioner 4 values *making that home-school connection*, emphasising that *if something is happening at home in their life, it can be brought into school or vice versa.* Additionally, Practitioner 4 asserts that relationships involve

> *each practitioner getting to know their key children, getting to know their interests, and building their curriculum and the environment around that as much as possible*.

Equally, Practitioner 2 recognises the individual child's uniqueness by stating,

> *Every child is different, and each child has to be helped differently* and asserts that *children's voices need to be heard more.*

The interview findings concur with Aistear (NCCA, 2009:27), who asserts that "relationships are at the very heart of early learning and development". Furthermore, it is notable that introducing each of the frameworks, Síolta (CECDE, 2006a) and Aistear (NCCA, 2009), were the first guidelines available for ECCE services to provide for the diverse needs of children in Ireland. Consequently, Mannion (2019) posits that the lack of training is evidentially detrimental to delivering and applying the curriculum framework's principles and goals. Moreover, as previously discussed, the key person approach (Goldschmied and Jackson, 1994) is not mandatory in Ireland (French, 2019). Therefore, the identified challenges affecting quality ECCE provision (DES, 2016a) remain inevitable without support and funding.

Professional Relationships

In contrast that First Five (2018) promotes, "To realise the vision of First 5, it is essential to work collaboratively and support inter-disciplinary work practices" (GOI, 2018: 111); the interview results signal individual attitudes impacting collegiality in some ECCE services. Stakeholder 2 employed in support/mentoring/advocacy role states,

> *If practitioners are set in their ways. It is such a shame because they* (practitioners) *restrict themselves and the children, families, and work colleagues with their attitude*.

Equally, Practitioner 10 and Stakeholder 5 suggest that staff turnover may occur for different reasons. Practitioner 10 states,

> *If there is a high staff turnover in a service, there are underlying issues, be it management, lack of communication, employer/employee interactions*.

Stakeholder 5 states,

> *If you have a service with a high staff turnover, there are a couple of things you need to look at there. You need to look at the service quality.*

The interview findings recommend collaborative engagements to provide quality, consistent with the OECD (2019b). Furthermore, Lazzari *et al.,* (2013:4) associate the inextricable link between quality and the professionalisation of the ECCE workforce. Compared with PLÉ (2018:1), that the "professional dimension of practice" is integral for forming "Level 7 and Level 8 graduates", this study deems that a professional component is intrinsic across all

qualification stages. Therefore, this study promotes the Code of Ethics and Code of Professional Responsibilities framework (Moloney *et al.*, 2020) for professional decorum to become inherent throughout the sector.

The interview results also signal some division between the ECCE workforce and the policymakers as Practitioner 1 says,

> *I think the whole sector has been divided at the moment; now is the time to have people with experience driving policy and driving decision making*.

Equally, both Stakeholders 5 and 6 caution the promotion of different agendas without the participation of the ECCE workforce. Stakeholder 5, employed in a leadership position in a support/mentoring role, states, *it needs to be collective and impartial when looking at policy*. Stakeholder 6 employed in a support/mentoring/advocacy role says, *Communication is essential, but it is coming from a very fragmented sector*. A prominent example is an introduction and use of the term Early Learning and Care/School-Aged Childcare (ELC/SAC) by First Five (2018) without consultation of the ECEC workforce (Urban *et al.,* 2019b). Indeed, the title's lack of consultation and publication directly opposes *"*the terms used in Irish policy, guidelines, and frameworks" (Oke *et al.,* 2021). Fundamentally, the lack of identity, and the need to establish a professional body, was prominent, with a strong association to the use of the title *teacher*. This study suggests that the top-down approach (Urban, 2020) negates the collaborative approach promoted by Síolta (CECDE, 2006e), Standard 4, Consultation.

The Triangle of Love

The increased visibility of diversity (McGinnity *et al.,* 2018) and the concepts "of a Triangle of Love*"* (Page, 2018) and "a Triangle of Trust" (Elfer, 2007) between the child, parent and practitioner are paramount for quality ECCE provision. However, the interview findings show that parental relationships depend on practitioner attitudes and experience, staff/management relationships, and the organisational structure. For example, Practitioner 4 reveals the support that some parental relationships depend on and states,

> *For some parents, the amount of paperwork can be quite intimidating particularly because it has to be done in stages*.

Additionally, Practitioner 4 says,

> *We also work in a disadvantaged area. That aspect is quite challenging for some parents and the provider supporting them doing*.

Stakeholder 3 describes worrying variations in quality ECCE provision for children due to discrepancies among qualifications and the relationships among the roles of the adults. Stakeholder 3 states,

> *A lot of services don't put enough work into checking in, promoting relationships, and checking in with families, checking with their children and that consultation piece.*

The interview results indicate some critical components associated with parental relationships parallel with Síolta (CECDE, 2006d), Standard 3 Parents and Families. Critically, Practitioner 5 emphasises that *The ECCE programme is their* (families) *first kind of integration into the community.* As a result, this study concurs with Murray (2019) to explore attitudes among the ECCE workforce to develop inclusion and diversity in practice. Therefore, the findings deem reflective practice and leadership and DEI training essential to engage meaningfully with parents.

Oke *et al.,* (2019) assert the challenges for the ECCE workforce to meet varying parental needs and expectations within time constraints. Equally, the interview findings show the repercussions of staff turnover on parental relationships. Practitioner 4 illustrates the implications on families due to staff turnover and states,

> *You're back to square one, trying to build new relationships for families, and it does take time to build those relationships and that trust with families*.

Similarly, the Stakeholder 5 role highlights the shared impact for both the parent and child due to the loss of their key person, stating,

> *The impact is that children form an attachment with the key person in the room. That person is now moving on*.

AistearSíolta (2018b:2) promotes the key person approach (Goldschmied and Jackson, 1994) as the *"*familiar point of contact*"* that provides a "secure base*"* for the parent and child. Delivering the key person approach (Goldschmied and Jackson, 1994) would support quality in ECCE, prioritising the reciprocal relationship between the family and child and benefitting all involved (Elfer *et al.*, 2011).

4.5 The ECCE scheme – Free and universal but at whose expense?

Undoubtedly, the free, universal provision is a vital aspect of the Irish ECCE scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a). This study identified six interconnected components that equate quality (i.e., IPE, leadership, regulation and evaluation, professional recognition and development, developmentally appropriate practice, and consultation). Interestingly, the findings highlight multiple challenges that impact quality ECCE practice, including lack of investment and professional recognition, inconsistent inspection, disruption to children's contact time, and communication between practitioners and policymakers. Specifically, the varying levels of qualification, Level 6/7/8 permitted as ECCE room leader and the added responsibility of the manager without management training challenges compliance and services alignment. Consequently, the expense of the ECCE scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a) is both tangible and measurable for the participating children and families and the practitioners and other stakeholders working in the ECCE scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a). Fundamentally, access to the ECCE scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a) is not guaranteed quality ECCE provision and, without targeted investment, continues at the expense of the children, their families and practitioners involved.

4.6 Conclusion

This chapter discusses the study's findings and relates existing and current literature. The overarching conclusion from this study is that the manager's role is essential and that the manager carries ultimate responsibility for quality ECCE provision. Fundamentally, the findings highlight that quality is rooted in establishing positive and collegial relationships between children, families, management, staff, and external professionals. Equally, individual responsibility is incumbent to establish mutual professional etiquette, and the sector needs to unite. Findings further indicate that meagre investment impacts children due to staff turnover

and attrition; consequently, the challenges in fulfilling the duties of education and care affect the workforce and ECCE provision. Moreover, the inconsistencies between the different inspectorate agencies, the increasing workload, and the exclusion from decision-making have significantly disempowered the ECCE sector. The absence of training appropriate to regulatory requirements, unsupported CPD and provision of the key person approach (Goldschmied and Jackson, 1994) impacts the development of relationships between parents, teachers and children.

Chapter 5: Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Introduction

This final chapter encapsulates the key conclusions of this study, which are derived from the research findings and subsequent analysis. Arising from these conclusions are recommendations for policy and practice, as well as for future research. This study aimed to identify what constitutes quality ECCE provision for children from two to eight months of age and not older than five years and six months of age (DCEDIY, 2021a) while also exploring the changes and improvements required to enhance existing ECCE practice and provision.

5.2 Overall conclusion of the study

The overarching research aim of the study was to investigate what constitutes quality ECCE provision from the perspective of ECCE practitioners and other stakeholders (employed in leadership positions in support/mentoring/advocacy roles) working in the ECCE scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a). This research reviewed national and international literature debating quality ECCE, and consequently, the findings indicate that quality components have changed over time. Evaluating and measuring quality ECCE at micro-, meso-, exo- and macro-levels should focus on 'process', emphasising positive interactions for children, staff, and families. From the practitioner and stakeholders' perspectives, there is consensus on what constitutes quality and that quality ECCE provision is paramount over profit. The findings indicate that numerous components were associated with quality ECCE practice and identified by Siolta (CECDE, 2006a). The results include IPE, leadership, regulation and evaluation, professional recognition and development, an emergent curriculum, and consultation; therefore, the principal conclusion to emerge from this study is to integrate these elements into a single quality framework to implement quality in ECCE.

This research found that the practitioner's role in determining quality practice is fundamental; however, the magnitude of the leadership role immersed in ECCE services challenges the duties and responsibilities affecting a service's alignment with compliance. Expressly, the varying levels of qualification, Level 6/7/8 permitted as ECCE room leader and the added responsibility for the manager without any management training challenge the duties of education and care involving the ECCE workforce. Another important conclusion to emerge from this study was the variable level of qualification Level, 6/7/8 permittable in the role of room leader, suggests a negative impact on student practitioners' learning. The mentoring to

support the quality of the ECCE sector demands proficiency even though the mandatory learning of a minimum of 35% professional placement (PACG, 2019) is not yet implemented. The results signal inconsistent minimum qualifications for the state-funded education systems, highlighting the difference in entry-level requirements between a Primary school teacher and an ECCE room leader. Further comparisons and discrepancies are drawn to the rewards allocated to Primary school teachers who undertake accredited courses during summer holidays (INTO, 2021).

This study highlighted the inconsistency associated with inspection due to differing advice from some DES and TUSLA inspectors. This has created deficits in providing quality ECCE provision suggesting an unsupportive consultation system. In addition to the absence of CPD to implement Síolta and Aistear, the National Quality and Curriculum Frameworks (DES, 2018b), the inconsistency of EYEI inspectorate visits suggests inequitable access for ECCE services to implement the frameworks. Furthermore, the role of Better Start mentors requires funding to enhance equitable mentoring and support to individual services nationally. The increased administrative workload associated with regulation disrupts children's contact time in ECCE services and provokes the regulation's deficiency. The findings indicate that the inadequate investment of just 0.1% GDP (ECI, 2021) causes an apparent impact on children's learning, development, and wellbeing, directly influencing quality (Douglass, 2019). The standard (€69.) and higher (€80.25) capitation rates have not been increased since 2018 (DCEDIY, 2019). The extent workers employed on low wages, part-time and 38-week contracts claiming the unemployment assistance for the summer months culminates in practitioners leaving the sector (Simmie and Murphy, 20), subsequently disrupting relationships due to staff turnover. The disproportionate salary range to levels of qualification and years of experience affects the ECCE workforce's professional development. The increasing staff turnover and attrition reduce the potential to lower staff/child ratios, and the service-specific Garda Vetting process delays staff relief cover.

Fundamentally, Síolta (CECDE, 2006a) highlights the importance of children's rights, including the right to participate and experience choice through playful and fun experiences. In comparison, the research findings reveal the challenging implications of the mixed perceptions of the national frameworks Síolta (CECDE, 2006a) and Aistear (NCCA, 2009a) caused by issues associated with accessibility and availability and optional engagement of CPD and increasing staff turnover. As a result, the emergent curriculum (Duignan, 2019) remains unsupported. The single-entry point and age-related criteria prevent some children from

receiving a two-year funded preschool programme and is unsupportive of parental choice. The research findings suggest that quality provision has not been informed by the child's needs in the Irish ECCE scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a). Overall, the division between the ECCE workforce and the policymakers has promoted different agendas and has excluded and disempowered the ECCE sector and impacted quality ECCE practice and provision.

This study has shown that expanding services and the ECCE scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a) without giving due attention to quality has led to provision where children, families, staff, and society are challenged. The ECCE scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a) is free and universal but at the expense of these stakeholders. Notably, this research recognises that regulation and evaluation are important components of quality; however, attention must be given to developing a graduate-led workforce and ensuring that attractive and favourable working conditions are established. The development of a highly skilled and adequately remunerated ECCE profession has been identified as the most significant contribution that could be made to enhancing quality ECCE provision in Ireland. This necessitates providing free continuing professional development for those already working in the profession and recognising that significant State investment is still required. The Core Funding model announced for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare Providers (DCEDIY, 2022c) will benefit the ECCE sector because the funding is based on the capacity of services instead of children's attendance levels. However, the funding per place and the withdrawal of the Higher Capitation potentially risk the sustainability of standalone ECCE services in the future.

This study has identified the changes and improvements required to enhance existing practice and provide for children, families, practitioners, and stakeholders. Undoubtedly, the expense of the ECCE scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a) is tangible for the participating families and the practitioners and stakeholders working in the ECCE scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a). Without targeted investment, the expense of the ECCE scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a) continues at the cost of the children, their families and practitioners involved. Deriving from these conclusions are recommendations to enhance quality in ECCE services.

5.3 Recommendations to promote quality ECCE.

Graduate workforce:

1. The DCEDIY should introduce a minimum QQI Level 8 qualification requirement for the ECCE workforce. Accelerate the commitments of the First 5 (GOI, 2018) and develop the Workforce Development Plan (DCEDIY, 2021g) to standardise the minimum qualification level for ELC and SAC as a QQI Level 8 qualification.
2. Introduce a Level 8 Special Purpose Award in Professional Mentoring for Early Childhood Practice similar to the award introduced by Mary Immaculate College (MIC, 2020). This will empower ECCE staff to mentor students participating in placement by developing professional mentoring skills to associate with daily practice.
3. Implement the Code of Ethics and Code of Professional Responsibilities framework (DCYA, 2020b) to promote professional decorum (PLÉ, 2018).

The workload for staff:

1. To unify one single inspectorate body of Tulsa and the DES to avoid duplication and ensure consistency, continuing with unannounced inspections to observe practice, interactions, and the environments.
2. To develop a Garda Vetted personnel database system for the ECEC workforce. This should replace the continuous need to attain service-specific Garda Vetting and facilitate the recruitment of relief staff at short notice.

Managerial Role:

1. The DCEDIY funds a CPD Level 8 Special Purpose Certificate in Leadership and Management for Early Childhood Practice to fulfil managerial tasks; HR, Curriculum, Finance and Business as a targeted pilot training programme among current Level 8 ECCE managers. Leadership and Management training should promote distributed leadership involving pedagogical leadership.

Implementing National Frameworks:

1. In line with The Aistear Siolta Practice Guide (www.aistearsiolta.ie), an online resource to support practitioners using the two frameworks together, a national rollout of training on this guide should be offered to all ECCE practitioners.

2. The DCEDIY implements the recommendations *Review of the current NSAI mentoring model* (GOI, 2018) and develops a working group involving representation from NCCA, Better Start, EYEI and national coordinators to develop Aistear CPD and Síolta CPD.

Staff Turnover:

1. This study recommends that the terms and conditions of the Employment Regulation Order (GOI, 2021b) in conjunction with the Workforce Development Plan (DCEDIY, 2021g) should introduce professional standardised salary scales with professional employment terms and agreements.
2. That ECCE representation is professionally recognised and engaged nationally at "*the State negotiating table*" (Moloney, 2021:99) in the ECCE sector's decision-making process and ECCE contractual agreements.
3. The DCEDIY incentivises annual CPD participation similar to the rewards allocated to Primary school teachers who undertake accredited courses during summer holidays (INTO, 2021).

The ECCE scheme:

1. The DCEDIY should fund a model for service provision instead of per child with inbuilt non-contact time and incorporating a mix of private and community business and deliver on the commitment to "*increase public investment in the sector from €485m in 2018 to at least €970m in 2028"* (GOI, 2021b:7).
2. Review the ECCE scheme's age range and remove the single-entry point to implement a universal provision of two years preschool, all for children based on individual needs.
3. Support parental choice to have the right to choose when to send their children or support them at home.
4. Introduce an incremental 3-year ECCE model utilising an Emerging Curriculum-based approach guided by Aistear (NCCA, 2009a) and Síolta (CECDE, 2006a), which would transition to primary school. The programme would comprise years 1 and 2 for three hours per day, and then the third year would replace Junior Infants for three and half

hours per day. This would promote a seamless transition to Primary school in conjunction with the use of Aistear (NCCA, 2009) and Mo Scéal (NCCA, 2022).

5.4 Recommendations for Further Research

In addition to the key recommendations based on the practitioner and stakeholders' perspective, the following considerations for future research are proposed to enhance quality in ECCE services.

1. It is recommended that future research invites children's input to "*Get children involved*" (P5) and explore from the child's perspective their experience of the ECCE scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a).
2. It is recommended that a large-scale study is conducted to understand ECCE quality provision and practice that includes all stakeholders such as practitioners, parents, children and policymakers.
3. It is recommended that a large-scale study be conducted on the understanding and implementing the National Frameworks Aistear (NCCA, 2009) and Síolta (CECDE, 2006a).
4. To endorse and develop a Mentored Community of Practice to support practitioners in developing the ECCE programme's first year, engaging with Reflective Practice and utilising the Emergent Curriculum.
5. Conduct research with student practitioners about their experience of initial professional education. Identifying the training needs and analysis to support student learning of a minimum of 35% "*structured, supervised assessed professional practice placement"* (PACG, 2019:24) would inform the Higher Educational Institutes delivering Initial Practitioner Education (IEP).

5.5 Contributions to Knowledge: Theory and Practice

Although a small-scale study, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of ECCE policy and practice, especially concerning what constitutes quality practice from the perspective of practitioners and other stakeholders. This study identifies the challenges and merits that require further development to enhance quality in practice and contributes to the existing literature by identifying essential components of quality ECCE provision. Essentially,

the quality components are interconnected; hence the policy recommendations impact practice within ECCE services. In particular, a graduate-led workforce prioritises quality by implementing an emergent curriculum involving children's agency and choice.

5.6 Concluding Remarks

This study sought to identify components relating to quality ECCE from the practitioner and stakeholders' perspectives. Although the study identified numerous features associated with quality, this study reveals challenges in fulfilling the duties of education and care affecting the ECCE workforce and service provision. Despite the challenges, the ECCE scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a) has a 95% participation rate (HOI, 2021) and is applauded in this study by participants. The introduction of the ECCE scheme in January 2010 gave universal access to education and care to children in Ireland. Fundamentally, the ECCE scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a) was ground-breaking but required real investment to prioritise children's needs with unified collaboration and inclusion of the ECCE sector and relevant stakeholders to be a world-class model. Indeed,

> "we know what good quality ECCE looks like; the challenge now is to make sure that all our children enjoy high-quality early education and care*"* (Murphy, 2015:297).

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Information Sheet for the Semi-Structured Interviews with Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Practitioners and Stakeholders.

Invitation to partake in Research Study.

To whom this may concern,

My name is Johanna Forde, and as part of my Master's degree, I am conducting a research study titled: The Irish Early Childhood Care and Education scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a) free and universal, but at whose expense?

The aims of the research are;

1. Provide an in-depth study of ECCE practitioner and stakeholder perspectives on what constitutes quality practice in ECCE.
2. Determine the best practice concerning quality provision for children aged from 2 years to 8 months of age and not older than five years and six months of age (DCEDIY, 2021a).
3. To explore how policy and regulation have impacted quality practice and provision in the ECCE scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a).
4. Explore challenges and the merits of providing quality provision for children participating in the ECCE scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a).
5. To contribute to the extant body of existing literature concerning quality early childhood care education.

I am currently recruiting relevant personnel to participate in this study. The following criteria apply to partake in this study;

- Be a QQI Level 6 /Level 7/ Level 8 ECEC practitioner working with children from 2 years and eight months of age and not older than five years and six months of age availing of the ECCE scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a)

  OR
- Be a stakeholder/sector personnel working in a supportive and collaborative role in the ECCE scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a)

To receive further information, please get in touch with Johanna Forde a[redacted]

I appreciate your consideration to participate,

Yours sincerely,

_____

Johanna Forde

Appendix 2: Consent Form for ECCE Practitioners participating in Semi-structured Interviews.

I invite you to participate in a research study titled; The Irish Early Childhood Care and Education scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a) free and universal, but at whose expense? You are a practitioner working with children availing of the ECCE scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a) and, therefore, are invited to participate. This research study aims to determine the best practice concerning quality provision for children and explore how policy and regulation have impacted quality practice and provision in the ECCE scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a).

By completing and submitting this form, you acknowledge reading the study description, are over 18 years of age and consent to the terms of your participation. The interview questions are themed, including; Initial Practitioner Training; Quality; The ECCE scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a); Inspections; Professionalism and you are encouraged to identify any new emerging issues. The interview will be held virtually, by arrangement and will take approximately 40 minutes to 1 hour to complete. The collected data will be kept confidential. However, Munster Technological University, Cork reserve the right to review and approve research studies and therefore may inspect and copy records specific to this study. Your anonymity is assured, and you nor your service will be identified. All notes and recordings will be destroyed three years after completing the research process.

This research seeks to identify how implementation can support future policy and how practitioners can inform future policy, hence your contribution to this study. Steps have been taken to ensure your protection from harm. However, due to the complexity of issues across the research and the personal implications for practitioners working in the ECCE sector, this research does include sensitive information. Your participation in this research study is always voluntary. Therefore, you may decline to answer questions at any time and or cease involvement during the process.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions by email at [redacted]

Thank you for your participation in advance,

Yours sincerely,

Johanna Forde

Please initial box

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet for this study and was provided with the opportunity to ask questions ☐
2. My participation is voluntary, and I am entitled to withdraw at any time without giving a reason. ☐
3. I agree to partake in this research study and the interview being recorded, with the use of anonymised quotes in publication ☐

_____	_____	_____
Name of Participant	Date	Signature
_____	_____	_____
Name of Researcher	Date	Signature

Appendix 3: Consent Form for Stakeholders participating in Semi-structured Interviews.

I invite you to participate in a research study titled; The Irish Early Childhood Care and Education scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a) free and universal, but at whose expense? Therefore, you are a stakeholder working in a supportive and collaborative role in the ECCE scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a) and are invited to participate. This research study aims to determine the best practice concerning quality provision for children and explore how policy and regulation have impacted quality practice and provision in the ECCE scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a).

By completing and submitting this form, you acknowledge reading the study description, are over 18 years of age and consent to the terms of your participation. The interview questions are themed, including; Initial Practitioner Training Quality; The ECCE scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a); Inspections; Professionalism and you are encouraged to identify any new emerging issues. The interview will be held virtually, by arrangement and will take approximately 40 minutes to 1 hour to complete. The collected data will be kept confidential. However, Munster Technological University, Cork reserve the right to review and approve research studies and therefore may inspect and copy records specific to this study. Your anonymity is assured, and you nor your service will be identified. All notes and recordings will be destroyed three years after completing the research process.

This research seeks to identify how implementation can support future policy and how stakeholders can inform future policy, hence your contribution to this study. Steps have been taken to ensure your protection from harm. However, due to the complexity of issues across the study, including lack of resources, poor quality practice and implications for practitioners working in the ECCE sector, this research does include sensitive information. Your participation in this research study is always voluntary. Therefore, you may decline to answer questions at any time and or cease involvement during the process.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions by email at [redacted]

Thank you for your participation in advance,

Yours sincerely,

Johanna Forde

Please initial box

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet for this study and was provided with the opportunity to ask questions ☐
2. My participation is voluntary, and I am entitled to withdraw at any time without giving a reason. ☐
3. I agree to partake in this research study and the interview being recorded, with the use of anonymised quotes in publication ☐

_____	_____	_____
Name of Participant	Date	Signature
_____	_____	_____
Name of Researcher	Date	Signature

Appendix 4: Interview Schedule for Ecce Practitioners.

Initial Practitioner Education

1. What is your highest level of qualification attained?
2. Can you tell me your current role?
3. How long have you been working in the ECCE profession, and can you describe your various roles over the years?
4. How well has your qualification prepared you for working as an ECCE practitioner?
5. Have you completed any continuous professional development courses, and can you tell me about them?
6. If you have completed CPD, why did you complete them? Was there an incentive to complete CPD?
7. Are you undertaking any current studies, or have you further studies planned?

Quality

1. What, in your opinion, is quality ECCE?
2. What, in your opinion, enhances quality in ECCE?
3. In your opinion, is there a lack of training in Aistear and Síolta?
4. When should a practitioner receive this training, during IEP or as CPD, or both?
5. Should it be updated and renewed regularly? How regularly?

ECCE scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a)

- What do you think of the ECCE scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a) from the perspective of;
- The child; Practitioner; Service provider;
- Both Irish and International research indicates the adverse effects of high staff turnover (Oireachtas, 2017; Cassidy *et al.*, 2011; Mims *et al.,* 2008). Have you witnessed/experienced staff turnover?
- What would you change about the ECCE scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a) and why?

Inspections

- What inspections have you received in the last three years?
- What is your overall experience or opinion of the three inspections bodies, POBAL, TUSLA and DES?
- Are the three separate bodies beneficial for the inspection of the ECCE scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a)?
- for children & families; the practitioners; The service overall

Professionalism

1. What does professionalism mean to you as an employee/employer?
2. What is needed from the state to support professionalism?
3 What is the responsibility of each one of us as a professional in the sector, and what can we expect of ourselves and our colleagues?

Recommendations

1. What recommendations can be made to enhance the ECCE scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a) for children, families, and practitioners?
2. The title of my research is The Irish Early Childhood Care and Education scheme is free and universal, but at whose expense?
3. Is there any question that I didn't ask you or any issues you would like to raise?

Appendix 5: Interview schedule for ECCE Stakeholders.

Initial Practitioner Education

1. What is your highest level of qualification attained?
2. Can you tell me your current job title and how it relates to children?
3. Can you tell me a bit about your experience working with and on behalf of children over the years?
4. How well has your qualification prepared you for your current role?
5. Are you undertaking any current studies, or have you further studies planned?

Quality

1. What, in your opinion, is quality ECCE?
2. What, in your opinion, enhances quality in ECCE?
3. In your opinion, is there a lack of training in Aistear and Síolta?
4. When should a practitioner receive this training, during IEP or as CPD, or both?
5. Should it be updated and renewed regularly? How regularly?

ECCE scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a)

1. What do you think of the ECCE scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a) from the perspective of; The child; Practitioner; Service provider;
2. Both Irish and International research indicates the adverse effects of high staff turnover (Oireachtas, 2017; Cassidy *et al.,* 2011; Mims *et al.,* 2008). Have you witnessed/experienced staff turnover?
3. What would you change about the ECCE scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a) and why?

Inspections

1. What is your overall experience or opinion of the three inspections bodies, POBAL, TUSLA and DES?
2. Are the three separate bodies beneficial for the inspection of the ECCE scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a)? for children & families; the practitioners; The service overall

Professionalism

1. What does professionalism mean to you as a stakeholder?
2. What is needed from the state to support professionalism?
3. What is the responsibility of each one of us as a professional in the sector, and what can we expect of ourselves and our colleagues?

Recommendations

1. What recommendations can be made to enhance the ECCE scheme (DCEDIY, 2021a for children, families, and practitioners?
2. The title of my research is The Irish Early Childhood Care, and Education scheme is free and universal, but at whose expense?
3. Is there any question that I didn't ask you or any issues you would like to raise?

Appendix 6: Principles and Standards of Síolta (CECDE, 2006a)

Principles of Síolta	**Standards of Síolta**
1. The Value of Early Childhood	1. Rights of the Child
2. Children First	2. Environments
3. Parents	3. Parents and Families
4. Relationships	4. Consultation
5. Equality	5. Interactions
6. Diversity	6. Play
7. Environments	7. Curriculum
8. Welfare	8. Planning and Evaluation
9. Role of the Adult	9. Health and Welfare
10. Teamwork	10. Organisation
11. Pedagogy	11. Professional Practice
12. Play	12. Communication
	13. Transitions
	14. Identity and Belonging
	15. Legislation and Regulation
	16. Community Involvement

Appendix 7: Aistear's 12 Principles (NCCA, 2009)

Children and their lives in early childhood	• The child's uniqueness • Equality and diversity • Children with Rights
Children's connections with others	• Relationships • Parents, family, and community • The adult's role
How children learn and develop	• Holistic learning and development • Active learning • Play and hands-on experiences • Relevant and meaningful experiences • Communication and language • The learning environment

Appendix 8: Aistear's themes (NCCA, 2009)

Well-being
Identity and Belonging
Communicating
Exploring and Thinking

	Appendix 9: A Timeline of Significant ECEC Initiatives in Ireland	
Date	**Initiative**	**Summary**
1996	Preschool Regulations	This guidance on the Child Care (Pre- School Services) Regulations, 1996, is written for people responsible for implementing the legislation and anyone affected by its provisions. These persons manage or propose managing a pre-school service (Government of Ireland, 2019).
2006	Equality and Diversity Guidelines	'Guidelines aim to support childcare practitioners, early childhood teachers, managers and policymakers in their exploration, understanding and development of diversity and equality practice' (OMC, 2006: ix).
2006	Síolta: National Quality Framework Early Childhood Education	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).
2008-2010	National Childcare Investment Programme (NCIP)	Government, Community-based Centre- disadvantaged children ((0-6). Parent(s)-social welfare or ed/training course. (Kerr, 2009; Irish Examiner, 2009).
2009	Childhood Education and Training Support (CETS)	Subsidised childcare scheme provided for parent(s) on a training course.
2009	Aistear: Curriculum Framework-Early Years	Department Education Skills (DES) Curriculum Framework-children birth-6. 4 inter-related themes; *Well-being; Identity and Belonging; Communicating; Exploring and Thinking.* Guidelines-parents and practitioners (NCCA, 2009).
2010	ECCE Scheme	Pre-Primary yr. Capitation grant- assist pre-school running costs (DCYA, 2019).
2010	ECEC Workforce Development plan	Find challenges in developing a Professional ECEC Workforce. Recommendations (DES, 2009).
2013	Child and Family Agency Bill 2013	Modified Part VII Child Care Act, 1991, i.e., registration and inspection process.
2013-2017	Area-based Childhood (ABC) Programme	National early-intervention-move to decrease child-poverty-ABC initiative 2013. 30m Euro Investment (DCYA and Atlantic Philanthropies) Executed by Pobal, Centre for Effective Services. (Pobal, 2015).
2014	Tusla: The Child Family Agency (2014)	Child and Family Protection Agency (Tusla) Cornerstone-child protection, early intervention legislation Child and Family Agency Act 2013. Inspects statics early childhood setting as per Regulations (2006) complemented by ed.-focused inspections, Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) (HSE, 2014; Hanafin, 2014).
2014	Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People, 2014-2020	Better Outcomes Brighter Futures aligns government commitments to children and young people against five national outcomes. The policy framework identifies five areas that have the potential to improve outcomes and transform the effectiveness of existing policies, services and resources in achieving these national outcomes. (DCEDIY, 2022)
2015	Better Start Mentoring Programme	Support Programmes-Quality-Services delivery. Collaboration; mentors (Early Years Specialists) and ECEC sector. Mentoring- Síolta (CECDE, 2006) and Aistear (NCCA, 2009) on-site training strategies. *Better Start is* fully funded/managed by DCYA hosted by Pobal (DCYA, 2015).
2015	ECCE Scheme	ECEC Scheme Expanded. Free pre-school- children aged 3-5 ½ (DCYA, 2019).
2015	Education-Focused Early Years Inspection Framework	*Good practice*-focused inspections. Síolta (CECDE, 2006) and Aistear (NCCA, 2009) are implicit throughout DES and DCYA active inspection early years services. Focus-Quality – *Context, Processes, Children's Experiences, Achievements, Management and Leadership* (DCYA, 2014; Early Childhood Ireland).

2015	Aistear-Síolta Practice guide	Aids practitioners make links between Síolta (CECDE, 2006) and Aistear (NCCA, 2009) to increase the quality of early childhood programmes. It is 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).
2015	The Access and Inclusion Model (AIM)	Support model for children with disabilities to access ECCE. Empowers pre-school practitioners to deliver inclusive pre-school experiences so eligible children can take part in the ECCE scheme and avail of quality education (DCYA, 2015b)
2016	Leadership for Inclusion Programme	Government-funded (NFQ Level 6) practitioners who assume the role of inclusion coordinator in ECCE service (DCYA, 2016) provide access to early childhood services for children with additional needs.
2016	National Síolta Aistear Initiative (NSAI)	Central support and coordination of Síolta (CECDE, 2006) and Aistear (NCCA, 2009) implementation is 'Overseen by a steering committee, chaired by DES, members from DCYA, DES and the NCCA. Two national coordinators to manage the initiative -*Síolta* Coordinator based in Early Years Education Policy Unit and *Aistear* Coordinator based in NCCA' (DES, 2018B:5).
2016	Child-Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016	Amendments; 3 principal areas: registration, management, and qualification-level (Early Years Services Regulations, 2016).
2016	Inclusion Co-ordinators Initiative	Dept. Children and Youth Affairs and Dept. Ed.and Skills-funded, Special-Purpose Award (NFQ Level 6) for 900 early years practitioners in the role *of inclusion coordinator,* EYE setting (DCYA, 2016a; ECI, 2016). Aim- help children with additional needs to access ECCE. (ibid, 2016). *Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Charter* was published (DCYA, 2016).
2016	Early Years Education Focused Inspection (EYEI) Guide	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. The fundamental principles underline the DES inspections, pre-and post-inspection procedures, and the DES inspection model.
2016	National Collaborative Forum for Early Years Care and Education Sector (Early Years Forum)	Early Years Forum for EYE professionals to discuss a range of topics. DCYA (2016) ease discussion/exchange ideas- between DCYA officials and ECEC key reps. (DCYA, 2016).
2018	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	Guidelines proved to develop 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 (DES, 2019) in 'clarifying the values, knowledge(s) and practices of a Level 7 or Level 8 ECEC graduate' (Fillis, 2018:2)
2018	Quality Regulatory Framework (QRF)	In collaboration with the DCYA, Tusla 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)
2018	Tusla – Child and Family Agency's Early Years Inspectorate Annual Report	Publication of the annual report for the Tusla inspectorate and early childhood services. Key statistics and findings on compliance with the Early Years Services and Regulations (2016) in early childhood services were detailed in the report (Tusla, 2018b)
2019-2028	A Whole Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children, and Their Families	National strategy for children/family outlined in the document with five key objectives; parental scheme (to provide parents more significant 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.
2021	Core Funding- Budget 2022	Budget 2022 announcement of additional funding of €183 million to include Early Learning and Care, International Protection Support and White Paper Transition, Tusla the Child & Family Agency and Youth Services, Equality and Inclusion, Disability, Mother and Baby Homes actions, Refugee and Migrant Integration; Traveller and Roma Initiatives and for the Adoption Authority, amongst others (DCEDIY, 2021h).
2022	Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth	Publication of The Economic Rationale for Government Investment in Early Learning and Care: a High-Level Overview, by the Research and Evaluation Unit (REU). Part 1 focuses on economic issues, part 2 focuses on government-funded schemes, and part 3 focuses on the primary literature on the beneficial impact of high-quality for children, their families and society (DCEDIY, 2022c)
2022	Core Funding Scheme Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School-Age Childcare providers	Publication of the Core Funding Ready Reckoner's online tool facilitates funding calculation from September 2022 (DCEDIY, 2022d).