

Locating Quality in Early Childhood Care and Education Discourse in Ireland: Pre-school and Infant Classrooms as a Crucible for Learning and Development

By

Mary Moloney (M. Ed)

Supervised by: Professor Jim Deegan

Director of Postgraduate Studies in Education,

Mary Immaculate College,

University of Limerick.

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List of Abbreviations

AB	Adult Behaviour
B.ED	Bachelor of Education
BERA	British Educational Research Association
CA	Child Activity
CCC	City and County Childcare Committees
CCSS	Community Childcare Subvention Scheme
CCS	Community Childcare Subvention
CE	Community Employment
CECDE	Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education
CEDAW	Convention against All Forms of Discrimination against Women
CSO	Central Statistics Office
DAP	Developmentally Appropriate Practice
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools
DHC	Department of Health and Children
DJELR	Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform
ECCE	Early Childhood Care and Education
ECS	Early Childcare Supplement
EEC	European Economic Community
EFA	Education for All
EHO	Environmental Health Officer
EOCP	Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme
EPPE	Effective Provision in Pre-school Education
ESF	European Structural Fund
EST	Ecological Systems Theory
EYEPU	Early Years Education Policy Unit
EYT	Early Year's Teacher (used to denote those working directly with children in pre-school settings)
FETAC	Further Education and Training Awards Council
GTM	Grounded theory methodology
HETAC	Higher Education and Awards Council

HS	Health and Safety
HSE	Health Service Executive
IEA/PPP	International Association for the Evaluation of Education for the Pre-primary Project
IMO	Irish Medical Association
INTO	Irish National Teacher's Organisation
LPP	Legitimate Peripheral Participation
MOT	Management of Time
NAEYC	National Association for the Education of Young Children
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NCIP	National Childcare Investment Programme
NCS	National Children's Strategy
NESF	National Economic and Social Forum
NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications
NVCC	National Voluntary Childcare Collaborative
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
OMC	Office of the Minister for Children
OMCYA	office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs
REPEY	Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years
ROI	Republic of Ireland
SCT	Socio-cultural theory
SPEEL	Study of Pedagogical Effectiveness in Early Learning
SPSS	Statistical Package for the Social Sciences
TCS	Typical case sampling
TF	Theoretical framework
UNESCO	United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UNICEF	United Nations International Childrens' Emergency Fund
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
ZPD	Zone of Proximal Development

Abstract

Locating Quality in Early Childhood Care and Education Discourse in Ireland: Pre-school and Infant Classrooms as a Crucible for Learning and Development.

This study examines the extent to which national and international early childhood policy becomes embedded as an everyday phenomenon in pre-school and primary contexts. Located within an ecological contextual framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), it fuses understandings of policy and practice from various perspectives into policy discourse and debate. It helps to highlight and prioritise issues for children and teachers with regard to quality in ECCE.

The study uses a combination of qualitative and quantitative methodologies. A total of 80 interviews and 6 focus group discussions were completed with early childhood students and teachers, infant teachers in primary schools, policy makers, and regulatory and support agencies. 150 hours of child observations were conducted in fifteen settings, 10 pre-school and 5 infant classes. Research instruments developed by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement specifically for the Pre-primary Project ((IEA/PPP, 1987-1997) were used for the quantitative component. These instruments were used to analyse the number and types of actions and interventions observed.

Data was analysed using grounded theory methodology. The study yielded compelling evidence that children's agency, a core tenet of early childhood policy, is bounded by legislative and structural deficiencies in everyday practice. Notwithstanding widespread agreement on the complexity of working with young children, the absence of a mandatory training requirement for the pre-school sector is particularly problematic. There is compelling evidence that the sector perpetuates a strong focus on school readiness. This is directly linked to misunderstandings about the purpose of ECCE as well as a deep rooted desire to redress issues associated with large class sizes and the rigid structure of primary school. Evidence demonstrates that preoccupation with complying with the minimum statutory requirements set out in the Childcare (pre-school services) Regulations, 2006 renders the National Quality Framework; Síolta and the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework; Aistear primarily inconsequential. This study contributes new epistemological insights to the area of inspectorate qualifications. Lack of pedagogical knowledge coupled with the top down approach of the pre-school inspectorate has created an adversarial relationship between the HSE and the sector. This study finds that the sector is characterised by sectoral fear and institutional power which does little to further the quest for quality.

Regardless of their levels of professional development, infant teachers are also restricted in their capacity to translate policy into practice. A key issue emerging from this study relates to the appropriateness of infant pedagogy as practiced in infant classrooms. Everyday practice is bounded by pressure to implement the primary school curriculum on the one hand and large class sizes on the other. The process of learning, a key aspect of the primary school curriculum is compromised by expediency. All of these factors preclude both pre-school and infant teachers from facilitating children's agency within individual setting contexts.

1. Context and Rationale

1.1 Introduction

The following interview extracts garnered during this study, provide a snapshot of attitudes towards the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) sector in Ireland. They reflect some of the many contentious issues that underpin ECCE provision. Moreover, they are embedded in quality discourse with which this thesis is concerned.

“I can’t ever see myself working on a day to day basis directly with children without being depressed; unmotivated, unenthused... you can’t keep doing something for years with absolutely no recognition for it. I want to work in New Zealand... I want to experience what it feels like to work in a country where you’re valued for working in the early years”.

BA (ECCE) graduate: commentary on working in the pre-school sector.

“They [children] go into school as these lovely, curious, little characters and within two years they are cloned into what the system wants”.

Infant teacher: commentary on primary school.

“They mightn’t know why they’re doing things for the children but they are meeting the children’s needs. They have children of their own at home... they love the children”.

ECCE manager: commentary on unqualified childcare staff.

“You’re not very good at anything but you have a kind heart; childcare would be ideal for you. That’s an example of who gets into childcare; the person who didn’t get through the school system very well”.

BA (ECCE) graduate: commentary on childcare staff.

“They do lots of little things to keep them [children] occupied; but the learning, the teaching - leave that to us”.

Infant teacher: commentary on pre-school.

“They won’t get half as much attention with only one teacher and thirty kids. The more preparation we do the better; their ABCs, their numbers, their letters.... we give them a leg up for primary school”.

ECCE staff: commentary on primary school.

Currently, in Ireland, pre-school children are cared for in a variety of settings by adults from a wide range of backgrounds. Within this context, pre-school provision is primarily associated with untrained women who love and care for children (Lobman and Ryan, 2007). Likewise, Carter and Doyle (2006) perceive it to be a practical matter related to women and children “...far from the towers of academia...” (ibid: 373). Such perspectives are rooted within two major paradigms. The first, associated with a traditional view of women, sees childcare as the remit of women in the home, while responsibility for children’s education

rests with the Department of Education and Science (DES), renamed the Department of Education and Skills in 2010. On the other hand, ECCE is a low status, poorly paid sector, predominantly characterised by unqualified or poorly trained women.

This stance, which polarizes education and care, is strongly linked to historical, social, economic and political factors. Following unprecedented economic growth from the mid 1990s, increasing numbers of women returned to the labour market. Consequently, the child's place in society changed dramatically; giving rise to the need for out of home childcare arrangements (Devine, Deegan and Lodge., 2004a; Government of Ireland, 1999 and 2000; Kennedy, 2001; National Economic and Social Forum (NESF), 2004 and 2005; Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), 2004b and 2006a; O'Sullivan, 2005; Purcell, 2001). In turn, this created new perspectives and altering priorities for the State in relation to services for children. As a result, Ireland has made a significant investment in the development of an ECCE infrastructure, perceived as being central to social and economic progression.

The period from 1999 to the present has been the most prolific period in the history of the Irish State in terms of developing ECCE policies, strategies, frameworks and initiatives that are central to quality discourse. Particularly salient to this study are the following:

- *Ready to Learn: The White Paper on Early Childhood Education* (DES, 1999a);
- *The Primary School Curriculum* (DES, 1999b);
- The Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP) 2000 - 2006;
- *The Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development in the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector* (Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform (DJELR), 2002);
- *Towards a Framework for Early Learning* (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), 2004);
- *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009);
- *Síolta: The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education* (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE), 2006);
- The National Childcare Investment Programme (NCIP) 2006-2010;
- *The Diversity and Equality Guidelines for Childcare Providers* (Office of the Minister for Children (OMC), 2006); and

- The revised *Child Care (Pre-school Services) (No 2) Regulations, 2006* (Department of Health and Children (DHC), 2006).

In addition, building on the *Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development in the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector* (DJELR, 2002) the DES published a background discussion paper entitled *Developing the workforce in the early childhood care and education sector: Background discussion paper* (DES, 2009a). Following an extensive consultation process throughout 2009, they further published *Developing the workforce in the early childhood care and education sector: Report on the findings from the consultative process* (DES, 2009b). In a historical move, the government introduced the Free Pre-school Year in ECCE Scheme 2010 (OMCYA, 2010), which for the first time in the history of Irish ECCE development is linked to staff qualifications and programme quality.

1.2 Rationale for Researching Infant Classes in Primary School

International definitions of early childhood locate the field as being concerned with the care and education of children between birth and six years. According to the Central Statistics Office (CSO) (2006), there are 418, 612 (10% of the population) children aged from birth to six years in Ireland. While the statutory school age in Ireland is six years, half of all four year olds and almost all five year olds attend primary school (DES, 2004; OECD, 2004a and 2006a). Accordingly, the DES (2004) believe that much of what is considered pre-school education in other countries, i.e., from four to six years, is provided through junior and senior infant classes in primary school. Thus, to limit research solely to pre-school children portrays an incomplete picture of the ECCE sector in the Irish context.

Significantly, the *Primary School Curriculum* (DES, 1999b) includes an infant curriculum for children aged four to six years. Moreover, two practice frameworks: *Síolta: the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education* (CECDE, 2006) and *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009) traverse pre-school and infant classes in primary school. Notwithstanding these initiatives, teaching approaches and methodologies are the subject of much debate and attention. The OECD (2004a) criticised a predominant focus on table-top activities and didactic methodologies in infant classes in Ireland.

Worryingly, in their report *Education at a Glance* (OECD, 2009a), they also state that teachers in Ireland use “structuring teaching practices much more than they do either student-oriented practices and enhanced activities...” (OECD, 2009a: 443). Commenting on formal education in general, Claxton (2008) maintains that it begins too soon. He argues that the

premature introduction of formal education may cause children to become weary towards it, which may result in their inability to reach their full potential. Thus, infant classrooms are appropriate fora in exploring concepts of quality in the ECCE sector.

1.3 Benefits of Early Childhood Care and Education

Children's early development lays the foundations for lifelong learning (Arnold *et al.*, 2007; Bennett and Neuman, 2004; Bowman, Donovan and Burns., 2001; CECDE, 2004a, 2004b and 2006; DES, 1999a and 1999b; Farquhar, 2003; Irwin *et al.*, 2007; Kagan and Neuman, 1998; Schweinhart, 2004; United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), 2006). Indeed, numerous researchers (Laevers, 2002; OECD, 2001; Schweinhart, Barnes and Weikart., 1993; Vandell and Wolfe, 2000; Waldfogel, 2002), argue that when they are accompanied by effective support measures (fiscal, social or employment based) for families and communities, programmes can help children to "...make a good start in life, irrespective of their background, and facilitate their social integration" (Bennett and Neuman, 2004: 424).

Clearly purporting the importance of ECCE, Barnett (2004) posits that its contribution to the healthy development and future well-being of economically and socially disadvantaged children has become a vital public issue with significant implications for families, business, private philanthropy and government alike. Likewise, researchers (Bennett, 2006; Bowman *et al.*, 2001; Campbell *et al.*, 2001) argue that ECCE programmes not only address the care, nurturing and education of young children, but that they also contribute to the resolution of complex social issues.

Economists assert that on the basis of available evidence, investment in early childhood is the most powerful investment a country can make. They add that returns over the life course multiply many times the size of the original investment (Irwin *et al.*, 2007). International longitudinal studies justify the relationship between investment in early childhood education and long term private and social outcomes (Cleveland *et al.*, 1998 and 2003, Heckman and Masterov, 2004; Schweinhart *et al.*, 1993; Schweinhart 2004). These include the Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) (1997 - 2004) and Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years (REPEY) (2002) studies in the United Kingdom; the High Scope Perry Preschool Study (1962 – 2002) in the United States; and the Competent Children Competent Learners study in New Zealand (1993 – 2013). Schweinhart (2004) published significant findings from the Perry Pre-school Evaluation, showing increased high school

graduation rates, better employment rates and higher earnings at age forty for those who attended the programme by comparison to those who did not.

Similarly, Carneiro and Heckman (2003) claim that for every US\$1 spent on a disadvantaged child in the early years, US\$7 could be saved in the longer-term; through reduced spending on remedial education, healthcare and crime. There is widespread agreement (Cleveland *et al.*, 1998 and 2003, Heckman and Masterov, 2004; Schweinhart *et al.*, 1993; Schweinhart 2004) that significant long-term productivity gains can be garnered for societies through appropriate investment in quality ECCE. Fundamentally, high-quality ECCE not only raises high school graduation rates and test scores, decades later, but it also leads to higher incomes and lower crime rates.

ECCE services are particularly beneficial for low income and disadvantaged families (Cleveland *et al.*, 1998 and 2003; Currie and Thomas, 1995; Hayes, 2007; NESF, 2001 and 2005; OECD, 2001 and 2006b; Schweinhart, 2004) with “...spill over effects on the future of children in their education and socialisation” (OECD, 2006a: 109). Well resourced ECCE can be a particularly significant protective factor in helping children, parents and other care givers to cope with adversity (Woodhead, 2006). The absence of protective factors, where children are deprived of ECCE opportunities for example, may increase the risks to young children’s well-being (Sylva *et al.*, 2004; Woodhead, 2006). Consequently, children’s experiences in the early years play a pivotal role in shaping later outcomes.

While a number of researchers (Dearing, Barry and Zaslow, 2006; Zigler, Kagan and Hall, 1996) argue that ECCE programmes cannot substantially address issues of structural poverty and institutional discrimination for children denoted as being at risk, the OECD (2001 and 2006a) assert that children who receive high-quality ECCE show better cognitive and language abilities than children in lower-quality settings. Similarly, Phillips *et al.* (2000) claim that high-quality ECCE is associated with a range of outcomes that all parents would wish for their child, including; co-operation with adults, the ability to initiate and sustain positive exchanges with peers, and early competence in math and reading (*ibid.*).

In Ireland, an incessant demand for ECCE services as a direct result of accelerated social change, coupled with a growing awareness of the benefits for children, served as a catalyst in under-pinning the emergence of a national vision for children. This vision is set out in the *National Children’s Strategy: Our Children - Their Lives* (DHC, 2000). At the core of this

Strategy, is a national goal proclaiming that children will receive quality supports and services to promote all aspects of their development (ibid.). In this context, services include schools and crèches (DHC, 2000: 44). Hence, the Strategy identifies quality as an underlying principle of all early childhood settings.

1.4 Defining Quality

Although quality did not feature in any predominant manner in Irish ECCE documentation prior to the late 1990s, there has been gradual emergence of the concept throughout the past two decades. It is now firmly embedded in ECCE lexicon. Quality has become the universal focus of provision and practice, as more and more voices are added to the discourse, e.g., policy makers, the Health Services Executive (HSE), pre-school teachers, ECCE managers, funding and support agencies, parents, researchers and educators. All of these stakeholders attempt to understand what quality means for them. It is a dynamic construct, and while there is no single definition of quality, it has been profoundly influenced by National and International perspectives.

According to Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, (1999), the concept of quality is primarily about defining “...through the specification of criteria, a generalisable standard against which a product can be judged with certainty” (ibid: 93). In the context of ECCE, it is a constructed quality that is “...subjective in nature and based on values, beliefs and interests, rather than on objective and universal reality” (Moss and Pence., 1994: 4). Thus, it is more accurate to speak about quality perspectives than about any universal construct of quality (ibid.). On the other hand, Dahlberg *et al.* (1999) assert that specified criteria are produced in one of two ways:

1. The application of disciplinary knowledge or practical experience, and
2. Through political, managerial or other types of authority.

Accordingly, they argue that defining quality is an “inherently exclusive didactic process, undertaken by a particular group whose power and claims to legitimacy enable them to determine what is to be understood as true or false” (ibid. 94).

This subjective approach places more emphasis on identifying quality as something tangible and visible, subject to the values and principles of those consigned to access it, than on the processes involved in developing and providing a quality ECCE service. There is little doubt that, in Ireland, a subjective approach to quality within the pre-school sector was underpinned by the *Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations, 1996* (Department of Health (DH),

1996). Consequently, the authority and legitimacy of the HSE who enforce the regulations, has judged and found quality lacking on the basis of specified criteria as determined by the DHC. Within this static quantifiable approach, process variables are a secondary rather than an essential feature of the quality audit.

Doubtless, it is relatively easy to identify and measure static variables by ticking the appropriate boxes relating to the specified criteria, e.g., adult/child ratios, numbers of toilets, sleeping facilities, access to an outdoor play area and so on. It is more difficult to quantify process variables; what is happening here and why, what teaching strategies are being utilised, how the learning environment is organised and why, what are the fundamental principles and values that underpin practice in different settings? Such in-depth analysis requires a broader knowledge and understanding of child development theory, pedagogy and practice from those conducting the audit, rather than simply relying on the application of limited health and safety criteria.

In the context of the pre-school sector, issues of quality have focused almost exclusively on structural characteristics in Ireland and, to a lesser extent, on staff qualifications and training. Such limited criteria, although important, are none-the-less insufficient; particularly when the weight of evidence points to the impact of pedagogical practices and relationships within settings as being critical to positive outcomes for children. However, the publication of the revised *Child Care (Pre-School Services) (No 2) Regulations, 2006* heralds a new approach to assessing quality. These revised regulations go further than any previous policy in placing children's learning at the centre of practice.

As previously mentioned, the pre-school sector represents one half of the care and education dyad (the other being infant classes in primary school). Few would argue with the pre-school or infant classroom as an appropriate locus in exploring concepts of quality as we move beyond macro policy to practices in settings. In this respect, Pianta (2006b) for example, argues that interactions between children and teachers are a primary mechanism through which classroom experiences affect development. Moreover, he posits that ways of measuring and improving quality rely on indicators such as teacher credentialing or class size - metrics that are disconnected from children's and teachers' actual classroom interactions. As noted by Bertram and Pascal (2002b: 241), "laying the foundations on which a child's life is to be built is increasingly acknowledged to be a skilful and very responsible task". In this

regard, policy documents point to the complexity of the teacher's role in both pre-school and primary contexts, and underpin the need for a highly trained and skilled workforce.

It is essential to examine the manner in which the parallel praxis of care and education is translated into practice within settings. Consequently, this study questions the extent to which the actions of the infant teacher are situated within the educational domain - independent of children's care needs. Equally, it questions the extent to which pre-school teachers fuse care and education. Bearing in mind Claxton's (2008) concern regarding the impact on children's learning trajectory when formal education begins too soon; it is imperative that practices in pre-school and infant classes are examined. Such an examination is central to determining the appropriateness of approaches to teaching and learning within both contexts where the foundations for lifelong learning are being laid.

1.5 Core Aspects of Quality

Commenting on the success of the High Scope Perry Pre-School Study, Schweinhart (2004) emphasises the importance of teacher characteristics, classroom conditions and regulable aspects of quality. He attributes the success of the High Scope Study largely to its teachers, who were: educationally qualified, trained in participatory education, helped children to participate in their education, and visited families regularly to discuss their child's development with them. Schweinhart further delineates four characteristics of ECCE programmes that are essential to predicting children's abilities later on. These are:

- Having free choice in participatory learning experiences
- Engaging in few whole-group activities
- Having many, varied materials available, and
- Having teachers with higher general levels of schooling (Schweinhart, 2004).

In an attempt to understand the constituents of quality, Galinsky (2006) undertook a review of both the High Scope Perry Preschool study, and the Carolina Abdecarian project. She found that each programme employed "...well-educated, well-trained, and well-compensated teachers – with resulting low turnover" (ibid: 2). There was a strong emphasis on continued professional development. The model of "adult learning was not one of pouring information into 'an empty vessel', but one of providing time and resources for teachers to reflect on what the children were learning and on their own teaching to find ways to improve their teaching practice" (ibid: 2). Galinsky concluded that the most critical aspect of quality was the relationship between teacher and child.

In their report *Developing Childcare in Ireland*, the DJELR (2003) recognised that quality is achieved through a combination of both structural and process elements. Among the various aspects required are:

“A good physical infrastructure; imaginative materials which meet the different needs of the children in the facility; a warm and caring team of childcare practitioners.... and a responsiveness to the individual needs of each child. Equally important are appropriate ratios of staff to children, the presence of qualified staff and the contentedness of staff with their working environment and structures” (DJELR, 2003: 29).

In a comprehensive review of the factors that affect quality, the OECD (2006b) identified seven aspects of quality which are summarised in table 1.

Table 1 Aspects of Quality

Aspect	Description
Orientation Quality	Government engagement through national legislation, regulation and policy initiatives.
Structural Quality	The overarching structures needed to ensure quality in early childhood programmes.
Educational Concept and Practice	The curriculum framework underpinning staff knowledge and the application of this in practice.
Interaction or Process Quality	Children’s day-to-day experiences.
Operational Quality	The management and leadership (including policy and process) that guide the way in which a service operates.
Child Outcome Quality or Performance Standards	The environment and interactions that improve the present and future well-being of children.
Standards Pertaining to Parent/Community Outreach and Involvement	Outreach to parent groups; efforts to improve the home learning environment, responsiveness to local cultural values and norms, and participation in integrated programming.

Source: OECD, 2006b: 129-130.

Although there is no absolute definition of quality, the concept clearly comprises both structural and process components. While attention to the structural aspects, such as adult/child ratios and health and safety are essential, the crucial variable in terms of achieving quality, relates to relationships between children and teachers. Equally obvious is the relationship between quality and trained teachers. As a result of international agreements (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), Barcelona agreement for example) together with irrefutable evidence from longitudinal studies and international

research concerning the importance of quality ECCE in shaping developmental outcomes, the State has assumed increasing responsibility for regulating, monitoring and improving the quality of such provision. In essence, Ireland has a multilayered approach to quality assurance that spans minimum quality standards, as set out in the revised *Child Care (Pre-School Services) (No 2) Regulations, 2006* (DHC, 2006), to *Síolta: The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education* (CECDE, 2006) that promotes continuous self-assessment and quality improvement within both pre-school and primary school settings.

1.6 Why Examine Quality?

The world of work impacts on the world of the family (Devine *et al.*, 2004; OECD, 2001, 2004a, 2006a and 2006b; DHC, 1999 and 2000; OMC, 2007). Consequently, increasing numbers of children are to be found in Irish ECCE settings, both at pre-school and infant level in primary school. UNESCO (2006) highlight the importance of ECCE in children's lives, stating that; in a context where "family and community structures are evolving and countries are going through rapid social and economic changes, early childhood programmes complement the role of parents and other carers in raising children during the early years" (ibid: 118).

This statement raises fundamental questions about the quality of ECCE. For, as noted by Blenkin and Kelly (1997), the benefits can only accrue when the provision is of high quality. Clearly pointing to the importance of process quality, Blenkin and Kelly (1997) hold that there are few advantages for children when they are cared for in "...institutions or other contexts in which their safety and security... are the sole or prime concern" (ibid: xi). However, Myers (2006) alludes to significant benefits as a result of participating in all ECCE programmes - even in circumstances where the programmes could not be classified as high quality. He claims that it would be inappropriate to over-emphasise quality in terms of outcomes, given that many factors and multiple environments can influence outcomes. Overall, it is difficult to determine the extent to which outcomes can be attributed to ECCE programmes and how much to families and communities. In counterpoint, Cleveland *et al.* (2006) and Lamb (1998), purport that the link between the quality of care and children's development is probably the most consistent finding to emerge from research over the past two decades.

In Ireland, "there has been little research in the area of quality, both in relation to quality indicators or the evaluation of the more subtle and intangible aspects of quality" (CECDE,

2003b: 141). Moreover, educational research tends to focus upon programmes of intervention targeted at children considered to be at risk of school failure (Hayes, 1995; Kellaghan; O’uallacháin and Morgan, 1995; O’Sullivan, 2005). Arguably, the dearth of research may be situated within a broader educational discourse, where historically, care and education operated exclusively of each other with little communication between the two.

The polarity of care and education is further emphasised by the manner in which education and childcare policy were prioritised, developed and implemented over the years. This divergence is borne out by findings from the background report on Ireland for the OECD’s *Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care* (2004a). Critically, this report noted that regardless of repeated statements in policy documents highlighting the importance and interconnectedness of care and education, there continues to be a clear distinction between the two concepts. The OECD claims that pre-school services are particularly focused on care, whereas the emphasis in primary schools is entirely on education with little evidence of combining the two. They attribute this preference to a lack of understanding at policy-making level about how care and education overlap.

The publication of *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009) and *Síolta* (CECDE, 2006) may potentially reduce the gap between care and education creating a “seamless transition” between the two (DES, 1999a: 4). Significantly, these initiatives build upon the national vision for children embedded within the *National Children’s Strategy* (DHC, 2000). Both are predicated on an approach to ECCE that takes account of learning within informal and formal environments, traversing school entry and infant classes in primary school.

In this regard, the OECD (2004a, 2004b and 2006a) alludes to difficulties faced by children when confronted by different expectations and daily routines. Hence, they suggest that consideration must be given to transition challenges faced by children as they enter school. Similarly, in highlighting the link between transitions and quality experiences for children, the CECDE (2006) and the NCCA (2004) emphasise the need for liaison within and between settings. Thus, in examining the concept of quality, a key consideration is the extent to which both sectors perceive and understand their respective roles in supporting the child’s transition between environments.

The Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (OMCYA) suggests that *Síolta* has the potential to “reinforce implementation of policy with regard to the generation of quality

childcare places” (OMCYA, 2007: vi). Reiterating its importance, the OMCYA further highlights the value of *Síolta* as a “mechanism to improve the quality of ECCE... [that] will be dependent on adherence to the principles and standards set down” (ibid: vi). Irrespective of this endorsement, the government, in a series of rigorous cutbacks, announced a decision in September 2008 to withdraw funding to the CECDE resulting in the closure of the centre in November 2008.

In response to its closure, the CECDE Board of Management issued a statement, which specified that its closure was a “significant loss of expertise and capacity to this important area of policy development and implementation and signals a disengagement from Government commitments to the early childhood sector” (CECDE, 2008). The impact of this decision on the ongoing development of quality within ECCE remains to be seen.

1.7 Accountability

Interwoven in quality discourse is the concept of accountability, resulting from public awareness and the needs and rights of parents as consumers, together with the demands of policy makers and funders. In general, parents are more highly educated and articulate than ever before, with greater expectations for their children’s education. Therefore, the concept of accountability is increasingly to the forefront of discussion and debate concerning children’s care and education.

Commenting on increasing accountability pressures on primary school teachers; the Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO, 2009: 4), states that they are accountable to “themselves, to their colleagues, to their pupils, to the parents of their pupils and to the State for their work as teachers in schools”. Within the primary school sector, accountability discourse is fuelled by the publication of inspectors’ reports on schools, discussion of league tables, and early school leaving. Whereas, in the pre-school sector, media reports detailing deficiencies in care and closure of services for non-compliance with the Childcare regulations drive debate and scrutiny. Moreover, pre-school and infant teachers are accountable to a broad range of stakeholders including the DES, the HSE, school Boards of Management and the OMCYA. As a result, of these competing demands, teachers in both sectors must understand and question what they are about. Crucially, they must understand who they are in relation to the child. They must understand what the child is about and how the child is constructed within the pre-school and infant class context. Such understandings determine pedagogical approaches and practices.

These issues are crucial to understanding children, ensuring that their lives will be better understood, that quality supports and services will be developed and will be accessed by all children (DHC, 2000). When one considers the significant financial investment in ECCE, through two successive investment programmes (the EOCP, 2000-2006 and the NCIP, 2006-2010) and the introduction of the Free Pre-School Year in ECCE Scheme 2010 (which will cost the exchequer €170m per annum); it is little wonder that the twin concepts of quality and accountability feature prominently in the ECCE field and warrant attention.

1.8 Structure of Thesis

This thesis is comprised of 7 Chapters. Chapter 1 provides an overview of the issues associated with quality in ECCE as well as outlining the benefits for children of participation in quality programmes. It provides the rationale for exploring quality in both pre-school and infant class contexts as well as delineating the core aspects of quality at national and international level. The remainder of Chapter 1 outlines the structure of this thesis.

Chapter 2: outlines the theoretical framework and explains how Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory is applied to the study. It explains how both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods are integrated within the study forming a combined, though mainly qualitative design for the empirical inquiry. The issues of sampling, reliability and validity are discussed in detail. This chapter describes how data was analysed using grounded theory methodology (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Following a comprehensive exploration of the concept of reflexivity, it concludes by highlighting the significance of the study.

The literature review is presented through Chapters 3, 4 and 5. **Chapter 3** is set against the backdrop of social, political, economic and historical trajectories. It examines how children's agency is constructed, understood, supported and progressed through the delineation of a myriad of policy initiatives. Using Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory as a policy overlay, Chapter 3 highlights the significance of the Macro system on children's experiences of early education and care. Chapter 3 focuses primarily on orientation quality (OCDE, 2006a) which determines the focus of ECCE policy in Ireland. In exploring policy, it becomes clear that while Ireland has long since moved away from the "family-responsibility" paradigm (Jensen, 2004), there is a reluctance to embrace what Oik (2009: 46) refers to as the "investing-in-children" paradigm.

Chapter 4: is divided into a series of subsections each of which examines one aspect of quality. Following an exploration of the concept of pedagogy, Chapter 4 examines “Educational concept and practice” (OECD, 2006: 129). It discusses the impact of child development on teachers’ philosophies of teaching and working with children. Although the study is located within a particular socio-cultural context, Chapter 4 examines Piaget’s legacy to the ECCE field before moving on to examine the contribution of Vygotsky and Rogoff, whose respective theories influence how we conceptualise childhood, understand childhood, and consequently respond to children’s needs within settings. Parental involvement in children’s education is a core indicator of quality (DJELR, 2003; Galinsky, 2006; Schweinhart, 2004). However, in exploring the construct of parental involvement, Chapter 4 questions the extent to which parents are, or can be included in children’s care and education in pre-school and primary school contexts. Chapter 4 further examines child outcome/performance standards and interactions/process quality. It compares and contrasts the social pedagogic approach to children’s care and education characteristic of the Nordic countries, and the liberal welfare approach common to Ireland. Thus, it examines the school readiness approach to pre-school education, which is closely linked to conceptions of childhood and in turn orientation quality.

Chapter 5: begins with an examination of professional identity within the ECCE sector. It looks at the dualism between pedagogic content-knowledge and subject-knowledge in planning and implementing early childhood curricula. Anderson’s (2001) revised taxonomy of educational objectives is applied as a methodological tool to delineate the roles and responsibilities of the ECCE teacher. This chapter concludes with a discussion of assessment and evaluation in ECCE and the role of reflective practice in professional development.

Chapter 6: presents the research findings, analyses and discussion. As with the literature review, it comprises a series of sub-sections, each of which examines aspects of the research findings. Consequently, **Section 1** explores the vision for ECCE as espoused at the macro level. It draws attention to the manner in which belief in a national vision for ECCE diminishes, the nearer one gets to the micro environments of pre-school and infant classes. Findings point to an unhealthy dissonance between the HSE and childcare providers. This is associated with the weak capacity of those working in the pre-school sector on the one hand, and the inadequate qualification levels of the pre-school inspectorate on the other.

Section 2 concentrates on the learning environment and parental involvement. It highlights the similarities and differences between pre-school and infant teachers regarding the purpose and use of the learning environment. Although parents were cited as the “...other half of the equation” in terms of children’s care and education, findings show a striking contrast in parental interaction within individual contexts. Notwithstanding a deep rooted desire by both sectors to work with parents, findings show that there is a variety of factors that compromise pre-school and infant teachers’ abilities to engage meaningfully with parents.

Section 3 is concerned with approaches to teaching and learning, and their practical application within individual contexts. It exposes tensions between the ideologies espoused to and the reality of practice within settings. Findings indicate that in spite of a child centred positioning in policy that teacher-led didactic methodologies prevail within both contexts.

Section 4 examines children’s agency within settings and questions the extent to which they are at the centre of practice in individual micro contexts. Findings suggest that pre-school and infant teacher ideology is compromised by a myriad of factors that hinder the process of learning, thus, relegating children’s agency to chance occurrence within both domains.

Section 5 focuses upon attitudes towards training and continual professional development. Findings show that professional identity is contentious and problematic. At pre-school level, this was predominantly associated with the lack of a mandatory training requirement. There is compelling evidence that highly trained ECCE graduates are being lost to the sector. At primary school level, while teachers (per se) enjoy a relatively high social status, their professional identity as infant teachers is compromised within individual school settings. Teachers believe that this is related to a perception that the infant class is analogous to ‘playschool.

Chapter 7 proposes a number of recommendations based on the research findings. Recommendations are interrelated and action-based. They relate to a range of core areas; the pre-school inspection teams, structural mechanisms, mandatory training, practice frameworks, teaching practice and work placements, cross-sectoral communication, class sizes and further research. These recommendations are directed towards macro, meso and micro contexts.

2. Research Design and Methodology

2.1 Introduction

This Chapter provides the rationale for, and describes the research design and methodologies utilised in the study. Since its ratification of the UNCRC (United Nations, 1989) in 1992, Ireland has developed a series of innovative policies¹ directed towards developing a comprehensive ECCE infrastructure. The extent to which these policies affect daily practice within the micro environments of pre-school and infant classrooms lies at the core of this study. Accordingly, the research is guided by the following key question: How does national and international early childhood policy become embedded as an everyday occurrence in pre-school and primary contexts? The study seeks to examine how policy has impacted upon the quality of ECCE provision in Ireland?

It is located within a socio-cultural context. Socio-cultural theory proposes that both context and relationships (especially amongst more experienced members within a culture) are integral to the child's development and enculturation into their communities (Fleer, 1995; Graue and Walsh, 1998; Rogoff, 1998 & 2003; Vygotsky, 1978). Within this frame, children are seen as social actors that shape and are shaped by their circumstances.

While acknowledging the indifference with which socio-cultural theory can be treated, Schaller (2002: 20) argues that it provides a framework for "bold speculative theorising that breaks free of empirical constraints". Moreover, it has the potential to inspire researchers to address "big questions" that, heretofore, lay outside the realm of social psychological investigation (Ibid.). Likewise, Gergen (1985: 266) claims that socio-cultural theory is primarily concerned with "explicating the processes by which people come to describe, explain or otherwise account for the world in which they live".

In this study, socio-cultural theory enabled the researcher to address the "big questions". Thus, while guided by the question - How does national and international early childhood

¹ *Ready to Learn: The White Paper on Early Childhood Education* (DES, 1999a); the *Primary School Curriculum* (DES, 1999b); *The National Children's Strategy: Our Children – Their Lives* (DHC, 2000); the *Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development in the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector* (DJELR, 2002); *Towards a Framework for Early Learning* (NCCA, 2004); *Siolta: The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education* (CECDE, 2006); the *Diversity and Equality Guidelines for Childcare Providers* (OMC, 2006); the revised *Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations, 2006* (DHC, 2006); *Aistear: The Early Years Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009); the *Free Pre-School Year in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Scheme* (OMCYA, 2010).

policy become embedded as an everyday occurrence in pre-school and primary contexts? The research is concerned in the first instance with ‘orientation’ quality (OCED, 2006a). Thus, it seeks to establish:

- What is the child’s place in society in Ireland?
- What is the role of ECCE in Ireland?
- Is ECCE early education? Or, is it primarily perceived as a custodial service for children of working parents?

According to Burr (2003) and Gergen (1978 and 1985), all knowledge is historically and culturally specific. Socio-cultural theory facilitates the discovery of “fresh truths about human cognition, human culture and human nature” (Schaller, 2002: 202). Rather than studying the individual, it is vital to consider social, political and economic domains to get a better understanding of psychology and social life.

2.2 Key Considerations

The rationale for methodological considerations comes to the fore in the context of the research design phase when wrestling with framing researchable questions (Brannen, 2005). The types of questions posed, influence the choice of research method. Increasingly, a complexity of methods is required (Brannen, 2005; Burke-Johnson *et al.*, 2008). Indeed, research methods should follow the research question in a way that offers the best chance to garner helpful answers (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

This research is concerned with four primary and interrelated issues:

1. Constructions of childhood as delineated through ECCE policy,
2. Understandings and perceptions of quality ECCE,
3. Understandings of pedagogy, and
4. Approaches to pedagogical practices within ECCE settings.

The overarching objective is to determine the extent to which macro policy translates into practice at the micro level within particular setting contexts. Thus, the objective is to determine how policy impacts upon the quality of ECCE provision in Ireland. The study aims to:

1. Examine policy developments in Ireland from the mid 1990s to 2010 - to delineate a construction of childhood. This examination is intended to highlight the vision that

drives approaches to ECCE, as well as the importance afforded to young children in society both at macro and micro levels.

2. Undertake a series of interviews to explore pre-school and infant teacher knowledge and understandings of policy, and thus, examine the ways in which policy impacts on understandings and subsequent practices within settings.
3. Conduct child observations to examine children's experiences of ECCE, particularly in terms of their active involvement within settings.
4. Undertake a further series of interviews to examine perceptions of quality from the perspective of a broad range of key stakeholders: policy makers, the Health Services Executive, the City and County Childcare Committees, the National Voluntary Childcare Collaborative, pre-school and infant teachers, as well as ECCE students and graduates across a spectrum of training programmes.

In order to address these areas as comprehensively as possible, the study combines qualitative and quantitative methodologies. It is underpinned by a predominantly qualitative approach, with a quantitative component. Qualitative enquiry was utilised to explore constructions of childhood; pedagogical perspectives; ECCE practices; and children's experiences within pre-school and infant classrooms. As noted by Greene and Hill (2005), the "richness of an individual's life" is to be found in how "it is lived, in the person's experiences and reactions to the world" (pg. 4). On the other hand, the quantitative component (based on time-sampling procedures) produced a count of both children's and adults' behaviours and the adult's proposal of activities within participating settings. These counts, expressed as percentages of the total observations made, provide "a quantitative measure of several aspects of quality [in settings]" (Hayes, Montie and Claxton, 2002: 234).

2.3 Rationale for Research Design

Qualitative research uses a naturalistic approach to understand phenomena in context-specific settings i.e., "real-world settings" (Merriman, 1998: 5). Data is not manipulated but allowed to "unfold naturally" (Patton, 2002: 39). Qualitative research is located within an interpretive frame where the researcher plays a proactive role, becoming immersed in the life of participating settings and where complex human activities including observations and interviews predominate. Thus, the researcher is the instrument through whom data are mediated, rather than through "some inanimate inventory, questionnaire or computer" (Merriman, 1998: 7). The researcher's direct involvement is central to qualitative research as

she attempts to: process information; respond sensitively to research participants; adapt the research design as data is analysed and interpreted and as new issues and questions emerge.

Hammersley (2000) outlines five advantages of qualitative research that are relevant to this study:

1. Appreciative capacity: where people's behaviour is understood as making sense within the context in which it occurs. In this study, the context includes how the participants: (i) perceive the learning environment, and (ii) perceive themselves as part of that environment.
2. Designatory capacity: the researcher's ability to record and present data as clearly as possible. In this respect, observations of practice enabled the researcher to: become immersed in the activities of the settings; to be as close as possible to the participants; and hence, to record and present data as clearly as possible.
3. Reflective capacity: reflection that occurs before, during and after the research. Later in this chapter, the "unconscious, I" is discussed, where the researcher engages in ongoing internal dialogue - reflecting upon, analysing and learning from emerging issues as the study progresses.
4. Corrective capacity: where the research methodology informs and shapes existing perceptions of practitioners and policy makers at macro and micro levels in education. There is little to be gained from undertaking research if it does not result in some benefit to society. Ireland is at a critical juncture in the development of a comprehensive childcare infrastructure, as evidenced through the introduction of the revised *Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations, (no 2) 2006*, the Free Pre-School Year in ECCE Scheme, 2010 and the publication of a national quality framework and an early childhood curriculum framework. This study sheds light on policy and practice in pre-school and infant class contexts. It adds to the existing knowledge base, thus, influencing practice into the future.
5. Relevance to policy making and practice - a critical consideration in this study. Hammersley (2005) points to the capacity of qualitative research to provide valuable information to improve educational policies and practice. The research methodology used in this study is designed to develop "bottom up" abstractions and observations. Qualitative research provides a platform to engage with those working directly with children, thus affording unique insights into children's lived experiences within ECCE settings.

2.3.1 Mixed Methods

Although qualitative research produces rich descriptions that tap into real-life experiences, its interpretative nature offers little by way of identifying tangible indicators of quality. In order to determine the indicators of quality in ECCE provision, a pragmatic decision was taken to enhance and expand the qualitative enquiry by utilising a quantitative research instrument during the data collection period. Brannen (2008: 8) suggests that practical rationality will “more readily embrace” a combination of methods if the research questions and the practicalities of the research require it. Johnson (2008) recommends openness to, understanding of, and use of multiple standpoints and strategies for learning about our world. Moreover, he argues that quantitative and qualitative methods are not two basic beliefs on a continuum; they are not “monoliths, with no interparadigmatic variation” (ibid: 206). Accordingly, Johnson asserts that dichotomising research into discrete paradigms is unhelpful. Rather, listening and learning from the “tensions produced by poles can advance our thinking” (ibid: 204). Sometimes, an advance will come “via multiple perspectives... sometimes through effective integration of ways of looking that better answer our questions and advance our knowledge (ibid: 204).

Historically, staunch proponents of qualitative research, Lincoln and Guba (2005), recognise that it is possible to combine both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. Likewise, Tashakkori and Creswell (2008) agree that both approaches may be used during data collection. This is especially so if the “models share axiomatic elements that are similar, or that resonate strongly between them” (Lincoln and Guba, 2005: 201). In this study, qualitative data was concerned with attitudes, opinions and experiences, whereas the quantitative component was directed towards exploring counts of activity in order to create a complete understanding of both the static and dynamic aspects of quality.

Consequently, research instruments developed by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement Pre-Primary Project (IEA/PPP, 1987-1997) were used. Specifically, the Management of Time (MOT), Child Activity (CA) and Adult Behaviour (AB) observation tools were used (see Appendix A). Hayes *et al.* (2002) highlight a primary goal of the IEA/PPP instruments in expanding the search for elements that contribute to the quality of ECCE by assessing both the static and dynamic elements of settings. The use of both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods ensured that data, which otherwise would not be obtained through qualitative methods was gathered. The

combination of research methods helped to broaden the dimensions and scope of the research. In this way, a complete picture of children's experiences and adult behaviour was obtained.

The IEA instruments were central to analysing the number and types of actions and interventions observed. Their use contributed to better understandings of time usage, accessibility of activities, and children's experiences within pre-school and primary contexts. The use of mixed research methods allows for the development of "more complete and full portraits of our social world through the use of multiple perspectives and lenses" allowing for an understanding of "greater diversity of values, stances and positions" (Somekh and Lewin, 2005: 275).

2.4 Research Reliability and Validity

Denzin (1989) and Patton (1990), who were among the first researchers to develop the concept of triangulation, advise that by combining multiple data collection and analysis sources and multiple theories and perspectives, researchers can hope to overcome the inherent bias that comes from single-methods, single-observer, and single-theory studies. A synthesis of the various typologies arising from reviews of mixed- method research identifies five major rationales:

1. Triangulation: seeking convergence and corroboration of results from different methods and designs studying the same phenomenon.
2. Complementarity: seeking elaboration, enhancement, illustration, and clarification of the results from one method with results from the other method.
3. Initiation: discovering paradoxes and contradictions that lead to re-framing the research question.
4. Development: using the findings from one method to help inform the other method.
5. Expansion: seeking to expand the breadth and scope of research by using different methods for different components (Denscombe, 2008; Greene *et al.*, 1989; Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

Fundamentally, the concept of triangulation is about rigour, trustworthiness and reliability. It is a "validity procedure where researchers search for convergence among multiple and different sources of information to form themes or categories in a story" (Creswell and Miller, 2000: 126). As noted by Patton (2002), the overarching purpose of triangulation is to check for consistency rather than achieving the same result using multiple data sources. The use of mixed-methods research in this study was directed towards:

1. Broadening the breadth and scope of the study by simultaneously gathering both qualitative and quantitative data. In this way, the static and dynamic aspects of quality were explored so that a complete picture of children's experiences could be constructed.
2. Improving the accuracy of data.
3. Avoiding biases that are intrinsic to single-method approaches.

In summary, this approach helped to monitor the “human instrument” (Merriman, 1998; Patton, 2002) and augment the interpretation and usefulness of data. The IEA (1992) recommend that a reliability rate of 80% must be achieved on each of the observation tools. With the help of a research assistant, the MOT, CA and AB observations tools were piloted in one of the participating pre-schools in September 2008. This pilot phase was conducted over a two-week period, on six different days, at the end of which a reliability rate of 90% was achieved.

2.5 Theoretical Framework

Sekaran (2000) describes a theoretical framework as a conceptual model of how one theorizes or makes logical sense of the relationship between various factors identified as being important to a problem. It illuminates the breadth and depth of the study, directs the research objectives, culminating in the big picture. A critical consideration in this study was the support framework and structures that enable pre-school and infant teachers to support children's development in accordance with policy objectives.

As detailed in Chapter 4, Ireland continues to rank among the lowest investors in ECCE (NESF, 2008: 89). Taking all of these factors into account, and placing the child's experience at the centre of the study, an ecological-contextual approach was used. In keeping with the socio-cultural nature of the study, the ecological contextual approach “pays as much attention to how children behave in relation to others and their environment, as it does to cataloguing their activities and the characteristics of their environment” (Tudge and Hogan, 2005: 103). It facilitated the examination of multiple contexts while also enabling the researcher to study phenomena in context.

There are many layers of influence on children's and adults' experiences of ECCE - ranging from the macro; the structural, political and ideological; through to individual setting contexts. In this respect, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory identifies a

range of systems depicted as a set of concentric circles, within and between which the child develops. Within this construct, the child is located in a “set of nested structures” each inside the next like a “set of Russian dolls” (ibid: 3).

This model comprises the innermost micro-level; representing the immediate environment in which the child is involved. This level “stands as the child’s venue for initially learning about the world” (Swick and Williams, 2006: 372). Surrounding this is the meso-level; consisting of relations between two or more such immediate settings - home, school, or pre-school for instance. The power of the meso-level is that it helps to connect two or more systems in which the child, parent and family live.

Surrounding this is the exo-level; made up of larger social systems where the child does not participate directly - such as parental employment. At this level, a child may physically be present in the ECCE setting, while psychologically she is present in the parent’s place of work. Although experienced vicariously, exosystems have a direct impact on those involved: child, parent, teacher (Swick *et al.*, 2006). Enveloping the whole system is a more abstract macro-level; consisting of cultural values, laws, customs and resources, serving as a blueprint for the organisation of the immediate settings.

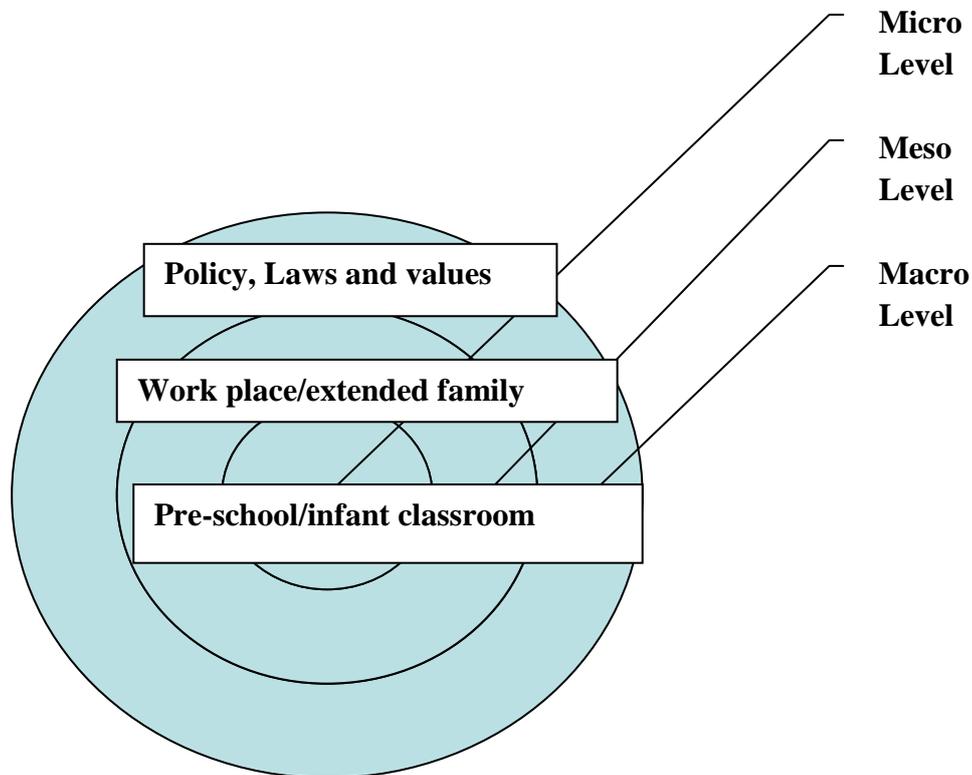
In adopting an ecological perspective, it is recognised that ECCE settings are institutions that are part of, but also reflect the larger social system. Accordingly, young children’s learning and development occurs within 3 primary social institutions - the family, the early childhood setting and the school. Each institution is located in a city, town, rural area, community or a neighbourhood, and each is influenced by public policy, societal values, beliefs and priorities as well as cultural practices. There are complex interactions between each of these variables that impact considerably on children’s experiences within settings. Changes within any system result in changes to the child’s experiences and consequent development.

Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998) stress the importance of considering individuals; both in their immediate environment and also within the larger environmental system. Critically, relationships between children and parents; children and teachers; and parents and teachers influence the child’s development.

Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) model was used to analyse ECCE within three ecological contexts: (i) policy (macrosystem), (ii) parental involvement and teacher preparation/training (exosystem), and (iii) classroom environment and children’s experiences (microsystem).

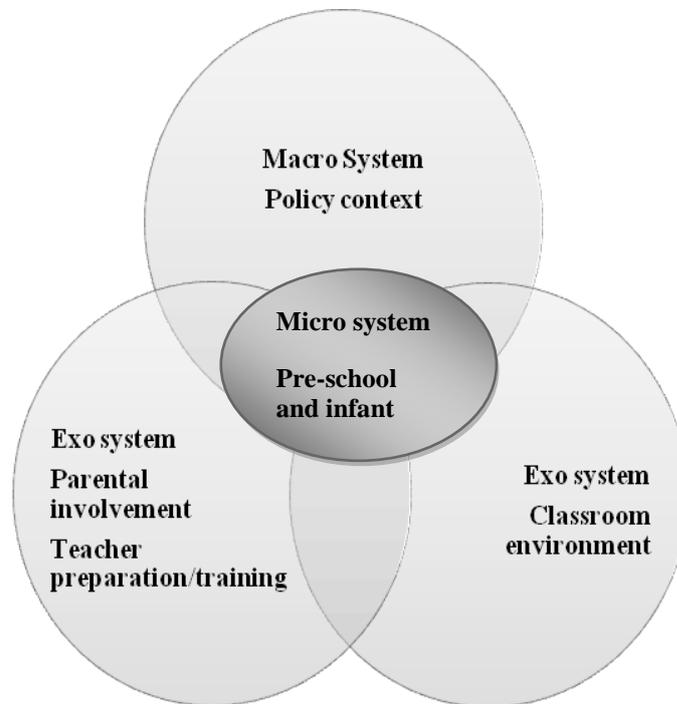
Another way of looking at the framework is in terms of a ‘top down’ (policy directives) and ‘bottom up’ (everyday practices) approach and to determine the level of convergence between the two. This model provided a valuable framework for understanding the interconnectedness between the provision of ECCE; teacher education and professional development; availability of resources; perceived aspects of quality from a variety of perspectives; and crucially, children’s experiences. The ecological framework draws attention to the interpersonal and situational aspects of ECCE. It places a focus on children engaged in authentic tasks, in natural settings, and facilitate inquiry into the interconnectedness of each layer that impacts on the child’s environment such as policy, practice and supports.

Figure 1 Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Framework



While the concentric circles are static in nature, Bronfenbrenner (1979: 22) holds that “bi-directional influences” between each system impact on the child’s development

Figure 2 Applications of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Framework to the Research Process



This amended model depicts the interconnectedness of each level and the convergence on the micro-system where the child experiences day-to-day life in the pre-school and infant classroom. This framework was used to:

- 1 Learn about children's lives and experiences, particularly their agency within individual contexts by observing them within particular setting contexts.
- 2 Examine classroom practice (including interactions, time use and teaching and learning strategies) by observing and utilising the IEA/PPP instruments.
- 3 Explore teacher preparation and professional development, by interviewing pre-school and infant teachers.
- 4 Analyse policy at national (macro) level, and its implementation at local (micro) level through a combination of observations and interviews.
- 5 Explore the intersection of home, pre-school, primary school and policy environments on children's experiences within their micro-environments by interviewing a wide range of stakeholders.
- 6 Connect observations to the specifics of the backdrop against which they occurred in the context of policy and practice by using grounded theory methodology to analyse data.

The ability to make connections is essential, from an ecological perspective. Thus, it was necessary to examine the extent to which teachers: initiated activities; influenced children's choices; encouraged or discouraged participation in activities; offered support; and encouraged parental involvement. Equally significant was the manner in which the bi-directionality of policy and practice impacted upon the activities and daily structures of the settings studied.

Chapter 3 uses ecological systems theory to explore a myriad of policies developed since 1999 to support the development of the ECCE infrastructure in Ireland. As previously discussed, Bronfenbrenner attached the greatest significance to interactions within the child's microsystem: family, classroom, peers and neighbourhood, as the primary unit around the child that influences his/her development. The macro-system, comprising the society and culture within which children are raised, is the underlying influence of all systems. Implicit within Bronfenbrenner's theory is that the whole system is surrounded by energy fields, through which bi-directional influences impact upon and shape children's experiences at the micro-level. Accordingly, Bronfenbrenner's model is used as a policy over-lay in chapter four to determine the impact of the macrosystem on the other levels within the overall ecological system.

2.6 Research Objectives

This study examines pedagogical perspectives and practices within ECCE settings. It considers both the effects of policy on every-day practices within settings, and the ability of the sector to deliver upon the myriad of policy objectives and children's experiences. The study is concerned with three primary units of analysis, as illustrated in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3 Primary Units of Analysis



2.6.1 Constructions of Childhood

Many researchers believe that, in Western thought and practice, the image of the child as a miniature adult to be trained has robustly survived. Children are seen as units of human resources - the future guarantor of pensions, social values, nationhood and other ideologies (Lewis and Lindsay, 2000; Qvortrup, 2009). Dahlberg *et al.* (1999) argue that early childhood institutions and pedagogical practices for children are constituted by dominant discourses in society embodying “thoughts, conceptions and ethics which prevail at a given moment in a given society” (ibid: 62). Indeed, Moss and Petrie (1997) advocate for a new discourse on the relationships between children, parents and society, within an alternative intellectual and ideological frame. Such a discourse should be based upon the principles and values that concern children, childhood, parents and society.

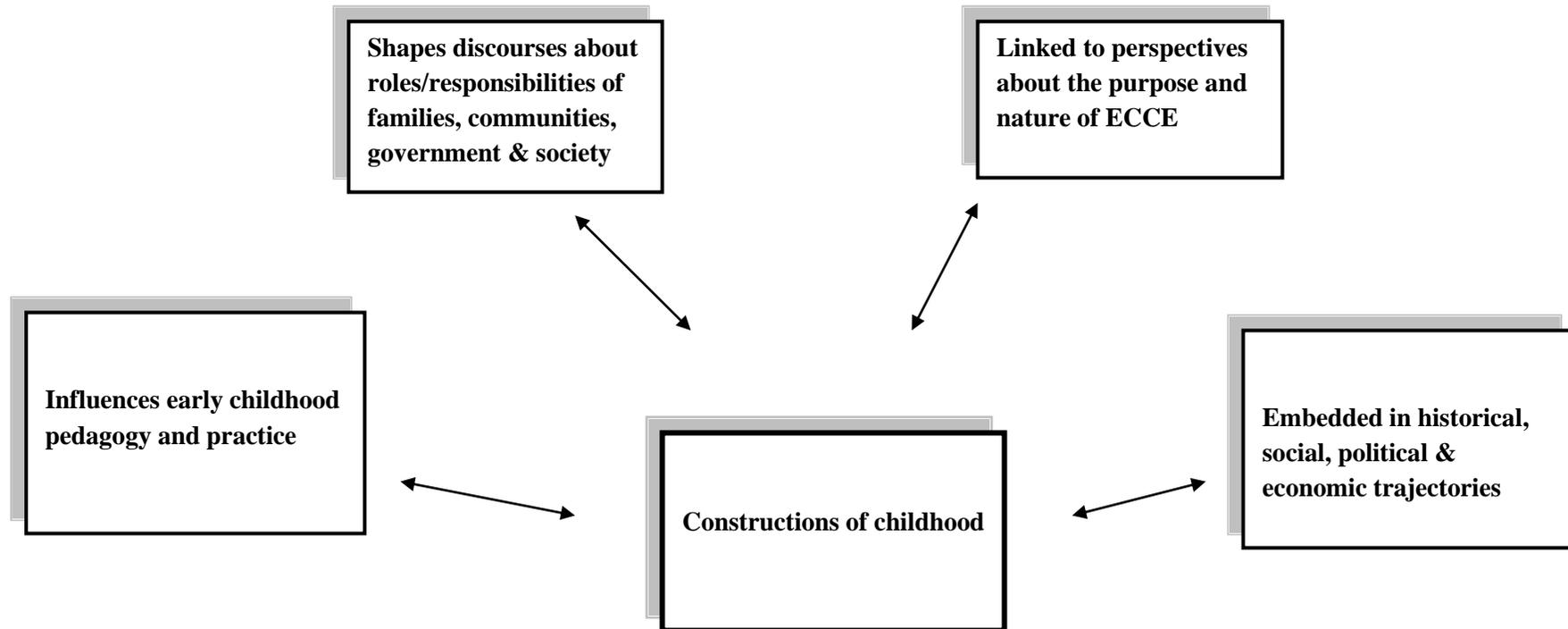
Constructions of childhood are embedded within ‘orientation’ quality (OECD, 2006a), where they fulfill a dual purpose. At one end of a continuum, they influence early childhood pedagogy and policy and are linked to perspectives about the purpose and nature of ECCE. At the other end, they shape discourses about the roles and responsibilities of families, communities, government and society. They are essential to discourses that affect ECCE policy as well as approaches to pedagogical practices within settings (Table 2). In analysing these constructions, we begin to understand the manner in which they are enmeshed in a myriad of social, political, historical and economic trajectories.

This frame gives rise to a number of questions that are salient at both macro- and micro-levels and that permeate the literature review in chapters 3, 4 and 5.

Table 2 Research Questions: Orientation Quality

Aspect of Quality	Research Questions
Orientation Quality	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ How are children constructed within ECCE policy?▪ What are the prevailing principles and values that underpin the provision of ECCE services in contemporary society?▪ What is the dominant discourse in Ireland concerning children, parents and society?

Figure 4 Connections between Constructions of Childhood and ECCE Discourse and Pedagogical Practices



2.6.2 Impact of Policy on Pedagogical Perspectives and Practices

While the period from the mid 1990s to 2010 represents a period of considerable change in societal and government approaches to ECCE, it also represents a unique opportunity in the development of child policy and infrastructure, leaving a rich legacy of policy initiatives.

Consequently, the focus of discourse is increasingly child-centered with an emerging child-as-agent theme taking precedence in policy rhetoric. Although analysis of policy places the child at the centre, a core consideration is whether the child-at-centre concept has become embedded in practice within settings. Table 3 presents the research questions in relation to the impact of policy on pedagogical perspectives and practices.

Table 3 Research Questions: Educational Concept and Practice

Aspect of Quality	Interview Question
Educational Concept and Practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To what extent are pre-school/infant teachers aware of policy developments? ▪ What is their understanding of ECCE policy? ▪ What is their understanding of ECCE quality? ▪ How do pre-school/infant teachers' understandings of policy impact on their perceptions of themselves as professionals? ▪ What is their understanding of the child-as-agent concept? ▪ In what way does the lack of a mandatory training requirement affect the provision of services? ▪ In what way does higher-level training make a difference to the quality of ECCE provision?
Operational Quality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What are the key issues for pre-school/infant teachers in the provision of quality ECCE?
Child Outcome Quality or Performance Standards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ How do pre-school/infant teachers promote children's learning in settings?

2.6.3 Children’s Experiences within Individual Settings

Article 12 of the UNCRC (United Nations, 1989) holds much relevance for research, purporting that the child’s own views should be listened to and respected. Consequently, an expressed goal in the *National Children’s Strategy* (DHC, 2000) is to provide children more and better opportunities to have their voice heard in all matters that affect them and to understand their lives. This goal is particularly relevant in research contexts, so that the child’s voice is central to any study that aims to understand children’s experiences.

Commenting on the methodologies utilised in the IEA/PPP project, Crahay (1995) notes that what happens within ECCE settings should match the values and expectations of caregivers and families who trust the setting. Any study, which aims to explore children’s experiences in settings, should include:

- Direct assessment of the quality of children’s experiences, by observing what the children have the opportunity to do and how they interact with adults and peers.
- Investigation of the values and expectations of caregivers and parents, to determine whether settings are run by caregivers in a way that is congruent with parent’s wishes.
- Analysis of the contextual factors that promote or impede the implementation of a high-quality learning environment (ibid: 10).

Table 4 presents research questions relating to children’s experiences within settings.

Table 4 Research Questions: Interaction / Process Quality

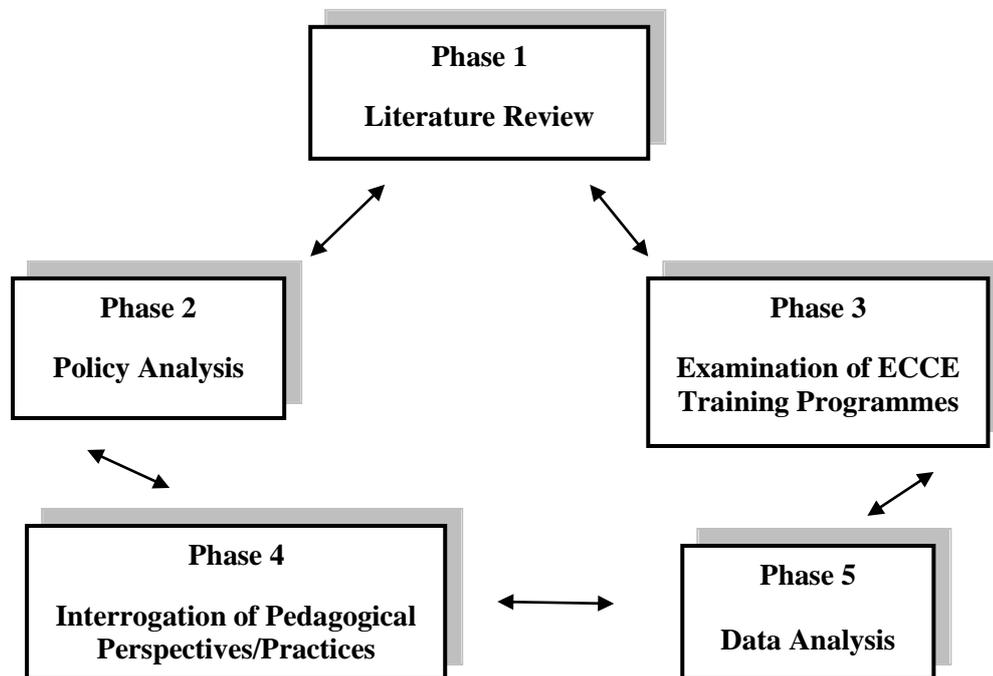
Aspect of Quality	Interview Question
Interaction / Process Quality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ How is the learning environment constructed? ▪ What are the prevailing principles that underpin the organisation of the learning environment? ▪ How does the learning environment impact on the child’s engagement in the activities of the setting? ▪ How is children’s agency facilitated within settings? ▪ What teaching strategies are utilised within pre-school and infant contexts?

2.7 Research Phases and Data Collection Strategies

The research design comprised five overlapping phases and multiple data collection strategies. Phase 1 involved an extensive literature review through which a range of critical

issues in the provision of ECCE were considered and analysed. This phase was conducted alongside phase 2 which was concerned with analysing a broad range of policy initiatives from the mid 1990s to 2010. Phase 3 was concerned with an examination of the various training programmes within the ECCE field, whereas Phase 4, which was divided into three sub-categories, sought to examine pedagogical perspectives and practices. Finally, Phase 5 involved in-depth data analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data garnered during the study.

Figure 5 Data Collection Phases

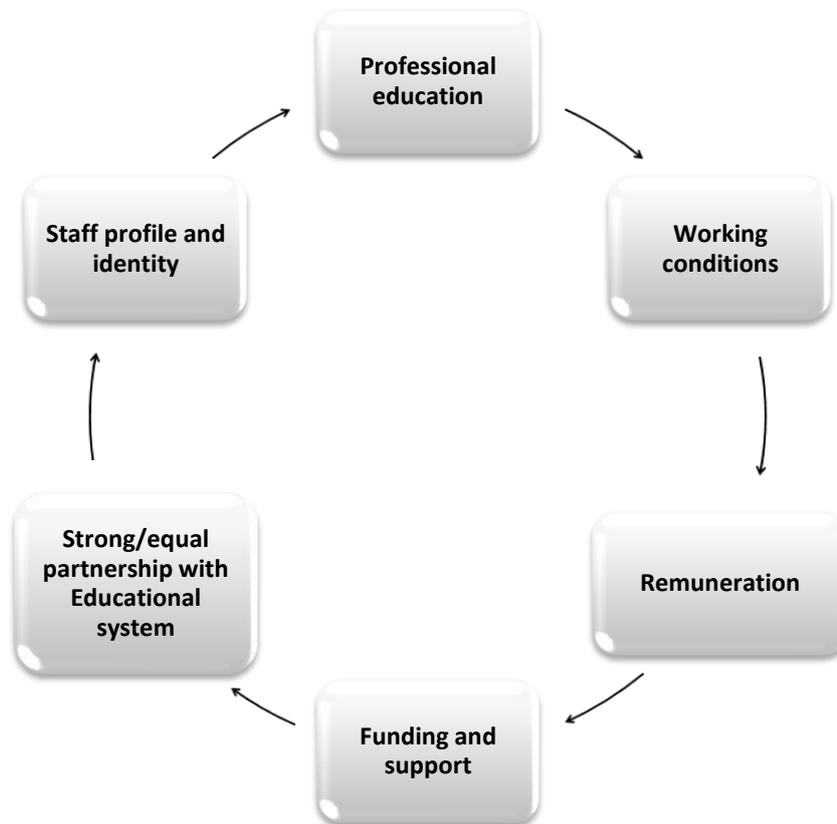


2.7.1 Phase 1: Literature Review

Through a comprehensive literature review (as presented in Chapters 3, 4 and 5), a range of critical issues in the provision of ECCE were delineated. In order to: structure the literature review, ensure its relevance to the study, and to establish the validity; an initial review of relevant literature was undertaken. This included a review of the *OECD Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care* (DES, 2004), *Starting Strong: Early Childhood Education and Care - volumes 1 and 2* (OECD, 2004/2001; and 2006) as well as *Insights on Quality: A National Review of Policy, Practice and Research Relating to Quality in Early Childhood Care and Education in Ireland 1990-2004* (CECDE, 2004). In this way, the major discourses, dilemmas and challenges in the provision of ECCE were identified - not just in the context of Ireland, but in a broader societal context. This initial review was particularly

helpful in terms of prioritising the issues and challenges more broadly associated with quality in ECCE. It enabled the researcher to determine, with relative certainty, those topics and themes that were relevant to the inquiry. Furthermore, it supported the development of a research matrix to guide further reading and examination of the themes identified.

Figure 6 Overview of Issues and Themes Identified through Initial Review of ECCE Reports



Following identification of key themes and concepts, further reading of relevant journals, policy documents and commentary, reports, books and keyword web searches was undertaken between June 2007 and September 2010. Additional key issues were also identified: concepts of pedagogy; contexts for children’s learning and development; social pedagogy versus school readiness; home-school: school-home connections; and the fusion of theory and practice.

The professional identity of both pre-school and infant teachers and the factors that shape their identities were examined in detail - culminating in a discussion of professional development. Using the revised taxonomy of educational objectives (Anderson and Krathwohl, 2001), the final section of the literature review (in Chapter 5) explores teacher

roles and responsibilities - taking account of: curriculum knowledge, assessment, evaluation and reflective practice.

Burton and Steane (2004) use the analogy of tapestry to illustrate the concept of synthesising literature. They emphasise the weaving together and integration of threads contained in previous writings on the research topic. By reading critically and analytically, the researcher developed a conceptual framework for the study. The literature review was organised into a set of key themes that, in turn, acted as a supporting framework to inform the research design.

2.7.2 Phase 2: Policy Analysis

Commencing with the UNCRC (United Nations, 1989) the study portrays a comprehensive construction of childhood through a systematic examination of major policy initiatives that serve as “markers on the landscape of evolving attitudes and increasing provisions for children in society” (CECDE, 2006: 11). These included the following statutory policies:

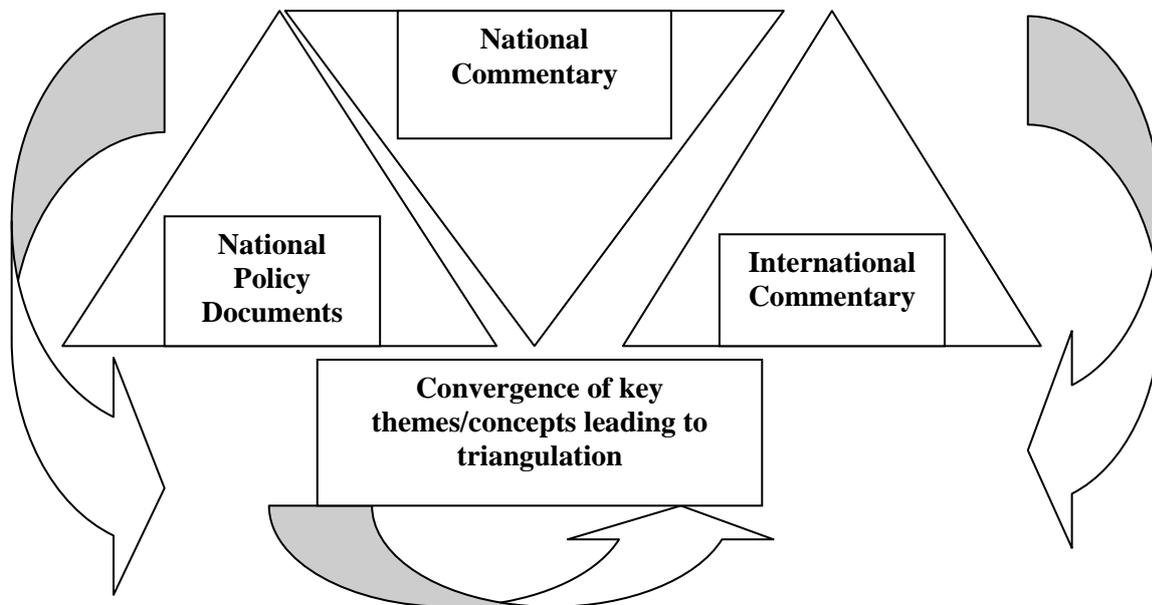
1. *The Primary School Curriculum* (DES, 1999b),
2. *The National Children’s Strategy: Our Children - Their Lives* (DHC, 2000),
3. *The Child Care (Pre-School Services) (No 2) Regulations, 2006* (DHC, 2006), and
4. *The Free Pre-School Year in ECCE Scheme 2010* (OMCYA, 2010).

A range of “soft policies” developed to guide and support practice that do not have a legislative basis were also examined:

1. *Ready to Learn: The White Paper on Early Childhood Education* (DES, 1999a),
2. *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009),
3. *Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development in the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector²* (DJELR, 2002),
4. *Síolta: The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education* (CECDE, 2006),
5. *Diversity and Equality Guidelines for Childcare Providers* (OMCYA, 2006),
6. *Developing the workforce in the early childhood care and education sector: Background discussion paper* (DES, 2009a), and
7. *Developing the workforce in the early childhood care and education sector: Report on the findings from the consultative process* (DES, 2009b).

These various initiatives have shaped not only constructions and understandings of childhood, but equally, have created expectations and accountability pressures on those working with and providing services to young children.

Figure 7 Triangulation of Data Phase 1 and 2



Cognisant that pedagogical perspectives and practices are rooted in understandings of child development, Phase 2 included an examination of child development theory. While the study is located within a particular socio-cultural context, Chapter 4 begins by looking at Piaget's legacy to the ECCE field. Thus, it explores the concept of developmentally appropriate practice and child centeredness. By contrast, Vygotsky emphasises the importance of adult/child and child/child dyads in cognitive development. Chapter 4 explores aspects of Vygotsky's theory, the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), scaffolding, the acquisition of language, as well as his emphasis on cultural variations in cognitive capacities and the expression of those capacities.

Building on Vygotskian theory, Rogoff extends the concept of ZPD by the manner in which the roles of children, caregivers and others are entwined in shaping intellectual development. Crucially, she characterises the process of guided participation as embracing more fully the complementary roles of children and caregivers in fostering children's development. It can be argued that Rogoff has gone further than anybody else in elaborating a socio-cultural framework with relevance and applicability to the ECCE sector.

2.7.3 Phase 3: Teacher Training and Development

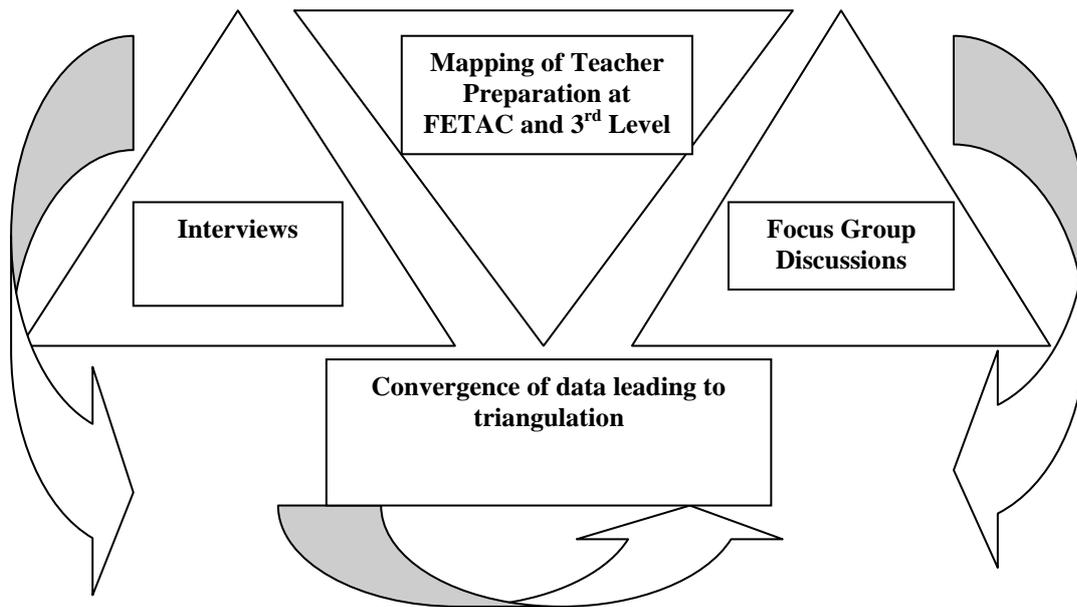
Darling-Hammond (2002) argues that teacher education contributes to teacher effectiveness. Likewise, as increasing attention is given to the necessity of creating a continuum of education between formal and informal settings (DES, 1999a; CECDE, 2006; NCCA, 2004 and 2009; OECD, 2004 and 2006a; UNESCO, 2006), similar questions permeate our thinking in relation to the pre-school sector in terms of teacher preparation and pedagogical practices in particular setting contexts. The centrality of training is underpinned by the *Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development in the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector* (DJELR, 2002) as well as research on the development of a Workforce Development Plan (DES, 2009a and 2009b).

The pre-school sector includes a combination of trained and untrained staff, as well as graduate and post-graduate teachers who may, or may not, have specialist training in working with young children (Bennett and Neuman., 2004; DES, 2009a; NESF, 2005; Moloney, 2010b; OECD, 2001 and 2006). Thus, there is an emerging consensus that increased coursework, specifically in the field of early childhood education, is directly linked to higher-quality care (Blatchford *et al.*, 2002; Blau, 2000; Howes *et al.*, 1992; Phillips *et al.*, 2000; Sylva *et al.*, 2004). On the other hand, while teachers undertake a strongly developed model of initial teacher education where they are awarded a Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) degree, the OECD (2004, 2006 and 2009a) is critical of a predominantly didactic approach to early development and learning in infant classrooms. In an attempt to elucidate the scope and content of pre-service training at primary and pre-school level, Phase 3 explored the “concurrent” model (Killeavy, 2001; OECD, 2005) of initial teacher preparation together with FETAC Level 5 and 6, and B.A. ECCE training programmes commonly accessed by ECCE students.

A series of focus groups and individual interviews with final-year students accessing all 4 models of training were conducted. Insights garnered were not based solely upon participants’ perspectives of training but also upon their experiences while undertaking work placements, the “staples” of teacher preparation at all levels (Wilson *et al.*, 2001).

Coupled with Phase 4, which examined the pedagogical perspectives and practices of participating pre-school and infant teachers, the study provides comprehensive insight into the nature, scope and relevance of teacher preparation, as well as highlighting the ongoing challenges associated with the provision of quality.

Figure 8 Triangulation of Data Phase 3



2.7.4 Phase 4: Pedagogical Perspectives and Practices

Children's experiences were central to Phase 4, which examined differing perspectives on quality from a range of pertinent stakeholders. This Phase comprised the following components:

- Interviews with ten ECCE managers, sixteen pre-school teachers and ten infant class teachers.
- On-site narrative observations, to gain insight into children's experiences within pre-school and infant classes. These observations were conducted in fifteen settings (10 pre-school and 5 infant classes) over a period of five consecutive days in each setting. Each observation was two hours in duration and focused on the children's involvement in the daily activities of the setting. This resulted in one hundred and fifty hours of observation.
- Administration of MOT, CA and AB observation tools. This involved six further hours of observations in each setting, which was carried out on two alternate days - resulting in an additional ninety hours of observations.

The following interviews were also undertaken during phase 4:

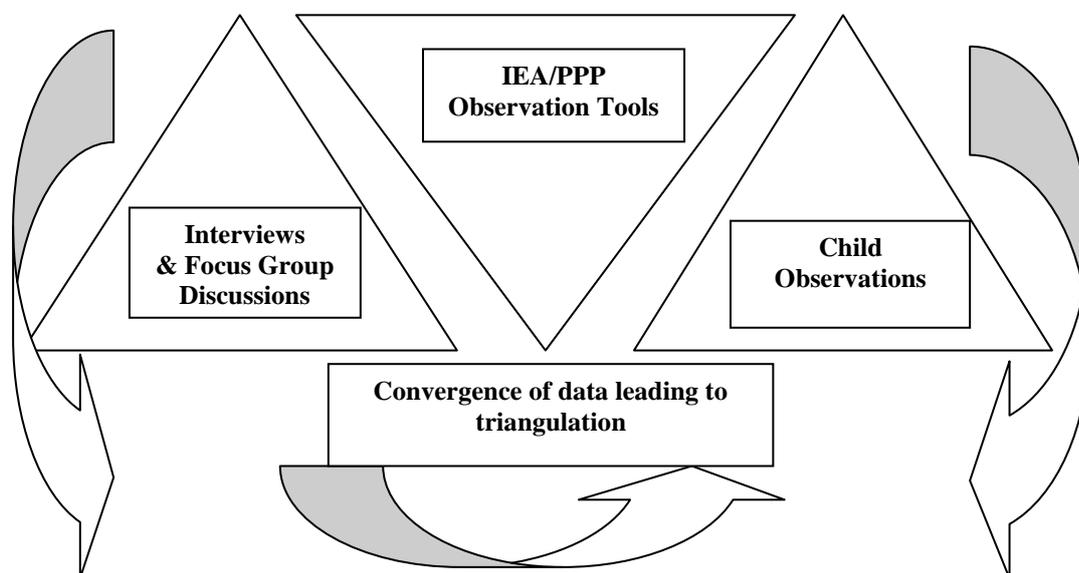
- Face to face interviews with:
 - 6 policy makers
 - 4 pre-school inspectors
 - 4 National Voluntary Childcare Collaborative representatives
 - 10 City and County Childcare representatives
 - 10 B.Ed. students, and
 - 10 B.A. ECCE graduates
- A series of six focus group discussions with B.A. (ECCE) graduates, infant class teachers and FETAC Level 5 and Level 6 childcare students.

Table 5 Profile of Participating Settings

Setting	Community Pre-School	Private	Age Range of Children	No. of Children	Curriculum	Junior Infant Class in Primary School	Senior Infant Class in Primary School
1	√		3 - 5 years	20	Play-based		
2	√		3 - 5 years	20	Montessori and play		
3	√		3 - 5 years	20	Play-based		
4	√		3 - 5 years	20	Play-based		
5	√		3 - 5 years	20	Montessori and play		
6		√	3 - 4 years	17	Play-based		
7		√	3 - 5 years	20	Montessori		
8		√	3 - 4 years	24	Montessori and play		
9		√	3 - 5 years	16	Montessori		
10		√	3 - 4 years	28	Play-based		
11			4 - 6 years	11 & 17		√	√
12			5 - 6 years	20			√
13			5 - 6 years	34			√
14			4 - 5 years	20		√	

In total, 80 interviews and 6 focus group discussions were completed. The purpose of these interviews was to elicit information from participants about their attitudes, feelings, opinions and perceptions of quality. While these interviews and focus groups were guided by an interview schedule, the flexibility of the interviews provided opportunities to further probe expand and clarify responses (Patton, 2002). Thus, data were generated by recording direct quotations about personal perspectives and experiences providing "...authentic insight into people's experiences" (Silverman, 2001: 87).

Figure 9 Triangulation of Data Phase 4



2.8 Sampling

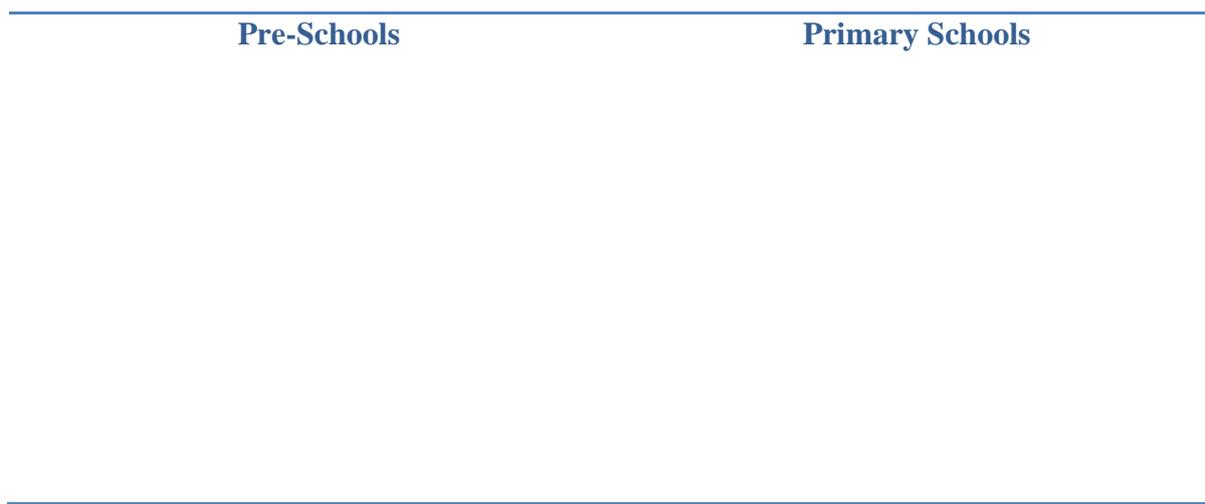
In order to select settings for inclusion in the study, a purposive sampling technique (PST) was utilised. Settings were specifically, rather than randomly, chosen (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2003). These settings were chosen because they were "information rich" offering valuable information and insights to the phenomenon of interest (Patton, 2002: 46). In the context of a PST, a typical case-sampling strategy was considered to be most relevant. In accordance with the *Child Care (Pre-School Services) (No 2) Regulations, 2006*, childcare providers minding three or more children are required to notify the HSE that they are operating a pre-school service. On the basis of this requirement, it was felt that services

notified to the HSE would possess all the attributes required of a typical ECCE setting. Similarly, typical case sampling was applicable to the primary school sector.

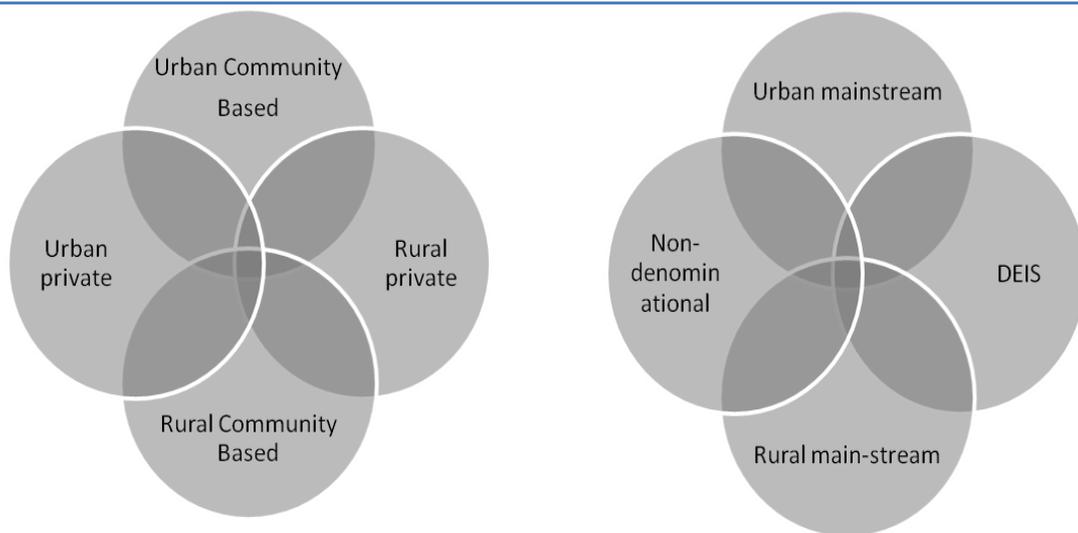
It was essential that participating settings would represent variation in geographical areas and socio-economic environs. Not only would this ensure that the sample group was representative of the ECCE sector as a whole, the variables would facilitate the comparison of data across settings. Thus, the sampling frame used consisted of HSE notified listings of ECCE settings within a specific geographic area. Likewise, primary schools were selected from available DES records. Participants represented variations in gender, socio-economic status of settings, and pre-service qualifications.

Of the 10 pre-school settings, there were 5 community and 5 private settings. One setting was attached to a DEIS³ primary school that also participated in the study. Four of the private settings were rural, while the remaining setting was located in an urban area. While each community setting was located in an area of disadvantage, there were three rural and two urban settings. Two of the participating primary schools, had DEIS designation - one of which was located in an urban area and the other in a rural area. Of the remaining three schools, one was a non-denominational urban school. The other two schools consisted of one urban and one rural.

Figure 10 Overview of Research Settings



³ In May 2005, the DES launched a new Action Plan for Educational Inclusion. The objective of this plan: Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS), is to ensure that the educational needs of children and young people in disadvantaged communities are prioritised and effectively addressed.



The views of 10 B.A. (ECCE) graduates and 10 final year B.Ed. students were also garnered. These participants were selected by targeting a class of final year B.A. (ECCE) and B.Ed. students attending a University in the same geographic area as the pre-school and infant class settings. In addition, 2 focus groups were conducted with final year B.A. (ECCE) students attending an Institute of Technology. Three focus group discussions with FETAC Level 5 and 6 students attending a college of further education were also conducted. These interviews and focus groups were essential to garnering the opinions of those working or preparing to work with children in pre-school and primary school in relation to quality, training, and professional identity within the sector. Each interview and focus group discussion was digitally recorded.

2.9 Phase 5: Quantitative Data Analysis

All IEA/PPP observations were analysed using the computer software programme: Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), which is suitable for analysing large volumes of numerical data. In total, 9,414 observations (MOT, CA and AB) were recorded between pre-school and primary school settings. Of these, 2,482 observations were recorded in the 5 primary school settings, while 6,932 were recorded in the 10 pre-school settings. The SPSS calculated the frequency of each category of activity observed as percentages of the overall observations. In this way, the most frequently encountered hypotheses were isolated, and relationships between data were examined.

2.9.1 Qualitative Data Analysis

The use of multiple methods of data collection resulted in a considerable volume of data. In this respect, Clark *et al.* (2005) use the analogy of sifting through grains of sand before finding a nugget of useful information. Although the task of analysing large volumes of data was an arduous process, the benefits outweighed any challenges involved. Through the data analysis process, the researcher got to know the data inside-out and was able to draw upon first-hand experience of the settings and situations studied. Analysing data in naturalistic inquiry involves organising, accounting for and explaining the data (Cohen *et al.*, 2000). Effectively, it is about making sense of the data in terms of the "...participants' definitions of the situation, noting patterns, themes, categories and regularities" (ibid: 147).

Drawing on grounded theory methodology (GTM), a systematic, inductive, comparative and interactive approach was taken to data analysis (Charmaz, 2006; Bryant and Charmaz, 2007; Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Through GTM, analysis was built step-by-step from the ground up, without going off on "theoretical flights of fancy" (Charmaz, 2006: 51). This methodical process continued for the duration of the research. Initially, data analysis occurred along with data collection. Thus, rather than applying pre-determined codes, they emerged from the data. In this way, coding generated the "bones" of data analysis; shaping an "analytic frame" from which the analysis was built (ibid: 46). Initial general coding progressed to focused coding, so that units of analysis of the data were fully developed (ibid.). As the process unfolded, codes were clustered so that links between codes were established. By reviewing these tentative links, additional categories were identified. Throughout this interactive process, data were continuously integrated and reduced - leading to the development of provisional hypotheses.

Data was analysed alongside data collection. Field notes were written up immediately upon completion of observations. Likewise, interviews were listened to prior to transcription. In this way, analytical notes were written before and after transcribing. This process served as a form of "quality control" helping to ensure that the data gathered were useful, reliable and authentic (Patton, 2002: 384). As Maxwell (2005: 96) comments, analytical notes capture one's analytic thinking about data and "facilitates such thinking, stimulating analytic insights".

Interviews were forwarded to each interviewee to ensure that they were satisfied that the transcript represented their views and to enable them to either add information or to request

an amendment to the transcript. Subsequently, four CCC interviewees and three B.A. (ECCE) graduates forwarded additional information resulting from the introduction of the Free Pre-School Year in ECCE Scheme 2010. This additional information was integrated into the original interview transcripts.

Furthermore, preliminary research findings (based upon child observations during Phase 4 of the study) were presented to research participants in March 2009. This presentation served as a validity check to ensure that findings were consistent with what had been observed and recorded in each setting. It was evident that ECCE managers and pre-school teachers appreciated this opportunity. They claimed that while they had often taken part in research they had “never been given feedback” (ECCE manager, 20th March, 2009). Engagement with research participants at this level ensured objectivity in the study, so that participant voices could be represented in a fair, honest and transparent manner.

Using an iterative process, interview transcripts, analytical notes and field notes were read line-by-line, and preliminary codes were applied. Line-by-line coding; “frees you from being so immersed in your respondent’s worldviews that you accept them without question” (Charmaz, 2006: 51). Coding data as it was collected helped the researcher to gain a close look at what participants said and struggled with. For example, analytical notes written prior to interview transcripts indicated that ECCE managers and pre-school teachers were concerned about the implementation of Article 5 of the *Child Care (Pre-School Services) (No. 2) Regulations, 2006* (DHC, 2006).⁴ Field notes accompanying observations highlighted the struggle for participants whose practice appeared inconsistent and unpredictable. As a result, a code category “Article 5-concerns” was generated to track similar responses in other interview transcripts and field notes.

Coding assisted in identifying implicit concerns as well as explicit statements (Charmaz, 2006). At this preliminary stage, codes were descriptive - covering a broad range of experiences, feelings and perspectives. Preliminary categories, themes and sub-themes were identified.

⁴ Article 5 requires that a person carrying on a pre-school service shall ensure that each child’s learning, development and well-being is facilitated within the daily life of the service through the provision of appropriate opportunities, experiences, activities, interaction, materials and equipment, having regard to the age of development of the child and the child’s cultural context (Department of Health and Children, 2006: 9).

As data was reread, codes were refined, modified and rejected at various intervals. Sub-codes were also delineated; thus multiple codes were applied to some data segments. Again, using the example of Article 5, multiple codes were applied to these data segments as new themes emerged during data analysis. Thus, while “Article 5” became an overarching theme, various sub-codes were applied. These included: “concerns”, “inspector qualifications”, and “positive aspects” for instance. Emerging themes were considered, revised and amended on an ongoing basis. Interview transcripts, analytic notes and field notes were compared and contrasted. Matching responses and frequency of responses were noted as well as any discrepant responses. A matrix was developed to track similarities, differences and frequencies. Field notes and interview transcripts were evaluated at regular intervals so that different stakeholder responses could be compared.

Throughout the data analysis, “in vivo” coding was identified (Charmaz, 2006; Bryant and Charmaz, 2007; Richards, 2005; Lewis-Beck *et al.*, 2004). These codes are described as “snappy words that are very telling and revealing” (Lewis-Beck *et al.*, 2004: 528). The researcher knows the instant the idea is expressed that it is worthy of note. In subsequent data collection, the researcher looks for the same term or words. In this study, ‘in vivo’ coding was exemplified through the use of the term “glorified babysitter” for example, as pre-school teachers described how they were perceived by the public. Another example was the use of the term “crowd control” by infant teachers, to describe their attitude towards teacher/child ratios in the classroom.

Finally, connections and relationships in data were consolidated. To facilitate this final step in the data analysis, a further matrix for both observations and interviews was completed. These contained a range of judicious citations taken directly from interview transcripts as well as vignettes extracted from observations of practice. This helped to substantiate earlier hypotheses and to isolate any discrepant examples. A code category “other” was used to track infrequent responses or discussion points. These matrices served as a record of significant quotes/observations that could be used to illustrate salient points in writing up the data analysis (Appendix B).

2.10 Reflexivity

Davies (1992: 57) suggests that, who we are “shifts with each speaking, each moment of being positioned within this or that discourse in this or that way”. The risk for social researchers is “imperial translation”, where they continually negotiate “how, when and why

to situate and privilege whose voices” (Fine, 1998: 152). Reflexivity is closely aligned to interpretation and representation. Accordingly, considerations of reflexivity are essential to all forms of research as “interpretive research begins and ends with the biography and self of the researcher” (Denzin, 1989: 12).

There are two types of reflexivity defined as personal and epistemological (Nightingale and Cromby, 1999; Willig, 2001). The former involves reflecting upon the ways that our personal experiences, beliefs, values, political orientations, aims in life and social identities shape the research. Whereas, epistemological reflexivity encourages reflection upon the “assumptions (about the world) that we make in the course of the research [it helps us to think about the] the implications of such assumptions for the research and its findings (Willig, 2001: 10).

In terms of personal reflexivity, throughout her career both as a childcare practitioner and as Coordinator of a CCC, the researcher established professional relationships with a multitude of people involved in the ECCE sector, including: pre-school teachers; representatives of the NVCC; members of the HSE; and policy makers. It was therefore necessary that she consider her own experiences in ECCE; how and why these had changed overtime; and of the power relationships between the research participants and the researcher. Critically, all aspects of the research process are imbued with these aspects of the researcher’s biography. It was for this reason that interview transcripts were returned to research participants, and preliminary research findings presented. This process ensured objectivity and the representation of participant voices in a fair, honest and transparent manner.

In the context of epistemological reflexivity, Hammersley and Atkinson (1983) advise on the need for some distance between the researcher and the researched. It is in the space created by the distance that the “analytical work of the ethnographer gets done” (ibid: 103). Failure to establish an analytical space renders research as little more than the “autobiographical account of a personal conversation” (ibid: 103). Indeed, Lynch (2000) is critical of any research process that privileges the voice of the researcher arguing that the “perspective of the expert is only one viewpoint” (ibid: 81). The solution lies in creating “knowledge and understanding through partnership between the researcher and research subject, while recognising the difference between the two positions” (ibid: 81]). Similarly, Shacklock and Smyth (1998) posit the need to recognise the interests implicit in the research agenda, suggesting that not to do so is to “assume an obscene and dishonest position” (ibid: 6-7). Reflexivity is clearly linked to the question of ethics and accountability in research.

Kincheloe and McLaren (2005) suggest that researchers should commence an investigation by placing their “assumptions on the table” so as to avoid any confusion regarding the “epistemological and personal baggage they bring with them to the research site” (ibid: 305). Reflexivity then, establishes a dual persona for the researcher - the conscious ‘I’ and the unconscious ‘I’. As the conscious ‘I’, the researcher was actively involved in the study, building trust and rapport with research participants.

Conversely, the unconscious ‘I’ was continuously engaged in internal dialogue. Whether out walking or driving, the researcher engaged in “ongoing conversations about experience, while simultaneously living in the moment” (Hertz, 1997: viii), intuitively reflecting upon the data and its ramifications. Through internal dialogue, the researcher became a reflective agent acknowledging and tracking bias, ensuring that it did not misrepresent the research. The unconscious ‘I’ questioned, pondered, analysed, sought answers and struggled with ways of representing participants’ voices. Consequently, the researcher aligns with Freire (1974) in acknowledging reflective practice as part of the human condition where human beings “organise themselves, choose the best response, test themselves, act, and change in the very act of responding” (ibid: 3).

While the unconscious ‘I’ remained hidden for much of the research process, it became visible within the text in how data was selected and presented, through the use of judicious quotes, as well as data that was ignored. The inner understandings that resulted from the internal contemplation of the unconscious ‘I’ appeared in the completed text.

Russell and Kelly (2002) create a link between reflexivity and political considerations. They highlight the need for researchers to take their obligations seriously, while also inquiring into the broader political assumptions underlying their work and the “political ramifications of [their] findings” (ibid: 19). Through a combination of active field work, analysis and critique of literature, policy and practice, coupled with reflexivity, new and shared understandings were generated. Simultaneously, the research contributed to the existing knowledge base. Each of these processes is intertwined, for as we read more, question more and communicate with others, we find that we have more to say, more to learn, more to explore and explain, and so it goes. Crucially, while acknowledging the responsibility to be reflexive, the researcher endeavoured to facilitate an open, discursive and collaborative process.

2.11 Chapter Conclusion

This study is underpinned by Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory which was used to analyse ECCE within three ecological contexts: policy (macrosystem), parental environment and teacher preparation and training (exosystem), and classroom environment and children's experiences (microsystem). The overarching objective is to determine the extent to which macro-level policy translates into practice at the micro-level in individual setting contexts.

This objective gives rise to a key research question against which the study is framed: How has ECCE policy impacted upon the quality of provision in Ireland?

The study combines both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. Qualitative inquiry, comprising child observations, interviews and focus group discussions were used to examine constructions of childhood, pedagogical perspectives, practices and children's experiences within individual setting contexts. The quantitative component involved the administration of research instruments developed by the IEA/PPP, 1987-1997. These instruments produced a count of both children's and adults' behaviours and the adult's proposal of activities within participating settings.

A total of 80 interviews and 6 focus group discussions were undertaken. The study also involved a total of 240 hours of observation in the research sites, of which 150 hours were on-site narrative observation, with the remaining 90 hours resulting from the administration of the IEA/PPP observation tools. Research findings, analysis and discussion, are presented in Chapter 6.

3. Constructions of Childhood and Aspects of Quality in the Context of Policy Developments

3.1 Introduction

As highlighted in Chapter 1, the State has assumed increasing responsibility for regulating, monitoring and improving the quality of ECCE provision in Ireland. This Chapter, which is set against the backdrop of social, political, economic and historical trajectories, charts the development of ECCE policy in Ireland from the mid 1990s to 2010. It examines orientation quality defined by the OECD (2006) in terms of policy direction - is it towards a market or public system or some combination of both; is the focus on basic care and protection of young children while parents work, for example?

James and James (2004) refer to the “cultural politics of childhood... [that comprise the] many and different cultural determinants of childhood and children’s behaviour, and the political mechanisms and processes by which these are put into practice at any given time” (ibid: 4). Drawing on this construct, this chapter examines how children’s agency is constructed, understood, supported and progressed through a myriad of policy initiatives. In exploring policy, it becomes clear that, while Ireland is moving away from the “family–responsibility” paradigm (Jensen, 2004), there is a reluctance to embrace the “investing–in–children” paradigm (Olk, 2009: 46).

As the examination of policy unfolds, the State’s position with regard to a number of quality indicators is revealed. This chapter specifically explores regulation and inspection, which are entwined with structural and process quality. Thus, this chapter examines training requirements and approaches to curriculum within pre-school and infant contexts. Increasingly, researchers link the issue of transitions from pre-school to primary school with education (Moreno and Dongen, 2006; OECD, 2006; O’Kane, 2008) and thus, with process quality. Accordingly, this chapter also examines the construct of transitions in detail.

3.2 Emerging Constructions of Childhood

Throughout the 20th century, the child and the interests of the child have been placed to the forefront of policies and practices in legal, welfare, medical and educational institutions (James and Prout, 1997). Regardless of their child-centered positioning, as societies become increasingly prosperous and progressive children have become problematic (Corsaro, 2005;

James and Prout., 1997; James *et al.*, 1998; Wyness, 1996, 1999, 2000, 2003 and 2006), resulting in a myriad of concerns, changing viewpoints and altering conceptions of childhood.

James *et al.* (1998) describe prevailing perceptions of children as barriers to women's progression in the labour market. Through their "demands for adult time;[children] constitute a countervailing pressure to adult success in flexible and increasingly global market" (ibid: 10). Fundamentally, children represent an "obstacle" to women's participation in the labour market because of an expectation that it is their mother who assumes the "burden of attending" to their needs (ibid.).

Throughout history, across and within societies, there is no consensus on what constitutes childhood (Matthews, 2007). None the less, children are increasingly visible in legislative enactments and policy initiatives, with an emerging consensus in Ireland, that childhood is a period in its own right distinct from other periods in the life cycle.

Contrary to Piagetian theory, which espouses the complete and independent adult and the incomplete and dependent child, a "new sociology" of childhood (Carsaro, 2005; James *et al.*, 1998; Vandebroek and Bouverne-DE BIE, 2006; Matthews, 2007) is emerging. Proponents of Piagetian theory perceive children as progressing through various stages of development as a preparatory process throughout childhood, before becoming a socially competent adult. Children are seen in terms of what they will become; future adults with a place in the social order and a valuable contribution to make. However, James and Prout (1997) claim that, within emerging sociological discourse, children are seen not as groups of "becomings", but as "beings", whose ideas, approaches to life and learning, individual choices and relationships are of interest in their own right.

Consequently, there is increasing acceptance that childhood is a social construction (CECDE, 2006; Corsaro, 2005; DES, 1999b; James and Prout, 1997 and 1998; Matthews, 2007; Mayall, 1994; NCCCA, 2004; Wyness, 1999, 2000 and 2006) where children are increasingly recognised as being "able, willing and reliable contributors within their own significant social contexts of home and school" (Wyness, 2000: 2-23). This conceptual shift can be viewed as a step forward, giving voice and visibility to a group in society that for centuries has been silenced, solely on the basis of age as a discriminatory classification (Vandebroek *et al.*, 2006).

Conversely, Wyness (2000) points to the challenges faced by the socially constructed child who is “bounded by particular cultures and histories... [that lead to the] preponderance of what is unique over what is common” (ibid: 23). Likewise, Carsaro and Fingerson (2003) suggest that, by their very participation in society, children are “constrained by the existing social structures and by social reproduction” (ibid: 130). Indeed, Prout (2005: 64) regards as problematic, the tendency of childhood studies that pay insufficient attention to the “changing character of the boundaries between nationally defined societies and the flows across these boundaries” (ibid: 64). He suggests that childhood as a social structure is more focused on the pattern than on how it is produced and constructed. Hence, this social structure “glosses over how stability and scale are achieved” (ibid: 64). However, Qvortrup (1994 and 1997) argues that focusing solely on the unique obscures insights into what is common. He suggests that analysis of pattern makes it possible to identify common characteristics shared by children living in a particular time, space and economic conditions for instance.

Matthews (2007: 326) holds that “statements about children are suspect if they are not grounded in a social context but instead claim to describe children in general”. Any statement claiming to describe children must decide “which children and under what circumstances” (ibid: 326-327). He advocates documenting the actual representations of children used in different social locations and settings.

While researchers look to child policy in other countries, as a means of understanding the importance of investing in ECCE, others (Moss and Petrie; 2002; Penn *et al.*, 2006) caution against transposing research findings from one setting or culture to another without giving due attention to both cultural contexts. They conclude that the specificity of the contexts of individual studies does not justify generalising the findings to other contexts. Clearly, concepts of childhood are culturally located and time specific (Hayes, 2002). They are subject to review and reconstruction, as societies evolve and in accordance with individual societal priorities, concerns and prevailing supports at any given time.

3.3 Reconceptualising Childhood

Although Western societies recognise that learning occurs through countless everyday activities, they place the greatest significance on formal education, typified by prescribed curricula and ongoing standardised assessment. Yet, in her writings, Rogoff (1990) illustrates that in other cultures, relevant learning occurs within a socio-cultural context within which it has specific merit. Individual cultures are based upon and prioritise a myriad of values that

are culturally relevant and significant within that particular society. It can be argued that such is the importance afforded to formal education in Western cultures, that children's agency is weakened by their lack of involvement in real-life experiences. Aries (1962) described children's schooling as a "quarantine that removed the child from adult society" (ibid: 412). It is ironic in the 21st century, that, through attendance at educational institutions, children free up parents' time to attend to the more adult-valued work of adult life.

Wyness (1996 and 2000) proposes two broad theoretical approaches to the child-as-agent theme. On the one hand, we situate children in their own contexts and examine the micro level of peer interactions. At this level, researchers analyse small-scale interactions and settings, which act like micro-societies and are associated with the concept of the "Tribal Child" (James *et al.*, 1998; Wyness, 1996 and 2000). On the other hand, children are located within the broader macro-social structure. At this level, theories of agency are reconciled with power and social inequality, where children are positioned as an exploited and inferior social group. In common with Foucault (1972 and 1977), many researchers (Dahlberg *et al.*, 1999; Mayall, 1994; Moss and Pence, 1994) portray an image of the child as inferior, placing emphasis on the power that adults have over children.

In counterpoint, Qvortrup (2009: 2) suggests that childhood should be seen as a permanent structural form that is "imposed on or taken in possession by children – in principle from birth". Accordingly, at a certain age "defined by a given culture, children leave this form of space and pass it onto new cohorts of children" (ibid: 2). This would "see agency as the full social recognition of children...[who] need to be accepted as social actors on the same terms as adults" (Wyness, 2000: 26). Such an ideology may be a step too far, even for those who espouse a child as agent theme. What differentiates children from adults is not that they are becomings, but, that they are beings living in the now, guided and supported by adults who have more life experience and therefore, more knowledge. The relationship between children and adults is inherently unequal. Just as adults have more knowledge about life, children are more knowledgeable about what it is to be a child in the now and thus, are more attuned to the needs of childhood. Viewed in this manner, children and adults bring valid and valuable contributions to the adult/child, child/adult dyad.

Essentially, the adult's role is to facilitate, guide and support the child. As summarised by the DES (1999a), the teacher has a complex role as a "caring facilitator and guide who interprets the child's learning needs and responds to them" (ibid: 20). The CECDE (2006) and the

NCCA (2004 and 2009) propose that children are facilitated and supported by adults within the context of warm, caring relationships. In this environment, they are permitted to enjoy the business of childhood: questioning, probing, exploring, making sense of the world and thereby growing in life experience.

3.4 Acknowledging the Milieu of Children's Lives

Prout (2002) asserts that children are in danger of remaining invisible when research relies only on adult accounts. Including children as research subjects and participants rather than objects of inquiry, reveals many novel aspects of the situations, settings and issues they are asked about (ibid.). Similarly, in a critique of what he terms the "invisible child", Qvortrup (1997) argues that children are perceived as dependants, hidden within socially significant domains of home, school or family. Children, thus, are excluded as a unit of reference within social statistics that are generally collated from adult perspectives (ibid.).

In reconceptualising childhood, researchers must take account of the milieus of children's lives (family, pre-school, school), where they interact with each other and with adults as well as the "structural" forms and processes that shape contemporary childhood (Prout, 2002: 69). This approach enables children to become the direct focus of analysis, rather than being seen through their connection to other social institutions; family and schooling. It broadens the scope of "referents, contexts and meanings [of childhood]" (ibid: 69). Implicit within these scholarly perspectives is the inevitable power differences in relationships between children and adults.

Children's lack of presence in society is reflected in their corresponding lack of active presence in theory (Corsaro, 2005). Haldén (2005) challenges this perspective. While acknowledging that new social studies of childhood provide a framework for understanding children's lives, she expresses concern that in describing children in relation to the concepts of being and becoming, we risk looking upon them in the same sense as adults. Mirroring Mayall (1994), she argues that in our attempts to give them a voice and a right to speak, we run the risk of ignoring the crucial difference between children and adults in terms of their vulnerability and dependency. Additionally, while acknowledging that children are social beings, we must also recognise the differences between children of different ages, and in doing so, take into consideration those persons who take care of them (ibid.).

Children cannot be theorised in isolation from their caregiver. Rather, the child and carer create a unit of analysis where understandings of their everyday interactions shape our constructions and further our understandings of their respective roles and status in society. As noted by Williams (2004) children have a right to have their needs understood and met in the present, not because of the benefits for society in the future, but because it is “important to them in the present” (ibid: 10).

3.5 Social Change and Constructions of Childhood

Using the Greek word “oikos” as an overarching expression of economic “house-holding”, Qvortrup (2009: 23), claims that the pertinent question for the 21st century is: “in which way children belong to the modern oikos, the modern national economy; are they a private good or a public good?” Future economic growth and prosperity is dependent upon a nation’s children who, as the next generation, will “...provide care for the elderly” (Qvortrup, 2009: 23). Thus, children are a “public good” and therefore, investment in children is necessary in the here and now (ibid.). Stating that children bring budgetary implications, Qvortrup (2009) holds that while everybody is willing to reap the benefits, not everybody is willing to contribute to the investment in early childhood. Ultimately, understandings of childhood are directly linked to the fiscal policies developed to support them. In order to understand their lives in the now, Haldén (2005) argues that we must also understand childcare, specifically investment in childcare.

Conceptions of childhood inevitably lead to consideration of profound social changes that mark the turn of the century known as globalisation. Through globalisation, Vandebroek *et al.* (2006) posit that nation-states and societies are opened up to many influences that originate beyond their borders - affecting the everyday contexts in which children live and grow up. As an island nation on the periphery of Europe, Ireland is perhaps more exposed to risk, in terms of economic impact, than other countries. Accordingly, Vandebroek *et al.* (2006) claim that the “prevalence of economics in political discourse including employment as a top priority occurs at the same time that nation states have less impact on their national economies” (ibid: 132). Indeed, pointing to the limitations of economic rationale in developing policy, Urban (2008) argues that policies to increase female labour force participation, introduced in times of economic growth “are at risk of being abolished as soon as the economy faces a deceleration” (ibid: 137). Consequently, Vandebroek *et al.* (2006)

declare that economic aspects dominate all other aspects of policy including the social agenda.

Increasingly, nations aspire to be knowledge societies where:

“Wealth, prosperity and economic development depend on people’s capacity to out-invent and outwit their competitors, to tune into the desires and demands of the consumer market, and to change jobs or develop new skills as economic fluctuations and down turns require” (Hargreaves, 2007: 223).

Within the knowledge society, economic success and a culture of continuous innovation depend on the capacity of workers to keep learning themselves and from each other throughout their working lives (Hargreaves, 2000 and 2007). Although this discourse has implications for everybody involved in ECCE provision, the manner in which such aspirations can be realised in practice, in the minutiae of life within settings is questionable. Located within a discourse on educational reform, Hargreaves (2000) argues that a societal focus on creating a knowledge society leads to many challenges. He asks: “How can we refashion schools so that they mirror, and thereby help to prepare the young for life in a knowledge economy? How can teachers in what they do in school, be models of what it is to be a successful member of society?”(ibid: 3).

Without doubt, working in ECCE is increasingly complex and demanding in relation to the knowledge, skills and attitudes required to support children’s development. Accordingly, I ask: what supports are required by those working in ECCE to enable them to meet the multitude of challenges inherent in the provision of services to children? How can practitioners reconcile the need to provide care and education within a relational framework with the need to build professional capacity in a knowledge society that continually moves the goal posts, deflects resources to areas of greater need in accordance with shifting economic priorities, while simultaneously, creating and demanding greater accountability from those that play a crucial role in nurturing our future citizens?

3.6 Early Childhood Care and Education: Irish Policy Context 1990 – 2010

Up until the mid 1990s, the State had little involvement with childcare. This reflected a historical “family - responsibility” paradigm (Jenson, 2004) where parents were solely responsible for their child’s welfare. The State’s responsibility lay in the areas of primary and secondary education and the child protection system operated through the then health boards (currently, Health Services Executive (HSE)). Childrearing, regarded as a private matter, was

the responsibility of women who fulfilled the role of wife and mother in the home (Kennedy, 2001).

However, the traditional role of wife and mother underwent a radical transformation from the 1970s onwards as Ireland's entry to the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1973 marked a significant shift in society's view of women; resulting, in a change in emphasis from primary carer within the home, to that of participant in the labour market. During the 1970s Ireland published a Working Women's Charter (1976), and ratified and transposed into law a United Nations Convention against All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979). Accordingly, the need to cater for working parents with regard to childcare provision and a demand for state-run childcare gathered momentum (Devine *et al.*, 2004b; Kennedy, 2001; Purcell, 2001).

The childcare debate was stalled during the recession of the 1980s, returning to prominence during the economic upturn from the mid 1990s onwards. As outlined in Chapter 1, vast numbers of women returned to the labour market during this period. The childcare landscape in Ireland and consequent policy development have been shaped by economic growth, accelerated social change and growing recognition of the benefits of quality early childhood education.

The combination of accelerated social change and economic realities created new challenges for the State. Its traditional role in supporting the family unit shifted towards acknowledging the child as an individual with its own needs and rights. This shift in thinking was reflected in Ireland's ratification of the UNCRC (United Nations, 1989) in 1992, which advocates for three major concepts in services for children: protection, provision and participation. While it reaffirms the parent's role in the upbringing and education of the child, it further stipulates that: "State parties shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that children of working parents have the right to benefit from childcare facilities and services for which they are eligible" (UNCRC, 1989: Articles 18.2 and 18.3).

Since 1992, ECCE policy in Ireland is increasingly informed by the UNCRC; placing children's needs and rights at the centre of policy development and practice. While the child is centrally located, a desire to consolidate economic prosperity resulted in a predominant focus on increasing childcare supply as reflected through two consecutive capital investment

programmes EOCP (2000-2006) and NCIP (2006-2010) as opposed to a much needed parallel investment in quality.

3.7 Emergence of the “Whole Child” Perspective

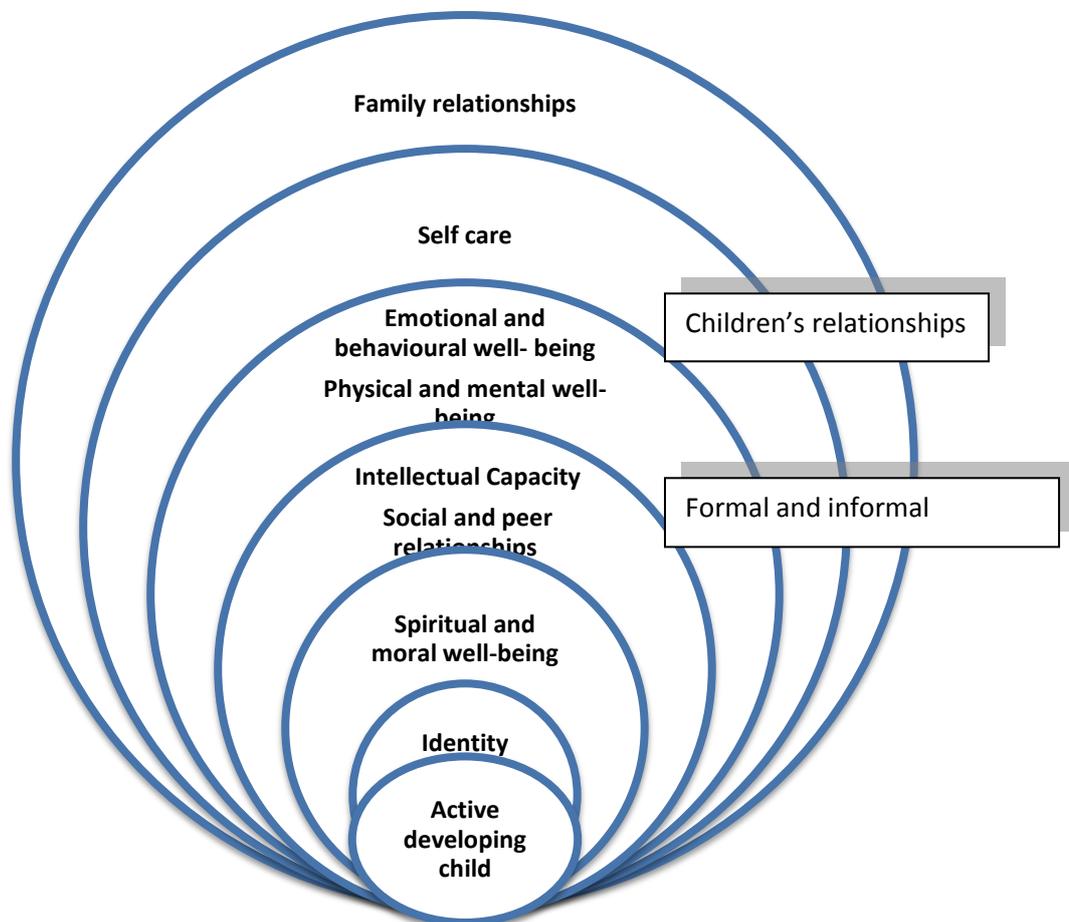
The importance of the UNCRC was reflected in the *National Children’s Strategy* (DHC, 2000), which was developed as a major initiative to progress its implementation.

The strategy proposed three national goals for children:

1. Children will have a voice,
2. Children’s lives will be better understood, and
3. Children will receive quality supports and services (DHC, 2000).

It introduced the concept of the “whole child” perspective, which was seen as being compatible with the spirit of the UNCRC (DHC, 2000: 24). Based upon nine dimensions of childhood, the “whole child” perspective represents a “broad framework for understanding children’s lives” (DHC, 2000: 11).

Figure 11 The Nine Dimensions of Childhood



It outlines the dynamic interaction between the three aspects of the perspective:

- 1) Extent of children's own capacities,
- 2) Multiple interlinked dimensions of children's development, and
- 3) Complex mix of formal and informal supports in children's lives.

Throughout childhood, foundations are being laid for well-being in adulthood. By building on early opportunities to develop social responsibility, childhood provides a preparation for taking on the responsibilities of active citizenship in later life. Ultimately, the State acts as the guarantor of children's rights.

The "whole child perspective" is a central tenet of the *Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations, 2006* (DHC, 2006). However, when one considers the lack of a mandatory training requirement coupled with relatively poor training levels and the relatively low status of the sector, the extent to which the "whole child perspective" has become embedded in practice is questionable.

3.8 Occupational Profiles

In an attempt to address the lacuna in training within the sector, the Certifying Bodies Sub-Group was established through the National Childcare Coordinating Committee in 2000. Following extensive consultation, they launched the *Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development in the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector* (DJELR, 2002a). It was intended that the framework, which defines agreed core values that should underpin all ECCE practice, would be implemented by the National Awarding Bodies (Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) and Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) whose task it is to set national standards for all qualifications in Ireland. The Framework identifies a range of occupational profiles and associated skills depending on the role of the childcare practitioner.

A National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) was launched in 2003. This is a system consisting of ten levels, ranging from Level 1 awards that recognise the ability to perform basic tasks, to Level 10 awards that recognise the ability to discover and develop new knowledge and skills at the frontier of research and scholarship. As it was in the final stages of development in 2002, it was not possible to map the occupational profiles onto the different levels of the NFQ. Since then, *Siolta* (CECDE, 2006) and *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009) have been developed providing further clarity regarding the role of the ECCE practitioner

(DES, 2009a). Following mapping and cross-referencing exercises, the DES (2009b) maintain that the *Model Framework* is still relevant to the future development of education and training programmes so as to ensure an appropriately skilled and qualified ECCE workforce into the future. Following extensive consultation during 2009, a workforce development plan is currently being prepared by the DES for the ECCE sector.

3.9 Current ECCE Training

Although there is no mandatory training requirement for those working in the pre-school sector in Ireland, entrants generally undertake training at FETAC Level 5 or Level 6. At FETAC Level 5, students undertake eight modules of training of which six are mandatory: Child Development, Caring for Children (0 – 6), Early Childhood Education, Working in Childcare, Communication, and Work Experience. The other two modules are elective: Arts and Crafts for Childcare, and Occupational First Aid. FETAC Level 5 can be undertaken over a one-year or a two-year period. On completion of all eight modules, students are awarded FETAC Level 5 accreditation.

At FETAC Level 6, students undertake four mandatory modules: Supervision in Childcare, Child Development, Social and Legal Issues in Childcare, and Early Childhood Programmes. There are two elective modules: Information Technology and Occupational First Aid. FETAC Level 6 is a one-year course. On completion of all six modules students are awarded FETAC Level 6 accreditation (see Appendix C for a description and the content of each of the FETAC Level 5 and Level 6 modules). In addition, a number of third-level institutions now offer a Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) in ECCE, including: University College Cork (UCC) since 1995, Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) since 1999, and Mary Immaculate College (MIC) since 2003 (see Appendix C for details of the B.A. (ECCE)).

3.10 Teacher Training

Musset (2009) claims that the way in which teacher education is organised, plays a key role in determining teacher quality. Since the 1970s, teaching in Ireland is an all-graduate profession. Teacher education, characterised by a 3 year concurrent model of education, is provided by education departments in the seven universities, or by colleges of education affiliated to one or other of the universities. On completion of training, graduates are awarded the degree of Bachelor of Education (B.Ed). Within the concurrent model, academic subjects are studied alongside educational integrated learning experience; with pedagogical and subject-matter (content knowledge) training taking place at the same time.

Primary teaching in Ireland continues to attract recruits from the top quartile of student achievers in the State Leaving Certificate examination (OECD, 2007). Table 6 provides a synopsis of the entry level for B.Ed. teacher training and B.A. (ECCE) training in a range of Irish universities in 2010.

Table 6 Entry Level to B.Ed. and B.A. (ECCE), 2010

Third-Level Course Provider	National Framework for Qualifications (NFQ) Level	Central Application Office (CAO) Points
Entry Level to B.Ed, 2010		
Mary Immaculate College, Limerick	Level 8	475
Froebel College, Dublin	Level 8	465
St. Patrick's College, Dublin	Level 8	475
Coláiste Mhuire, Marino Institute of Education, Dublin	Level 7	425
Entry level to B.A. (ECCE), 2010		
Mary Immaculate College, Limerick	Level 8	370
Dublin Institute of Technology	Level 8	415
University College Cork	Level 8	395
Institute of Technology, Tralee	Level 8	365
Institute of Technology, Carlow	Level 8	335

(Source: www.qualifax.ie)

With the exception of the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT), the points differential for entry to a B.A. (ECCE) by comparison to a B.Ed. is considerable. This, in itself, sets primary school teaching apart from the pre-school sector in terms of the educational attainment of entrants to both sectors.

Supervised and assessed teaching practice and school experience are an integral part of primary school teacher education in Ireland and accounts for up to 50% of the time spent on programmes. In order to become a fully qualified primary school teacher, graduates must complete a probationary year in a recognised primary school.

3.11 Equal Opportunities and Labour Market Dimension

Reflecting the considerable demographic shift and resultant difficulties for parents in accessing childcare outside the home in recent years, the DHC (1999 and 2000) highlight the lack of affordable quality childcare places as being particularly problematic. In agreement with the Social Partners, the government developed a National Development Plan (NDP) (2000–2006), of which the EOCP was a strand. Funding for childcare was negotiated through the equality measures of the European Structural Funds (ESF). A core objective of this funding was that the State would contribute to eliminating inequalities, and promoting equality between men and women (NDP/CSF, 2003). As the funding allocated for childcare through the ESF was primarily an equality measure to ensure equal employment opportunities for men and women, responsibility for childcare rested with the DJELR from 1999 – 2005, until the Office of the Minister for Children (OMC) was established.

In acknowledging the funding set aside for the EOCP, the DHC highlighted its commitment to ensuring that “the needs and rights of children are the primary consideration in the development of new quality [childcare] places” (DHC, 2000: 50). Given the genesis of the EOCP, in reality, its primary objective was to increase the number of childcare settings and places nationally as a conduit to enable parents to remain in, or return to, employment, education or training.

Convergent with the requirements of the ESF, an evaluation of EOCP justifies its existence in terms of “...perceived economic/labour market benefits, equality of opportunity and a positive social inclusion impact” (NDP/CSF, 2003: 26). The *Value for Money: Review of the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme* (OMC, 2007) highlights its success in: creating 33,582 new childcare places nationally, of which 14,799 were full-time places; as well as supporting 1,280 full-time staff and 1,568 part-time staff in the community sector (ibid.: 6). The 2007 review (OMC, 2007) confirmed that only limited progress had been made in terms of ensuring quality childcare provision. This is not surprising given the absence of a mandatory training requirement, coupled with the singular thrust of EOCP in increasing the supply of childcare provision.

3.12 Pre-School Inspection: Background and Context

Since the establishment of the Irish State, the private sphere of the family was accorded special status within the Irish Constitution and was guarded by the Catholic Church. State interventions into the private domain of the family were tolerated only in exceptional

circumstances. Equally, social services for children and families were limited (Herrmann and Herrenbrüeck, 2006). Widespread allegations of child sexual abuse began to emerge during the late 1980s, with further allegations of “cruelty to children in childcare institutions run by the Catholic Church” (Buckley *et al.*, 1997).

A number of high-profile child abuse cases triggered public and media interest in the area of child welfare. Such cases ran the “gamut from chronic abuse within families to abuse by priests and allegations of abuse by staff members in homes run by religious orders” (Gilligan, 1996: 56). The first of these high-profile cases involving gross physical, emotional and sexual abuse became known as the Kilkenny Incest Case. Such was the public outcry that the Minister for Health established an inquiry to investigate the failure of a number of services to respond appropriately to the Kilkenny incest case. The report from that inquiry (McGuinness, 1993) resulted in an immediate investment by the Government of IR£35 million to implement the recommendations of the report and the terms of the *Child Care Act, 1991* (Gilligan, 1996).

The *Child Care Act, 1991* marked a significant change in the systems of child welfare in Ireland by providing a legislative framework to deal with children who are considered neglected and at-risk (DH, 1991). It gave the Minister for Health administrative responsibility for child care, and vested powers with the then Health Boards (currently, HSE) to protect the welfare of children and to provide child care and family support services (Corrigan, 2004; Hayes, 2002; Kennedy, 2001; Purcell, 2001).

The subsequent *Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations, 1996* (DH, 1996) and *Child Care (Pre-School Services) (Amendment) Regulations, 1997* (DH, 1997) legislated primarily for structural quality within pre-school settings and allowed for an annual inspection by the HSE pre-school inspectorate. Specifically, these regulations placed a statutory duty on:

- 1) **Health Boards** to secure the health, safety and welfare and to promote the development of pre-school children attending pre-school services.
- 2) **The person carrying on a pre-school service** to take all reasonable measures to safeguard the health, safety and welfare of pre-school children attending the service (DHC, 1998).

Part 2: Article 7 of the regulations obliged a person carrying on a pre-school service to ensure that “a sufficient number of competent adults are supervising the pre-school children at all

times” (ibid: Part 2, Article 7). A competent adult was defined as a person “who has appropriate experience in caring for children under six years and/or who has an appropriate qualification in childcare and is a suitable person to care for children” (ibid.). Table 7 provides an overview of the required adult/child ratios in accordance with the regulations.

Tasked with supporting the development of the child, a person carrying on a pre-school service was obliged to ensure that “every pre-school child attending the service has suitable means of expression and development through the use of books, toys, games and other play materials, having regard to his/her age and development” (ibid.).

Table 7 Adult/Child Ratios: Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations, 1996

Sessional Services⁵	
Age Range	Adult/Child Ratio
0 – 6 Years	1 – 10
Full Day Care⁶	
Age Range	Adult/Child Ratio
0 – 1 Years	1 – 3
1 – 3 Years	1 – 6
3 – 6 Years	1 – 8

(Source: DHC, 1998)

Regardless of widespread consensus regarding two significant contributing factors to quality, i.e. staff qualifications and training (Bowman *et al.*, 2001; Burchinal *et al.*, 2002; Dalli, 2008; DES, 1999a and 2009a; DJELR, 2002; Epstein, 1999; European Childcare Network, 1996; Laevers, 2002; Oberheumer and Ulrich, 1997; Olmstead and Montie, 2001), and child development outcomes (Laevers, 2002; Malaguzzi, 1993; Sylva *et al.*, 2004), these aspects were not addressed by the regulations.

Indeed, the OECD (2004b) criticised the regulations for their predominantly structural focus, outlining that they did not include “quality related issues such as staff qualifications and training, curriculum and pedagogy” (ibid: 35). Similarly, a report of the National Forum for

⁵ Sessional pre-school services mean the provision of a service offering a planned programme to pre-school children of up to 3.5 hours per session.

⁶ A full day-care service means the provision of a structured day-care service for children for more than 3.5 hours per day.

Early Childhood Education (1998) upholds the belief that teacher competence is crucial in the early years and that the training and education of teachers is the first assurance of quality. While O’Kane (2004) attempts to justify such omissions, suggesting that the regulations were seen as an exercise in compromise; they effectively resulted in a continuation of diverse training, qualifications, pedagogy and quality of ECCE provision.

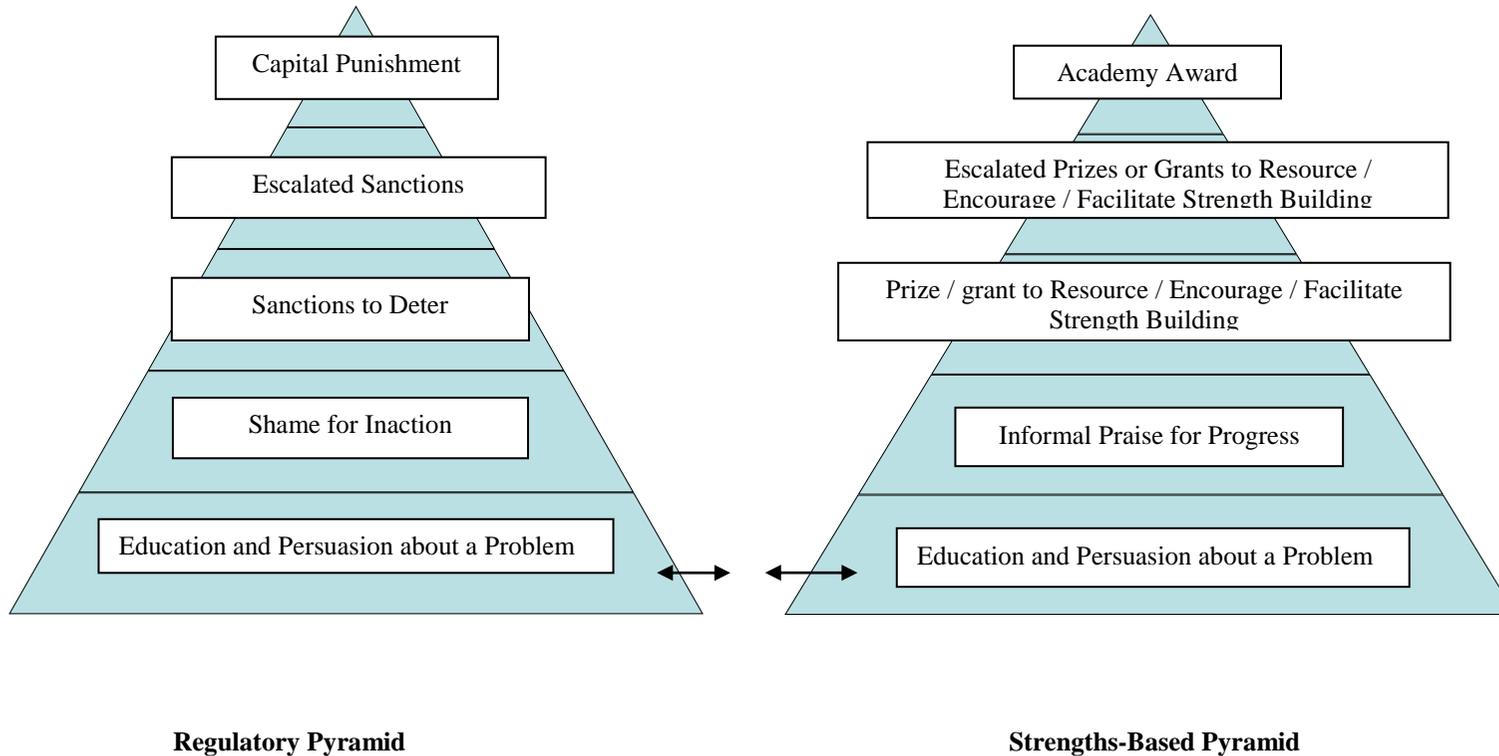
3.13 Regulatory Approach to the Pre-School Sector

As previously mentioned; the *Child Care Regulations* allowed for an annual inspection of ECCE settings by the HSE pre-school inspectorate. The purpose of these inspections was to enforce the regulations. Quality in this respect was primarily concerned with the specified criteria within the regulations as a generalisable standard against which ECCE provision could be judged with certainty (Dahlberg *et al.*, 1999).

Researchers (Baldock, 2001; Dahlberg *et al.*, 1999; Gormley, 1999) warn of the dangers of policing the inspection process, arguing that it is essentially about controlling the environment rather than supporting childcare providers. Gormley (1999: 117) argues that regulation is subject to the “...twin dangers of insufficient rigour and excessive severity”; the latter promotes quality at the expense of accessibility and affordability. Consequently, a didactic approach to regulation can lead to an adversarial relationship between childcare providers and inspectors (*ibid.*).

In their writings on aged care in Australia, Braithwaite, Makkai and Braithwaite (2007) developed an integrated compliance and strengths-based approach to regulation that has relevance for the ECCE field. The principle underpinning this model (Figure 12) is to promote better performance by rewarding and building on recognised strengths. The “regulatory pyramid” responds to fear about a risk, whereas the “strengths-based pyramid” responds to a hope that opportunities can be built upon (Braithwaite *et al.*, 2007: 118). They explain how both pyramids are linked at the bottom because education and persuasion about problems and strengths may have the same delivery mechanism. Rather than being preoccupied with “guaranteeing a minimum standard” as mandated through the Child Care Regulations, this model seeks to “maximise quality by pulling standards up through a ceiling” (*ibid.*: 318).

Figure 12 Regulatory and Strengths-Based Pyramid



(Source: Braithwaite *et al.*, 2007: 319).

While the Braithwaite model acknowledges the need for different strategies in order to encourage regulatory compliance, Fullan (2001) suggests that it is difficult to generate motivation to comply with new policy, if the values of the key implementers (pre-school providers and staff) are not compatible with the intent of a policy. The Minister for Health announced a review of the regulations in October, 2001. The revised *Child Care (Pre-School Services) (No 2) Regulations* were published in 2006 (DHC, 2006). These revised regulations (particularly, Section 3.19) place a greater emphasis on processes within settings. This is most evident in Article 5: Child Health and Well-Being. On foot of this review, a standardised inspection tool was developed to ensure consistency in inspections and outcome reports across the HSE regions in Ireland.

3.14 Primary School Inspection

The promotion of quality is a paramount concern for all those involved in the educational system in Ireland (OECD, 2007). Primary schools, therefore, are subjected to a rigorous inspection process. Responsibility for evaluating formal education provision in Ireland is assigned to the Inspectorate, a division of the DES. Section 13 of the *Education Act, 1998* bequeaths responsibility for quality assurance within the education system on the Minister for Education and Science. Under Section 7(2) (b), the Minister is required "to monitor and assess the quality... and effectiveness of the education system provided in the State by recognised schools and centres for education" (ibid: Section 7(2) (b)). The Act defines the main functions of the Inspectorate (categorised broadly) as; the evaluation of the educational system (at primary and second level) and the provision of advice to the educational system and policy makers. The functions of inspectors are to:

- Support and advise recognised schools, teachers and boards of management on matters relating to the provision of education, through an evaluation of the organisation and operation of schools and the quality, effectiveness and standards of education provided therein, including the quality and effectiveness of individual teachers.
- Evaluate the quality and effectiveness of the provision of education in the State.
- Conduct research into education and support policy formulation.
- Evaluate the effectiveness of the teaching, development, promotion and use of Irish in schools.
- Advise on any matter relating to education policy and provision, including curriculum, assessment and teaching methods (DES, 2006).

Schools themselves have a key role in the task of identifying existing good practice as well as areas for further development. The centrality of the school's role in relation to evaluation and development is evident from the following statement which describes schools as “complex institutions in which change can only come about through internal acceptance by staff and management both of the school's strengths and of the need for action in those areas of activity where further development is desirable” (Report on the 1998/1999 Pilot Project on the Whole School Evaluation: 49).

Up until 2003, following a school inspection, a school report (*Tuairisc Scoile*) was prepared on each primary school on average every seven years. However, the inspection of primary schools has been further developed with the introduction of Whole School Evaluations (WSE) which has replaced the *Tuairisc Scoile* model of inspection. WSE was phased in to primary schools from 2003-2004 onwards. It is a process whereby a team of DES inspectors spend a few days in a school evaluating its overall work under a number of themes, each of which is related to processes within the school. WSE specifically inspects the quality of:

1. School management
2. School planning
3. Curriculum provision
4. Learning and teaching in subjects
5. Supports for inclusion

Unlike pre-school inspection, which consists of unannounced HSE visits to the setting, the WSE process includes: pre-evaluation meetings with staff and management, meetings with parents’ associations, school and classroom visits, preparation of a draft report, post-inspection meetings with staff and management, finalising of the WSE report, and finally the issuing of the report to the school. Accordingly, the WSE model which builds upon teacher strengths is similar to that proposed by Braithwaite *et al* (2007). Reports of school inspections carried out since February 2006 are available, upon request, to the public. In addition to WSE, the school inspectorate periodically carries out inspections on a particular subject or a range of subjects across a chosen school. They may also inspect a certain course or inspection of a particular theme, or an aspect of school life such as literacy or special needs (INTO, 2009).

3.15 Department of Education and Skills

Traditionally, the DES has a tradition of involvement in early childhood education by virtue of its universal provision for infant class children, as well as the provision of targeted interventions for children with special needs and those affected by educational disadvantage,

e.g. the *Rutland Street Project* and the *Early Start Pilot Pre-School Project*. Building on the *Rutland Street Project* (1969 to present day), the *Early Start Pre-School Pilot Project* was introduced in 40 areas of disadvantage nationwide in 1994. The purpose of the initiative was to enhance children's development through an educational programme and to counteract the effects of social disadvantage (Lewis and Archer, 2002).

In 1998, the National Forum for Early Childhood Education facilitated all those with an interest in ECE to come together for the first time. Noting the paucity of ECE research in Ireland, it commented that "it is as if the problems of little people were also regarded as little [and not worthy of the] serious attention of politicians and others in the real world" (Coolahan, 1998: 7).

Following the Forum, the DES published *Ready to Learn: The White Paper on Early Childhood Education* (DES, 1999a). A pivotal publication, its principal focus was on children aged 3 to 6 years. Crucially, it acknowledges that "care without education cannot succeed in promoting educational objectives" (DES, 1999a: 11). It implies an implicit link between pre-school and primary school, asserting that education and care should be provided in a "complimentary seamless fashion" (ibid: 4). Hence, in a departure from historical ideologies where education was seen to commence upon entry to primary school, the early years were perceived as a core aspect of the child's involvement in learning. Unfortunately, notwithstanding political rhetoric throughout the past decade, little progress has been made in minimising the gap between the two sectors in spite of what is universally recognised as the "inextricable link" between education and care (ibid: 4). Indeed, O'Kane (2008) claims that the differences between the pre-school and primary school sectors in Ireland are evident in almost every aspect of practice including curricula, staff training, regulation and inspection, historical and cultural differences, and the government departments with responsibility for each sector.

Also in 1999, the DES launched the *Primary School Curriculum* which includes an infant curriculum for children aged four to six years. Presented in seven curriculum areas, it recognises the integrity of the child's life and aims to "cater for his/her needs and potential as they evolve day by day" (DES, 1999b: 6). The curriculum aims to "enrich the child's life" laying the foundations for "happiness and fulfilment in later education and in adult life" (ibid: 6). It is based on a philosophy of teaching and learning that accords equal importance to what the child learns and to the process by which s/he learns. One of its essential features is

recognition of the principle that there are different kinds of learning and that children learn in different ways. Hence, the curriculum articulates not only the content to be learned and outcomes to be achieved, but a wide range of approaches to learning.

Curriculum alone is not a guarantor of quality. In many European countries, including Ireland, teachers use traditional practices aimed at transmitting knowledge in structured settings more often than they use student-oriented practices, such as adapting teaching to individual needs (OECD, 2009a). Furthermore, teachers seldom use enhanced learning activities that require a deeper cognitive activation of students (ibid.). In an indictment of school policy and practice, Woodhead (2006) claims that classroom conditions, curricula and staffing ratios may not be of sufficient quality to ensure that the benefits from an early childhood programme are reinforced and translated into long term outcomes for children across the primary school sector.

The considerable variation in approaches to qualifications and training, and the application of adult/child ratios are anomalies that remain. The Programme for Government (2002) committed to progressively introduce maximum class guidelines to ensure that the average size of classes for children aged 9 years and under would be below the international best-practice guideline of 20:1. This commitment has not materialized. Therefore, classes resemble “chips from a takeaway... [that] come in three sizes - regular, large and super-sized” (Carr, 2007, INTO general secretary). While teachers find themselves alone in classes of 25 - 30 children (OECD, 2004a, 2006a, 2009a and 2009b), the *Child Care (Pre-School Services) (No 2) Regulations, 2006* (DHC, 2006) require one adult for every 8 children (full-time) or every 10 children (part-time) in the 3 - 6 year age cohort. Bearing in mind that 50% of four year olds and almost all five year olds attend primary school in Ireland, this age cohort participate in a learning environment that is characterised by disproportionate adult/child ratios.

As previously mentioned, primary school teachers must undertake a three year B.Ed. training programme, yet there is no statutory training requirement for the pre- school sector. This anomaly contradicts researcher claims that programmes must be pedagogically sound and conducted by appropriately trained professionals (DES, 1999a; Bennett, 2004; Urban, 2008).

It is noteworthy that those involved in the HSE pre-school inspectorate generally come with a public health nursing background and may be “relatively untrained in early childhood

methodology” (Bennett, 2004: 8). This is not to minimise the importance of their role in ensuring that minimum standards are maintained, rather it points to what may be insufficient pedagogical knowledge and understanding, serving to create conflicting perspectives between those working in the pre-school sector and the inspectorate.

Pre-school settings found in violation of the Child Care Regulations, are subject to punitive sanctions, risking closure at worst, or having their numbers capped at best. These irregularities are cause for concern at many levels, not least of which relates to the child’s lived experience within pre-school and infant classrooms, as well as the impact on the child’s transition from pre-school to primary school. Fundamentally, policy makers, teachers, parents and society must question the appropriateness of such diverse approaches to children’s care and education across pre-school and primary sectors.

3.16 Informing Transitions in the Early Years

Expectations of children metamorphose dramatically as they transition from pre-school to primary school; characterised by high adult/child ratios and the flexibility and fluidity of activities in pre-schools, to the relative anonymity of the infant classroom as they strive for recognition and identity as one of many within the structure of the new environs.

Accordingly, the “wishes and fears of individual children may not be taken into account in large classrooms focussed not on the individual child or the child’s agency but on reaching early learning standards” (Bennett, 2006: 16). At the core of this argument is the inequity that exists in terms of the monitoring and regulation of both sectors. At primary level, educational accountability is monitored by the DES with little regard for structural characteristics; whereas, at pre-school level, a strong emphasis on structural aspects is prioritised over educational accountability. Far from uniting the sectors, the continuing dichotomy perpetuates entrenched approaches creating unhealthy and unhelpful perceptions and attitudes within both sectors.

The Education for All initiative (2007) and the OECD (2004b and 2006a) suggest that a more unified approach to learning should be adopted within early education and the primary school systems. A number of researchers (Elkind, 2003; Fabian, 2002; Moloney, 2010b; O’Kane, 2008) report that on entry to school, teachers expect social skills rather than cognitive ability from children. These skills include the ability to listen; to follow instructions; to start and complete a task independently; to work cooperatively with peers; to take turns; to possess the capacity to concentrate and to sit for relatively long periods of time; to stand in line; and the

ability to use their initiative. Importantly, those purporting the need for educational reforms are critical of what Hargreaves (2007: 224) refers to as the “agrarian and industrial models of one teacher-one class schooling” (ibid: 224).

Asserting that transitions are a time of stimulus and growth, the OECD (2006a) caution that, if too abrupt and handled without care, they carry “the risk of regression and failure” (ibid: 15). As a life event, Schultz and Heuchert (1983) claim that transition to school is a stressful experience for all children and requires sensitive handling by the class teacher, who embarks on the inevitable and necessary process of “spirit breaking” (ibid: 18). Consistent with this assertion, Cohen and Manion (1998) suggest that the most valuable part of a teacher’s work in school is control. Pointing to the difficulties associated with transition, Johansson (2007) asserts that leaving one arena, with its specific and cultural code, and moving into another with a different set of values and “ways of constructing meaning about what is important in the surrounding world” (ibid: 33) is a complicated and complex process for most children. Critically, children are bounded by specific cultural codes within the home, pre-school, school and the wider community. Fundamentally, this points to the need for shared values, principles and approaches to teaching in both sectors.

Researchers Moreno and Dongen (2006) and O’Kane (2008) assert that the issue of transitions is intrinsically linked to education, concluding that schools have a responsibility to meet children halfway. Better communication and interaction between pre-schools, primary school and parents would help to facilitate transitions (Fabian and Dunlop, 2007; Johansson, 2007; Moreno and Dongen, 2006; O’Kane, 2008; Pianta and Kraft-Sayre, 2003).

The core question according to the EFA (2007) relates to “ready schools”; the characteristics of a school environment that might facilitate or hinder learning. Among the many factors that affect readiness are: overcrowding; the language gap in which the language of instruction may differ from the child’s mother tongue; and inadequate learning materials (ibid.).

In expounding the need for a “strong and equal partnership” (Bennett, 2006: 16) between the school and early childhood setting, Bennett (2006) suggests that early childhood pedagogy “...with its emphasis on the natural learning strategies” (ibid: 16) of the child should be respected and reflected in infant classes.

Moreover, continuity in educational processes can be stressed in two ways:

1. Introducing the sequential educational process of the primary school into early education,
2. Transferring the holistic and investigative approaches to learning, characteristic of the young child, upwards to junior classes in primary school (ibid.)

In support of the second approach, Bennett suggests that schools may need to adapt a modified pedagogy (similar to the Nordic countries), in the first years of primary schooling. In Ireland, the development of *Síolta* (CECDE, 2006) and *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009) that span the childhood period of birth to six years, may herald a new beginning in harmonising processes across the pre-school and primary school sectors.

3.17 Children and Equality

National and international policy guarantee all children, regardless of circumstances (DHC, 2000; OMC/DHC, 2007; UNCRC, 1989), access to services that are whole-child / whole-system focussed; responsive to their needs; culturally sensitive; and anti discriminatory. As highlighted in Chapter 1, ECCE programmes not only address the care, nurturing and education of young children, they also contribute to the “resolution of complex social issues” (Bennett, 2006: 5).

Regardless of perspectives to the contrary, government does not treat all children equally. In this regard, defining disadvantage within the narrow confines of socio-economics deprives significant numbers of children who are on the fringes for a myriad of reasons. As fears increasingly emerge for children who are not as easily recognisable as being at risk; consideration must be given to the ever increasing social issues that impact on children’s lives across all societal strata (Bennett, 2007; OECD, 2006a; Pianta, 1999; Wyness, 2003), including marital breakdown, decrease in familial support, and diverse family units.

According to the OECD (2006a), almost half of the children considered to be at risk live outside designated areas of disadvantage. Likewise, Bennett (2007b) claims that targeted childcare provision fails to provide for many of the children who are eligible for special programmes. Acknowledging the challenges experienced by parents in rearing their children, Dunne *et al.* (2007) highlight the many everyday expenses associated with contemporary living, e.g. “high mortgage or other housing costs, such as rent” (ibid: 18). All of which impact on disposable income and leads to a situation where supposedly well-off families can

ill afford to pay high childcare costs and yet find themselves in a situation where their choices are limited, as they do not qualify for any subsidies.

Whelan and Maitre (2008: 5) refer to the “temporalisation and biographisation” of poverty, where disadvantage is seen as both individualised and transitory. Thus, poverty is not restricted to designated areas or low socio-economic classification. While risk is inherent in certain visible populations, government tends to decentre children as a collective group, thus ignoring the fact that risk is also a dynamic construct likely to affect many more families and children than those visibly at risk.

Following a recommendation in the *Value for Money* review (OMC, 2007) that alternative forms of financing to EOCP be developed, the Community Childcare Subvention Scheme (CCSS), 2008-2010 was introduced. Under the provisions of CCSS, childcare subsidies were made available to parents in receipt of social welfare payments. The subsidies were intended to support such parents with childcare costs, irrespective of the child’s age or the parents’ employment status.

Consistent with claims by Urban (2008) and Vandebroek *et al.* (2006) that the economy dominates all aspects of policy, a new Community Childcare Subvention initiative (CCS) was announced in Budget, 2010. Introduced as a cost saving measure, the CCS supersedes the CCSS and came into effect in September, 2010. Under CCS, weekly subvention for recipients of Jobseeker’s Benefit⁷ is capped at 2 ½ days per week. The rate is unchanged, and so full capitation applies to such parents availing of sessional- and half-day places, but where the child attends full daycare, no more than €50 subvention applies per week.

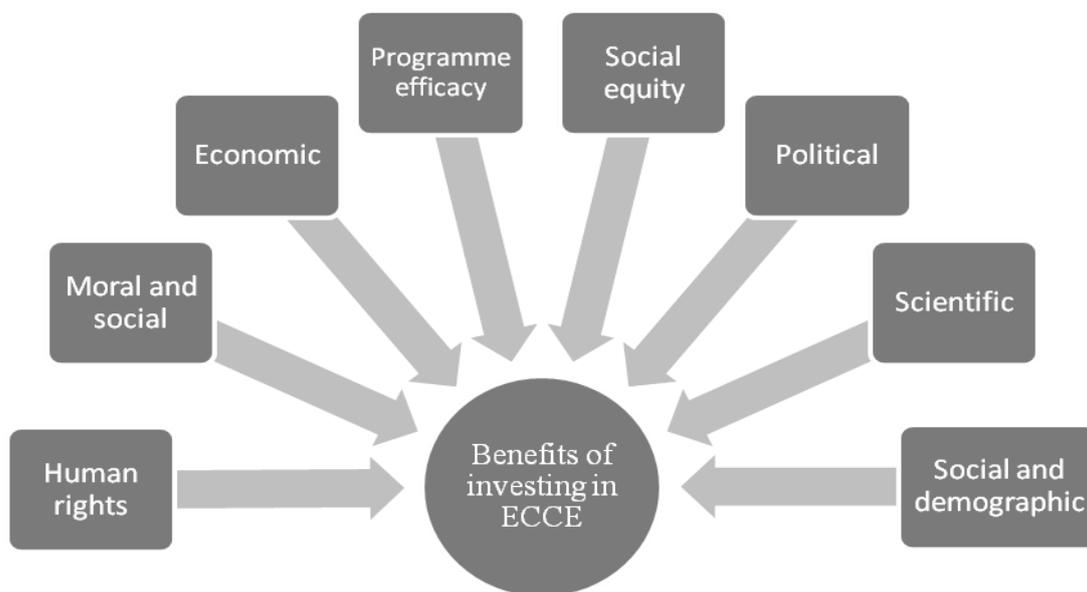
The CCS represents a crude fiscal measure that is specifically directed at saving money. It signifies that in the current economic climate, women are no longer perceived as contributors to the economy. Moreover, it represents a narrow short-term perspective that fails to take account of “mid-income parents [who do not have the] blessing of convenient, affordable, quality childcare” (Buell and Peters, 2003: 83). More than a decade ago, the DJELR (1999) noted that low income or middle income earners found their earnings “wholly or largely absorbed by childcare costs” (ibid: 4). Moreover, the OECD (2003) point to the inequity

⁷ Jobseeker’s Benefit is a weekly payment from the Department of Social Protection (formerly, the Department of Social and Family Affairs) to people who are out of work and covered by social insurance. Since October, 2008 Jobseeker’s Benefit can be paid for: (i) a maximum of 12 months to people who have paid at least 260 contributions, and (ii) a maximum of 9 months to people who have paid less than 260 contributions.

between families in the same income group in terms of those who have access to heavily subsidised community childcare and those who do not. A study into childcare provision in Ireland (Barry and Sherlock, 2008) reaffirms this stance with regard to the financial difficulties for middle income families in accessing affordable ECCE.

Adopting a broad view of the benefits of investment in ECCE, UNICEF (2005) outlines the arguments for subsidising childcare costs (Figure 13).

Figure 13 Benefits of Subsidising Childcare Costs



Typical of a liberal welfare approach to ECCE, Ireland employs a universal child-benefit payment that can be used by parents to subsidise childcare costs. As part of a commitment to support parents with childcare costs, an Early Childhood Supplement (ECS) was introduced in Budget, 2006. This comprised an annual payment to the value of €1,000, which would be paid directly to parents in respect of each child under six years of age. The ECS was guided more by an attempt to treat all parents equally than any commitment to improve and maintain the quality of early education experiences for children (Hayes, 2008). Again, indicating the supremacy of the economy, the ECS was phased out between 2008 and 2009 in a series of stringent cost saving measures, effectively saving the exchequer €500 million. Furthermore, the universal child benefit payment was significantly reduced in Budget, 2010, while debate continues at the political level about further reductions into the future.

3.18 Universal Pre-School Provision

Notwithstanding a predominant focus on targeted intervention, Ireland has commitments under the Barcelona Summit, (2002); specifically to ensure that 90% of all children aged between 3 to 5 years participate in full-time education by 2010. This commitment may well have been the impetus for the introduction of the universal Free Pre-School Year in ECCE Scheme, 2010. This scheme is directed at giving children access to a free pre-school year of appropriate programme-based activities in the year prior to commencing primary school. It is open to all children aged between 3 years 3 months and 4 years 6 months on September 1st each year.

Participating settings are paid a capitation fee for each qualifying child enrolled. In return, the setting provides an appropriate programme of activities that are free to parents. Children attending full- or part-time services receive 11 hours 15 minutes a week, whereas, children attending a sessional service receive 15 hours per week.

Without doubt, this scheme marks a watershed in the development of ECCE in Ireland. It supports all parents with childcare costs in the year prior to their child starting formal education - irrespective of their financial circumstances or the location of the service. As a result of the scheme, in excess of 94% of children in the year prior to transitioning to primary school are attending a pre-school service. Coupled with the numbers of children availing of their free pre-school year through: Early Start programmes; special services for children with special needs; Traveller pre-schools; and the CCS scheme, some 97% of children were availing of a free pre-school place (Barry, Andrews, Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, 2010)] at the time of this study. These figures exceed the 90% Barcelona summit threshold.

A requirement of the scheme is that all pre-school leaders would possess a minimum training standard of FETAC Level 5 by 2012. Moreover, it recognises the value of higher-level training by increasing the capitation available to services employing ECCE graduates.

Following the Government's decision to establish the OMCYA in 2005, a new Early Years Education Policy Unit (EYEPU) was established in the DES (co-located within the OMCYA). This unit has responsibility for the development of a Workforce Development Plan for the early years sector. Collectively, *Síolta* (CECDE, 2006), *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009) and the Workforce Development Plan are the pillars that support the ongoing development of quality ECCE provision. These initiatives span the primary school sector, incorporating

junior and senior infant classes, inferring the need for a unified approach between both sectors. These measures are central to ensuring that the ECCE agenda progresses towards a more comprehensive focus on quality; particularly processes within settings that are a distinctive characteristic of practice within both domains.

3.19 Potential of *Síolta* and *Aistear* to Influence Quality

Concurrent with the review of the *Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations, 1996* (DH, 1996) a number of seminal policies were developed with a view to impacting on process quality within formal and informal settings. Significantly, *Síolta: the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education* was launched by the CECDE in 2006.

Síolta was designed to complement the existing regulatory and curricular frameworks relevant to the ECCE sector in Ireland (Circular 1/2009). In recognition that current practice is lacking in terms of quality, this circular stipulates that *Síolta* can be used by services who are “beginning to develop quality in practice and who are endeavouring to comply with minimum standards as represented by the Child Care (Pre-School Services) (No 2) Regulations 2006” (Circular 1/2009). Furthermore, “highly developed services can use *Síolta* to constantly refresh and revitalise their planning and development activities and can also avail of the opportunity to get external validation of their quality practice” (ibid.).

Central to *Síolta* is the principle that “...pedagogy in early childhood is expressed by curricula or programmes of activities which take a holistic approach to the development and learning of the child and reflect the inseparable nature of care and education” (CECDE, 2004). It is directed towards processes within settings and is intended for use by childcare providers as well as junior and senior infant teachers. The aspiration is to “bridge many of the traditional divides between education and care and between early year’s settings and the formal education system” (CECDE, 2004: 1). This objective will be achieved through the development of ECCE services in line with a series of guiding principles and standards (see Appendix D) that serve as the benchmark for all quality practices and service provision in early education.

Síolta implies that childcare staff must understand child development theory, educational philosophy, and an understanding of what it is they want for children in settings and how these objectives can be achieved. Crucially, it emphasises the need for enriching and informing all aspects of practice through cycles of “observation, planning, action and

evaluation, undertaken on a regular basis” (CECDE, 2006: 57). Ultimately, *Síolta* represents the vision that underpins and provides the context for quality practice in ECCE in Ireland. Currently there are 23 *Síolta* Coordinators employed by a variety of organisations including the National Voluntary Childcare Collaborative (NVCC). These coordinators are working with a range of services across Ireland to implement *Síolta*.

Consideration must also be given to the implications of implementing a national early years curriculum in Ireland. To this end, *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* was published by the NCCA in 2009. As with *Síolta* (CECDE, 2006), *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009) is concerned with enhancing process quality within settings. Its publication marks a watershed in the history of curriculum development, focussing specifically on learning throughout early childhood from birth to six years. Its objective is to “complement existing curriculum guidance... create more coherence and connectedness across learning and... offer advice and guidance to adults in planning and providing appropriate learning experiences for the individual child” (NCCA, 2004: 15). It has both implicit and explicit links with the *Primary School Curriculum* (DES, 1999).

Commenting on the significance of transition from pre-school to primary school, Walsh (2003) holds that it is “imperative to create a learning continuum to effect this smooth transition and minimise any disruption between the two learning contexts” (ibid.: 93).

Adopting a thematic approach, *Aistear* outlines children’s learning through four themes:

1. Well-being,
2. Identity and belonging,
3. Communicating, and
4. Exploring and thinking.

In line with the principles of *Síolta*, *Aistear* supports a partnership approach to working with children, together with the need for reflective practice to “empower the adult in his/her role as educator and as learner” (NCCA, 2004: 69) and the need to plan for early learning so that “children’s strengths as well as their needs shape the experiences they are offered” (ibid: 69). *Aistear* is appropriate to the needs of children in the birth to 6 year age range, and supports the active participation of the child in his/her learning, based upon reciprocal relationships with caring and understanding adults.

Central to both initiatives is a commitment to supporting pre-school and infant teachers to attain the highest possible standards of practice. Their starting point is the practitioner, and rather than looking at a “deficit model, they examine instead, that which is working well, thereby affirming the teacher in his/her role, while at the same time identifying areas for improvement” (Moloney, 2010a: 189). It is imperative that teachers feel positive about their role in supporting and facilitating children’s learning, so that they arrive at a place where providing quality ECE is seen as an everyday occurrence.

Moreover, these initiatives highlight the need for teachers to take account of the social milieu of children’s lives that impact their learning. Hence, frameworks that bridge formal and informal education settings strengthen pedagogical continuity; helping to maintain enthusiasm for learning and school attendance (Fabian and Dunlop, 2007). There is little doubt that *Síolta* and *Aistear* are predicated on an understanding of the need and a willingness to bridge the gap between care and education.

3.20 Implementing *Síolta* and *Aistear*

The OMCYA circular (No 1/2009) outlines the approach to implementing *Síolta* (CECDE, 2006), *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009) and Article 5 of the *Child Care (Pre-School Services) (No. 2) Regulations, 2006* (DHC, 2006) during an initial implementation phase from January 2010 to August 2012. This will be followed in September 2012 by Phase II when more “stringent requirements” regarding the level of qualifications held by practitioners in ECCE services, the standard of implementation of *Síolta*, and compliance for the purposes of Regulation 5, will be appropriate (Circular 1/2009).

- **Phase I: January 2010 - September 2012**

During the introductory period - Phase I from January 2010 to September 2012 - the pre-school inspectorate, the CCCs and those involved in *Síolta* are asked to support pre-school service providers in becoming familiar with and competent in the new requirements. The OMCYA acknowledge that an “incremental approach accepting the need for a lead-in time is required” (Circular, 1/2009).

Working with the HSE, the OMCYA will coordinate information on the interaction of *Síolta*, *Aistear* and Article 5. This information will be disseminated to pre-school services in a cohesive way, through the pre-school inspectorate, the CCCs and those involved with *Síolta*.

The EYEPU will play a key role in producing clear information on how early years learning programmes are accommodated within *Síolta* and *Aistear*. The Childcare Directorate of the OMCYA will work with the CCCs and the NVCCs involved in implementing *Síolta* to deliver a series of information and training workshop at county level, over the course of this period.

- **Phase II: September 2012 - September 2014**

From September 2012 to September 2014, the level of required competence and familiarity with the new requirements under the ECCE scheme, Article 5 and *Síolta* will increase. This process is designed to “achieve a coherent implementation by all parties concerned with the requirements placed on services participating in the ECCE scheme, both regulatory and those particular to the scheme... the overall objective is to ensure that children's experience of early childhood care and education is the best possible” (Circular 1/2009).

3.21 Diversity and Equality Guidelines

Building on the work of Louise Derman-Sparks (1989), and recognising that the foundations for equality and respect are laid early in life, Murray and O’ Doherty (2001) developed *Eíst: Respecting Diversity in Early Childhood Care, Education and Training*. While *Eíst* encourages practitioners to reflect on their own practices and experiences, it strongly promulgates the inclusion of diversity education in ECCE provision and training.

Drawing heavily on *Eíst*, and set against the backdrop of the UNCRC, international agreements and national policy initiatives (notably the *National Children’s Strategy* (DHC, 2000)) the OMCYA published *Diversity and Equality Guidelines for Childcare Providers* in 2006. These guidelines serve to support ECCE practitioners in their exploration, understanding and development of diversity and equality practice. Described as essential to building a “childcare system that truly nurtures all of its children” (OMCYA, 2006: viii), these guidelines purport that those working with children should be:

“Well informed about each individual child, about their capabilities, their interests, their culture and their background. Informed by this knowledge practitioners can respond respectfully to the rich diversity around them” (OMC, 2006: viii-ix).

Reflecting the principles of *Aistear* and *Síolta*, these guidelines reinforce the vulnerability and dependency of children within society, while simultaneously placing them at the centre of policy and practice.

Commenting on the increasing levels of cultural diversity in Ireland, Deegan (1998) notes that children are attempting to “learn, live and play free of prejudice” (ibid: 40) in a multitude of environments including schools, classrooms, playgrounds, neighbourhoods and communities. Teaching needs to be “correspondingly responsive and caring”, it must “respect diversity by celebrating all cultures and challenging oppression and social injustice in the present cultures of classrooms and schools” (ibid: 40).

Moreover, Devine, Lodge and Deegan, (2004a: 255) believe that “learning about diversity is a pre-requisite for teaching about diversity; there can be no teaching without prior learning”. While these comments relate specifically to the primary school sector, they are equally applicable to ECCE. Any attempt to redress issues of equality and diversity are dependent upon awareness including: self-awareness, knowledge and understanding of the issues and challenges and an ability and confidence to deal effectively with oppression and social injustice. In the words of Derman-Sparks (1989), those working in the ECCE sector have a “serious responsibility to find ways to prevent and counter the damage before it becomes too deep” (ibid: 5). This is a formidable challenge that must not be underestimated or minimised. As articulated by Devine *et al.* (2004a: 255), they require “generous time, space and opportunity for reflection moving beyond socially constructed and accepted stereotypes” (ibid: 255).

3.22 Process Quality and the Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations

The *Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations, 1996* (DH, 1996) were discussed earlier in Section 3.9 which highlighted their predominant focus on structural quality. Likewise, the revised *Child Care (Pre-School Services) (No 2) Regulations, 2006* (DHC, 2006) maintain a strong emphasis on structural quality, covering such areas as the: health, welfare and development of the child; behaviour; child/adult ratios; premises and facilities; floor space; heating and ventilation; sanitation; food; safety measures; facilities for rest; and play and insurance.

In addition to the pre-existing full-time and sessional services, the revised regulations introduced a new category: “part-time” day care. This category is intended to bridge the gap for parents engaged in part-time employment, and for whom a sessional 3.5 hour service is insufficient - but yet they do not require full-time day care. The specific adult/child ratios required under the regulations are set out in Table 8.

The maximum number of children allowed, at any one time, in a sessional group that caters for children up to six years of age is 20. This is dependent upon the availability of sufficient space in the room. When viewed in the context of excessive teacher/child ratios (1: 25/30) and limited availability of space in infant classes, it is apparent that inappropriate conditions are excused in the name of education in the primary school system.

Table 8 Adult/Child Ratios, Child Care (Pre-School Services) (No. 2) Regulations, 2006

Type of Service	Age of Children	Adult/Child Ratio
Full Day Care ⁸	0 – 1 Year	1: 3
	1 – 2 Years	1: 5
	2 - 3 Years	1: 6
	3 – 6 Years	1: 8
Part-Time Day Care ⁹	Birth to 1 Year	1: 3
	1 – 2 Years	1: 5
	2 - 3 Years	1: 6
	3 – 6 Years	1: 8
Sessional ¹⁰	Birth – 1 Year	1: 3
	1 - 2½ Years	1: 5
	2½ - 6 Years	1: 10

Significantly, there is an increased focus on child development within the revised regulations, which embrace the “whole child perspective” (DHC, 2000). Table 9 highlights the considerable difference with regard to the child development component, by comparison to the previous regulations in 1996.

⁸ This is a structured day care service for more than 5 hours per day.

⁹ This is a new type of pre-school service offering a structured day care service for pre-school children of up to 3.5 hours per session.

¹⁰ This is a sessional service offering a planned programme of up to 3.5 hours per day but less than 5 hours (DHC, 2006).

Table 9 Comparison of Child Development Aspect of the Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations, 1996 and 2006

<i>Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations</i>	
Development of Child	
1996	2006
<p>A person carrying on a pre-school service shall ensure that:</p> <p>Every pre-school child attending the service has suitable means of expression and development through the use of books, toys, games and other play materials, having regard to his/her age and development.</p>	<p>A person carrying on a pre-school service shall ensure that:</p> <p>Each child’s learning development and well being is facilitated within the daily life of the service, through the provision of the appropriate opportunities, experiences, activities, interactions, materials and equipment, having regard to the age and stage of development of the child’s cultural context.</p>

Source: DHC, 1998 and 2006.

The revised regulations adopt a broader view of the child’s development, giving due recognition to the multiple influences on this development. Accordingly, pre-school teachers must be “pro-active in ensuring that appropriate action is taken to address each child’s needs in cooperation with his/her parents and following consultation, where appropriate, with other relevant services” (DHC, 2006: 36). Mirroring the *National Children’s Strategy* (DHC, 2000), the regulations stipulate that in meeting these needs, pre-school teachers should “recognise how children affect and, in turn, are affected by the relationships, environments and activities around them” (ibid: 36). These requirements point to the need for a core body of knowledge, together with a level of competency and skill on behalf of pre-school teachers.

3.22.1 Management and Staffing

Article 8: Management and Staffing represents a fundamental flaw within the revised regulations that severely undermines process quality in settings. Nutbrown (1999) refers to all those who work with children in a professional capacity as “professional educators... adults who have some relevant training and qualifications, who are active in their thinking and interaction with children in group settings” (ibid: 28). Congruent with the 1996 regulations, Article 8 simply requires that a person carrying on a pre-school service shall ensure that “a sufficient number of suitable and competent adults are working directly with the children in the pre-school setting at all times” (DHC, 2006: 37). Once more, a suitable and competent

adult is defined as a “person (over 18 years) who has appropriate experience in caring for children under six years of age and/or who has an appropriate qualification in childcare” (ibid: 38).

Ironically, as highlighted in Chapter 1, the DJELR (2003) explicates the presence of qualified staff among a range of factors considered essential to the achievement of quality. Article 8 represents a considerable contradiction when viewed alongside *Síolta* (CECDE, 2006), *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009), the *Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development in the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector* (DJELR, 2002) and ongoing work on the development of a Workforce Development Plan. Each of these initiatives emphasises the critical importance of qualifications and training for those working in the ECCE sector. Failure to embed a mandatory training requirement within the regulations is farcical, given the considerable responsibility placed upon pre-school teachers to facilitate children’s development in accordance with Article 5 (see Table 9).

Current staffing requirements devalue both the importance of the pre-school teacher’s role in shaping children’s development during their formative years as well as the highly skilled nature of ECCE. It is extremely unlikely that any 18 year old would have appropriate experience in caring for children under six years of age that would enable him/her to adequately implement the child development provisions of the *Child Care (Pre-School Services) (NO. 2) (Amendment) Regulations 2006*, let alone hold an appropriate qualification.

Equally, one must question the appropriateness of an “and/or approach” to qualified staffing, bearing in mind criticism of the same approach within the 1996 regulations by the Partnership 2000 Expert Working Group Report (DJELR, 1999). It is inconceivable that the same laissez faire approach to staff training and qualifications was not redressed through the Child Care Regulations a decade later.

The staffing issue is further compounded by a recommendation that the childcare provider should aim to have “...at least fifty per cent of childcare staff with a qualification appropriate to the care and development of children” (DHC, 2006: 39) and that qualified staff “should rotate between age groupings” (ibid.). Community childcare provision has been characterised by this combination of trained/semi-trained/untrained staffing for many years. Studies highlight significant dissatisfaction, frustration and ineffectiveness of this approach (OECD, 2001 and 2004a; NESF, 2005). Given, the strong empirical evidence (EPPE, REPEY, High

Scope Perry Pre-school evaluation, Competent Children Competent Learners study) of the relationship between highly qualified teachers and child outcomes, particularly in terms of disadvantaged children, this staffing requirement is highly questionable.

Highlighting the need for grounding ECCE practices in theory, Pianta (1997) argues that in order to address pressing ECCE concerns at the local level, we tend to create a vacuum that is filled by practices that are less and less linked to theory. Disconnect between theory and practice creates challenges and difficulties for teachers at all levels in understanding how “basic processes related to particular problems, and theories regarding those processes, can directly contribute to designing useful practice” (ibid: 11). Inability to connect theory to practice on a continuous basis is intertwined with inadequately trained staff.

In their haste to address changing demographics, policy makers over looked a fundamental principle of quality ECCE provision: the need for appropriately trained personnel. These regulations are the national agreed standards and guiding principles on which quality within ECCE will be determined for the foreseeable future. They fall far short of what is required of a national framework for the inspection and implementation of ECCE standards and practices. Their inadequacy will forthwith be perceived as a missed opportunity in terms of embedding within macro policy a minimum training standard for this specialised field of work.

Some justification for shortcomings in the regulations may lie in Kellaghan and McGee’s (2005) suggestion that recommendations in reports are often idealistic rather than realistic.

They are usually not costed, and government proposals often:

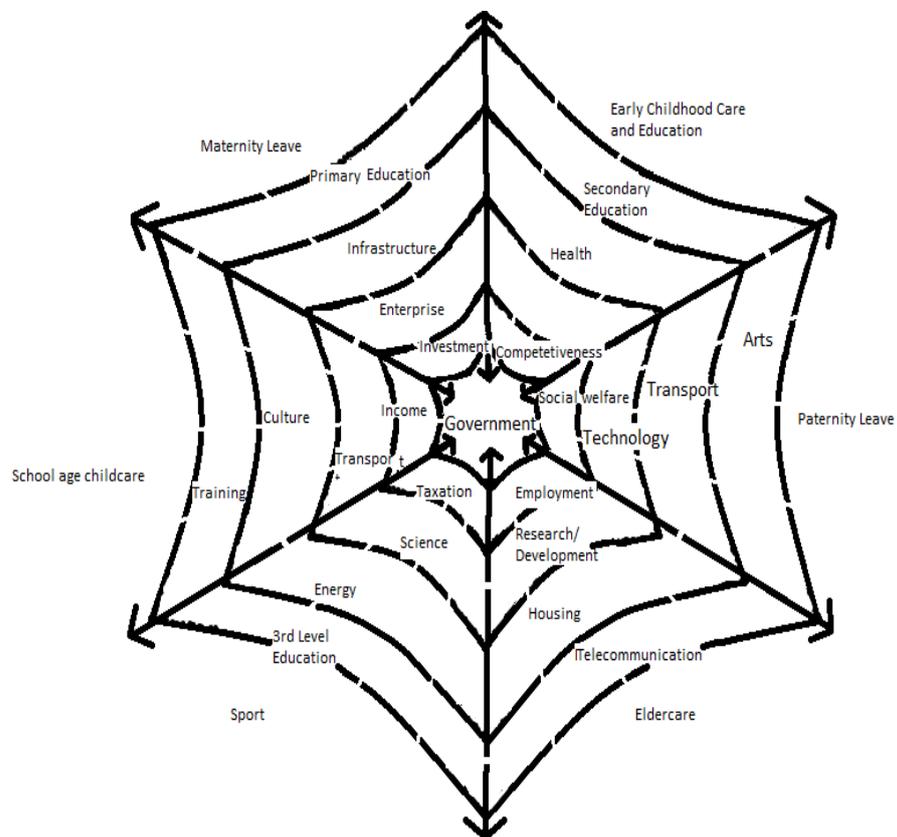
“Reflect the views of powerful pressure groups rather than those of the general population. At best, they are the result of exercises, not in participatory democracy, but in representative democracy from which many people feel excluded” (ibid: 91).

Similarly, Urban (2008) argues that consultations at national level by government departments which introduce new policies, seldom reach individual practitioners who are tasked with realising them. Within the realm of ECCE, policies espoused at a macro level risk floundering within the micro-environment of classrooms due to a mismatch between national ideologies and the practicalities of implementation on the ground. Indicative of broader political discourse, this mismatch points to considerable estrangement between policy makers and ECCE providers.

3.23 Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Framework as a Policy Overlay

As highlighted in Chapter 2, this study utilises Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory to analyse policy within the macro-, meso- and micro-systems. Bronfenbrenner stresses the importance of interactions and relationships within the child's micro-environment. By superimposing Bronfenbrenner's framework on ECCE policy, the pervading influence of the macro-system is revealed. The strength of government influence on social and fiscal policies place it at the centre of the micro-system. Thus, in placing the Government at the centre, its impact radiates outwards, influencing all aspects of daily life. This reversal of influences is portrayed as a precarious spiders web at the centre of which is the State.

Figure 14 Ecological Spider's Web: Macro-Perspective



Holding the web together are the tenuous strands of government priorities that are interwoven in a multiplicity of demands - where those with less power, agency and voice receive the least attention and allocation of resources. From this perspective, the economy is of paramount importance and is closest to the epicentre encompassing employment, job creation, income and taxation policies. As discussed earlier in this chapter, competing demands are made on the resources generated within this strand by the DHC, DES, Social Welfare and Public

Services for example, which by way of education, social, and fiscal policies impact on the delivery of core services to children and families in order of the importance attached by society and the State.

Depending on temporal priorities, strands within the web are strengthened or weakened - either reducing or increasing their proximity to the centre. Concurrent with the recession, welfare policies are paramount and receiving much attention from government and social partners. Because of their vulnerability and dependency on others to speak on their behalf, children are relegated to the outermost layers.

The ECCE sector is also firmly ensconced on the outermost layer, due to its low status and lack of agency. Such is the gap between policy and practice that children's needs and rights are very far removed from policy, values, and priorities at the centre. Consequently, children are located furthest away from the centre, representing their vulnerable position. Hence, in terms of ECCE, children are catered for when all others have been taken care of. As noted by Urban (2008), the gap between the education committee of the OECD and the childcare worker is considerable. What happens at the centre influences the extent to which parents, families, teachers and others in the community are enabled to support children's well-being and development. Bi-directional influences are strongest between the centre and the proximal strands. They weaken as the distance between strands and the centre increases. With the exception of intervention policies and the Free Pre-School Year in ECCE Scheme (2010), children do not feature on the State's radar.

3.24 Chapter Conclusion

This chapter charts the development of ECCE policy from the mid 1990s to 2010. Since 1992, policy is increasingly informed by the UNCRC; placing children's needs and rights at the centre of policy development and practice. As a result, a plethora of policies were developed to: a) support the development of a childcare infrastructure, b) enhance the quality of ECCE provision, and c) bridge the traditional gap between the care and education sectors.

However, as this chapter demonstrates, policy developments are contradictory. On the one hand, direct investment into the ECCE sector through the EOCP (2000 – 2006) and the NCIP (2006 – 2010) was predominantly market-driven and based upon a desire to facilitate women's participation in the labour market. On the other hand, a focus on children's protection and welfare resulted in the publication of the *Child Care (Pre-School Services)*

Regulations, 1996 (DH, 1996). At the same time, a desire to enhance process quality led to a plethora of progressive policy initiatives including the *National Children's Strategy* (DHC, 2000), the *Primary School Curriculum* (DES, 1999), *Síolta* (CECDE, 2006) and *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009). Critically, the revised *Child Care (Pre-School Services) (No 2) Regulations, 2006* (DHC, 2006) as the only statutory policy governing the pre-school sector, while focusing upon process quality within ECCE settings and pointing to the complexity of the role of the pre-school teacher, none the less, portray a contradictory message with regard to the need for trained staff.

Irrespective of an overarching objective within policy to narrow the gap between care and education, the polarity of these sectors is evident in almost every aspect of practice, including: curricula, qualifications, inspection, historical and cultural differences, and the locus of each sector within different government departments (O'Kane, 2008).

Moreover, notwithstanding their child-centred positioning within policy, the pervading influence of the macro-system pushes children to the periphery of practice. Because of their vulnerability and dependency on others to speak on their behalf, ensuring that their rights and needs are not just enshrined within policy but are matched by appropriate fiscal and social supports children are relegated to the outermost layers. Due to its low status and lack of agency, the ECCE sector (comprising both pre-school and primary school) is also firmly ensconced on the outermost layer. Such is the gap between policy and practice that children's needs and rights are far removed from policy, values and priorities at the centre. Hence, the concept of quality in ECCE remains elusive.

4. Pedagogy, Theory and Quality

4.1 Introduction

This Chapter is divided into four subsections, each of which examines an aspect of quality. Section 1 begins by exploring the concept of pedagogy, a term that has gained currency in national and international policy and literature.

The second section examines “Educational concept and practice” (OECD, 2006a: 129); building upon the importance of pre-school and infant teacher training discussed in Chapter 3. Accordingly, their understanding of how children develop clearly impacts upon their philosophy of teaching and ways of facilitating and supporting children’s learning. Thus, Section 2 examines child development theory, commencing with an exploration of Developmentally Appropriate Practice and child centeredness - concepts that are rooted in Piagetian theory and are prevalent in ECCE discourse (Bredekamp, 1987; Bredekamp and Copple, 1997; Dahlberg *et al.*, 1999). Moving beyond Piagetian influence, Section 2 examines the contribution of Vygotsky and Rogoff. Specifically, it examines the zone of proximal development, scaffolding and guided participation.

As indicated in Chapter 1, parental involvement in ECCE is a core indicator of quality. Indeed, the benefits of parental involvement are well documented (Arnold *et al.*, 2007; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Carlisle *et al.*, 2005; Eldridge, 2001; Fabian and Dunlop; 2007; Lubeck, 1994). Research suggests that parental involvement is underpinned by teacher/parent attitudes and understandings, as well as teacher/parent availability (Carlisle *et al.*, 2005; Jalongo *et al.*, 2004; UNESCO, 1998). Section 3 therefore discusses the extent to which parents are, or can be, included in Children’s ECCE.

Section 4 is concerned with child outcome/performance standards and interactions/process quality. It compares and contrasts the social pedagogic approach to children’s care and education, characteristic of the Nordic countries, and the liberal welfare method common to Ireland. It examines the school readiness approach to pre-school education, which is closely linked to conceptions of childhood and in turn orientation quality.

4.2 Section 1: Ascribing Understanding to Pedagogy

Good teachers must know what good pedagogy is; how to deliver it and recognise the difference that it can make for all children (Gore *et al.*, 2007). For many working within

ECCE, or those operating outside the field, the term is little understood (Blatchford *et al.*, 2002; British Educational Research Association (BERA), 2001; Moss *et al.*, 2002; Moyles *et al.*, 2002). It has multiple meanings and defining characteristics.

Traditionally, education was associated with formal schooling, a domain where the teacher “needs to practice a craft requiring a certain knack or practical know how” (Beyer and Bloch, 1999: 5). Within the realm of formal and informal settings, Beyer and Bloch argue that both theory and practice are essential, creating a cycle of shaping and reshaping, through which theory informs practice and practice informs and reshapes theory. It is this combination of theoretical knowledge and understanding, embedded in everyday practice that defines pedagogy within the learning environments where young children participate.

Petrie (2004) holds that the term pedagogy creates a certain congruence of care and education. In portraying the complexity of the term, Alexander (2007) argues that it represents territory that is either “cautiously avoided as too complex or is incautiously blundered into as ostensibly unproblematic” (ibid: 2). McNamara (1994: 6) suggests that it has a “...hostile tone with implications for pedantry, dogmatism, or severity”. Equally, Mortimore (1999: 3) describes it as a “contested” term, with “changing connotations and pressures” claiming that it should be defined in terms of “any conscious action by one person designed to enhance learning in another” (ibid: 3).

Similarly, Boyd *et al.* (2007) argue that the concept encompasses knowledge of instructional methods, learning theories, measurement, testing and classroom management. Indeed, failure to engage with pedagogy creates a perilous situation into which a plethora of claims are sucked about what constitutes best practice in teaching and learning and the virtues of this or that “pedagogical nostrum” (Alexander, 2007: 2).

Pedagogical understandings and subsequent practices are closely aligned to understandings and conceptions of children and childhood. Looking closely at the many ways in which these domains are constructed, Moss (1999) proposes a set of constructions, all of which are embedded in childcare policy in Ireland. Thus, children are seen as citizens, social actors, learners from birth, critical thinkers, and powerful pedagogues. Children are “meaning makers... always in relationship with others, seeking an answer, rather than the answer” (ibid: 149). Children are co-constructors, rather than reproducers of knowledge.

Siraj-Blatchford *et al.* (1999: 8-21) define curriculum as the “educational plans and learning effects of early years settings”, whereas pedagogy is the “particular selection of educational practices and techniques that are applied to realise the curriculum” (ibid: 8-21). Zufiaurre (2007) also associates curriculum with a fixed body of knowledge that is joined by the idea of pedagogy as a “praxis” - a regime of teaching and learning that “inducts human beings into knowing rather than knowledge” (ibid.: 146-147). Curriculum, therefore, does not necessarily define pedagogy.

In her writings, Rinaldi (2001 and 2006) states that the term curriculum fails to take account of the complex and multiple strategies considered necessary for sustaining children’s knowledge-building processes. Accordingly, the word “project” is more appropriate, evoking the idea of a “dynamic process, an itinerary” that is sensitive to the “rhythms of communication and incorporates the significance and timing of children’s investigation and research” (Rinaldi, 2006: 132).

Describing pedagogy as the practice, art, science or craft of teaching, Sylva *et al.* (2002), claim that any adequate conception of educative practice in the early years must be broad enough to include the provision of environments for play and exploration. It is the teacher’s implementation of a curriculum, through instructional and social interactions, central to which are “play, hands on learning and language development” (ibid: 28) with the child that produces effects on children’s learning. Early childhood pedagogy must be instructive, with the pedagogue skilled in the selection of appropriate techniques to facilitate learning. Overall, pedagogy is the interactive process between the teacher, the learner and the learning environment, which includes the concrete learning environment of family and community (ibid.). Clearly, there is an inherent relationship between curriculum and pedagogy where both are central elements of a continuous process, each dependent on the other (Hayes, 2007).

Consistent with the interactive nature of pedagogy proposed by Sylva *et al.* (2002), Moss *et al.* (1996) define it in terms of the development of the child through active involvement with the environment and others, by exploring, questioning, experimenting and debating.

Similarly, Ying Li (2006) suggests that the purpose of education is to help the child “achieve higher levels of development through interactions with his physical and social environments” (ibid: 38). Thus, pedagogy is not a prescriptive plan for instructional activities.

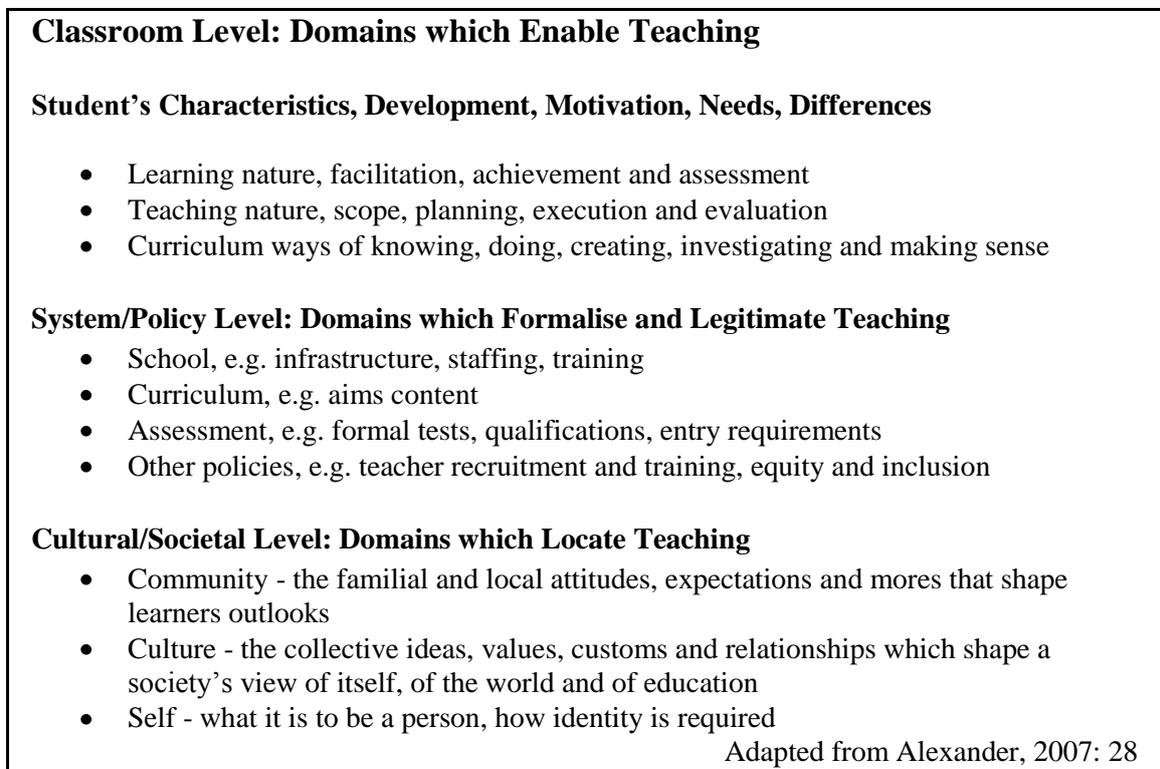
Ayers (2005), posits that teachers must endeavour to accomplish two crucial tasks:

1. To convince children that there is no such thing as “receiving an education as a passive receptor or an inert vessel” (ibid: 324), and
2. To demonstrate to children and oneself that “each person is valued, and their humanity is honoured and that their growth, enlightenment and liberation are paramount concerns” (ibid.).

This is congruent with Moss and Petrie’s (2002) belief that the pedagogical approach is first and foremost a holistic process, where the pedagogue sets out to address the whole child, “the child with body, mind, emotions, creativity, history and social identity” (ibid: 143). Rather than seeing the child as an autonomous and detached subject; the pedagogue recognises that the child lives in “networks of relationships” (Ibid: 143) that involve both children and adults.

Alexander (2007) provides a somewhat technical definition of pedagogy, i.e. a binary framework dealing with the observable act of teaching and the knowledge, values, beliefs and rationale which inform it.

Figure 15 Pedagogy as Domains



In effect, Alexander places pedagogy within an ecological framework where the teacher's ideas about children, learning and teaching are shaped and modified by the context, policy and culture in which they occur. The first domain enables teaching, whereas, the second formalises and legitimates it. In the third domain, pedagogy and children are located in "time, place and the social world, and anchors it firmly to the questions of human identity and social purpose, without which teaching makes little sense" (Alexander, 2007: 28-29).

Pedagogy draws on professional skills, understandings and theories, as well as professional ethics and relationships with other pedagogues (Moss *et al.*, 2002). Therefore, the pedagogue has a relationship with the child that is both personal and professional relating to the child as a person, rather than as a means of achieving adult goals. Moss and Petrie (2002) locate learning at the heart of pedagogy where the pedagogue's role is to "accompany children in their learning process" (pg. 143-144), helping them to become conscious and to reflect on their own learning.

Similarly, Jalongo *et al.* (2004), argue that learning experiences must respect children's "natural, playful style of learning, rather than impose rigid and tedious approaches to mastering academic skills" (pg. 145). Moreover, it is essential to achieve a balance between a didactic and a child-centred approach. For, as noted by Stipek *et al.* (1995), success lies in allowing children to initiate tasks and to complete them without pressure to perform.

Congruent with the concept of control discussed earlier, in Chapter 3, Saracho *et al.* (1993) argue that children give up the natural rhythm of their daily activities upon entry to school. They adapt their behaviours to what the school considers appropriate. Woods (1979) suggests that ideal circumstances permit both teachers and children to share common standards, values and beliefs where children have already been socialised into acceptable forms of behaviour prior to school entry. In the absence of these conditions, Woods argues that teachers spend most of their time endeavouring to socialise children into tolerable forms of behaviour.

Drawing on the congruence of care and education, the best outcomes for children, aged three and over, are achieved in settings where cognitive and social development are seen by teachers as complementary processes (Sylva *et al.*, 2002). Mortimore (1993) provides an overview of how difficult and complex it is to define effective teaching. Based upon relevant research, he extrapolated a broad range of factors considered essential for effective teaching (Table 10).

Table 10 Factors Considered Important in Effective Teaching

Knowledge	Skills	Understanding...
Curriculum	Presentation	... of how children learn
Pedagogical	Organisational	... of how to transfer subject knowledge
Psychological	Assessment	
Sociological	Management	
	Evaluation	

Source: Mortimore, 1993

In an attempt to identify the components of effective pedagogy, Moyles *et al.* (2002) undertook a year-long Study of Pedagogical Effectiveness in Early Learning (SPEEL) in the UK. They concluded that pedagogy combines aspects of teaching, practice, principles and professional dimensions:

“Pedagogy encompasses both what the practitioners actually do and think and the principles, theories, perceptions and challenges that inform and shape it. It connects the relatively self-contained act of teaching and being an early year’s educator, with personal, cultural and community values (including care), curriculum structures and external influences. Pedagogy in the early years operates from a shared frame of reference (a mutual learning encounter) between the practitioner, the young child and his/her family” (Moyles *et al.*, 2002: 5).

In summary, pedagogy has multiple meanings and defining characteristics. Although difficult to define, it creates a congruence of care and education. Thus, Siraj-Blatchford *et al.* (1999) define curriculum as the “educational plans and learning effects of early years settings” whereas pedagogy is the “particular selection of educational practices and techniques that are applied to realise the curriculum” (ibid: 8-21). Pedagogy is the interactive process between the teacher, the learner and the learning environment (including the concrete learning environment of family and community) (Sylva *et al.*, 2002). Accordingly, pedagogy is deeply embedded in the concept of quality; helping to shape interaction/process quality, structural quality, educational concept and practice, as well as standards pertaining to parent/community outreach and involvement.

4.2.1 Learning Environments and Pedagogy

Referring to the micro-environment of the Reggio schools in Northern Italy, Gandini (1998), claims that it reflects the culture of those who created it. Examination reveals distinct layers of this cultural influence; through the architecture, aesthetics, language, dialect, and

documentation (ibid.). Culture is constructed through the story of how the building was designed, chosen and built, the experiences that each child and family brings, and the way the participation of parents in the life of the setting is manifest. The environment comprises a multiplicity of intersecting elements: physical, material, psychological and cultural, which together, create and locate the learning environment in context.

According to Wachs and Coapci (2003: 54-55), the micro-environment is defined by three major dimensions:

- 1) Spatial - open or closed space or crowding,
- 2) Affordance - play materials that promote specific uses, and
- 3) Affordance-less - environmental features involving non-specific background stimulation such as noise.

Bosch (2006) refers to the concept of classroom organisation, at the centre of which is the classroom environment encompassing physical aspects such as lighting and décor and the classroom operation, i.e. rules, routines, consequences and incentives imposed by the teacher. Specifically, in relation to ECCE, Spodek *et al.* (1991) explicate the need for good organisational and management skills; a safe, welcoming physical environment and the establishment of a positive social environment. While all teachers are concerned with managing the social context of their classroom, good teachers are also aware of the social dimensions that help them achieve important educational goals especially those relating to children's social development (ibid.). Equally, Han and Kemple (2006) declare that in any ECCE programme, adults and children interact within an environmental context. Broadly defined, this context includes all the aspects outlined in addition to the emotional climate of the setting. These elements can be manipulated to create optimal conditions for children's social competence to flourish.

4.2.2 Environmental Chaos

A further consideration relates to environmental chaos and its impact on children's development (Wachs *et al.*, 2003). In defining this phenomenon, Wachs *et al.* (2003) describe it as a collection of micro-system contexts such as home, day-care centre or school - characterised by "high noise levels, high levels of density or crowding, high context traffic patterns; many people coming and going, and a lack of physical and temporal structures; few regularities or routines in the environment" (ibid: 56). Moreover, adults contribute to the environmental chaos in circumstances where they are unresponsive to the child's actions,

functioning as “background rather than focal sources of stimulation” (Wachs *et al.* 2003: 56). Farquhar (2003) argues that ECCE settings can be particularly noisy places. Consequently, the environment needs to be carefully arranged to minimise the impact on children’s health and behaviour. In the words of Parker-Rees (1999: 67) “we tune our brains to the environment we inhabit, choosing what we will filter out as irrelevant noise”.

Orderliness of the internal environment may also affect children’s development (Brooks-Gunn *et al.*, 2005), to the extent that children in tidy classrooms are happier and better behaved than those in messy, untidy rooms (Fisher, 1991). In their commentary of environmental chaos, Wachs *et al.* (2003) posit that it may hinder development, making it difficult for children to concentrate, pay attention, and differentiate meaningful from less meaningful cues.

Distal environmental characteristics such as cultural values and beliefs about the desirability of various child characteristics are also important (Wachs *et al.*, 2003). These aspects impact upon expectations of children’s behaviour within the environments in which they participate. Midbjer and Day (2007) claim that environments affect how we think, feel and behave, shaping our habits and expectations of normality and values. They suggest that unless “we consciously dedicate design to this end, it is more likely to hinder and unbalance development... its influence... largely subliminal, is potent” (ibid: 3).

In a critique of schools, Dudek (2003) argues that teachers are given little more than a room that complies with statutory requirements, without consideration to other essential criteria such as light, colour and texture. Likewise, Pointon and Kershner (2001) claim that schools are characterised by similarity: more children than adults, child-size tables and chairs, wall displays, trays of pencils and rulers, paints, models and books. These distinctive features are designed to assist adults and children to understand what is likely to happen and what behaviour is expected of them.

The arrangement of the physical space conveys messages about the relationship between teaching and learning, the image of the child held by the teacher, and expectations for behaviour and learning (Fisher, 1991; Gandini, 1998; Rinaldi, 1994, 1998 and 2006; Simco, 1996). The appearance of the classroom indicates to children the care that goes into providing them with an environment that is conducive to their learning (Kyriacou, 1991).

Conceivably then, classroom contexts affect children's learning, setting the stage for interest, motivation and engagement.

Tarr (2004: 3) criticises "formulaic schemas", prescriptive worksheets and prescribed art work on walls that silence imagination and creativity. Commenting specifically on kindergartens, Neuman *et al.* (2000) decry the practice of cluttering the environment with labels, signs and print just for print's sake, claiming that all it does is to become "just so much wallpaper" (ibid: 38).

Consistent with Dudek (2003), researchers (Moyses, 1992; Pointon and Kershner, 2001) state that there is often a mismatch between teachers' and children's perception and use of the environment. Teachers experience it in terms of how they can use the space, whereas children experience the places themselves – the "world is one big sensory exploration" (Midbjer and Day, 2007: 3). According to Olds (2001: 43), children live in the here and now, "feasting upon nuances of colour, light, sound, odour, touch, texture, volume, movement, form and rhythm around them". Highlighting the necessity of appropriately playful environments, Dudek (2003) concludes that children need playful architecture which is light-hearted and distracting, in its own right - motivating children to participate in the environment. While Dudek's aspiration is admirable, Midbjer *et al.* (2007: 8) claim that in reality, concern for what children need is "...lamentably rare... children need architecture not to shape but to serve them".

4.2.3 Environments that Speak

The old adage, "first impressions last" pertains to the child's perception of the aesthetics of the learning environment. Thus, Olds (2001) and Pressly and Heesacker (2001) emphasise the importance of colour in the physical environment. Similarly, Kopacz (2003) and Mahnke and Mahnke (1993) suggest that bright colours compliment children's extroverted nature, while white or grey offer limited stimulation and are boring for young children. In the context of Reggio schools, Gandini (1998: 162) emphasises the impact of light describing the central areas as "...bathed in light, inviting us to explore and become involved".

Rinaldi (2006) defines the physical space as a language that speaks "according to precise cultural conceptions and deep biological roots" (pg. 82-83). Her belief is underpinned by eight core principles (see Appendix E) that conjure a context where the child is nestled within an environment that is at once spiritual, sacred and respectful; where each child is valued as a

meaning maker for what they bring to the environment, as well as the manner in which they act upon, make sense of, and create a personal meaning of that space. Moss and Petrie (2002) advocate for “children’s spaces”- places where children have opportunities for excitement, wonder and the unexpected, places of emancipation; enabling them to become critical thinkers where they are less governed by power. In common with Rinaldi, they highlight the need for children to have spaces where they are permitted to remove themselves from the adult gaze.

Massey (2004) suggests that early years classrooms are typified by activity and noise, children painting, playing, drawing, building, reading, eating and “most importantly conversing” (pg. 227). Following a visit to a 2nd grade classroom in Chicago, Ayers (2005) describes the environment as rich and deep, inviting and potentially engaging. What struck Ayers most forcibly was that the “architect of the environment... [had a] purpose and a vision for her students and herself” (ibid: 323). The teacher’s “hopes, priorities and commitments were evident in dazzling detail in her classroom” (ibid: 323]). According to Ayers, the teacher becomes the architect of the environment, in collaboration with the children.

4.2.4 The Emotional Environment

Children’s spaces are more than the mere physical attributes; rather, relationships between children and teachers are a critical dimension in the establishment and maintenance of positive learning environments. Irwin *et al.* (2007) refer to the “transactional model” where the child is seen as a social actor who shapes and in turn is shaped by his environment:

“Young children need to spend their time in warm responsive environments that protect them from inappropriate disapproval or punishment. They need opportunities to explore their world, to play, and to learn how to speak and listen to others” (ibid: 7).

Relationships are the engine of child development. Thus, it is the quality of the daily interactions between teachers and children that underpin the effects of childcare on children’s development (Barnett, 1995; Reynolds *et al.*, 1999 and 2001; Shonkoff *et al.*, 2000a and 2000b).

The environment should be constructed so as to interface the cognitive realm, with the realm of relationship and activity (Malaguzzi, 1993). This ideology creates an impetus for teachers to form and sustain positive relationships with children, adults and peers, and to develop the social and emotional skills for cooperating with others (Pianta *et al.*, 1997; Sylva *et al.*, 2002 and 2004). Shonkoff *et al.* (2000a) assert that nurturing relationships are critical to children’s healthy development, while also serving as a protective factor serving to buffer young

children against the development of serious behaviour problems. Indeed, Waldfogel *et al.* (1999) urge teachers to move away from adult-determined agendas with their focus on pre-academic work, toward children's natural interests and innate capacity to learn, thus striving to involve them in reciprocal learning interactions with other children and teachers.

Goodnow (1980) points to the necessity of knowing what it is in any environment that makes a difference to development. He suggests that we might expect to find dimensions related to the skills people value, the methods that they regard as appropriate for teaching and learning, and the methods people consider feasible and proper for accessing progress.

Claxton and Carr (2004: 91) differentiate between four kinds of environments that are placed on a continuum between hostile and didactic, to stimulating and motivational. They are:

1. In a prohibiting environment, it is impossible to express a particular kind of learning response. A tightly scheduled programme where children move from one routine to the next, in rapid succession, makes it impossible for them to persist and remain engaged over any length of time. Consequently, some classroom activities prohibit children from collaborating.
2. An affording environment provides opportunities for the development of a range of learning attributes, but they may not be sufficient for all children. There may be no particularly deliberate strategies to draw student's attention to those opportunities and value is not placed upon them. Valsiner (1984) argues that affordances in settings define the limits of "...what actions of the child are in principle possible" (ibid: 67).
3. An inviting environment not only affords the opportunity to question, but clearly highlights it as a valued activity. Asking questions or working with others is made attractive and appealing. In this regard, Wolfgang *et al.* (1986) describe the teachers' roles as that of a supportive, non-critical facilitator whose behaviours give most control to the child.
4. A potentiating environment, not only invites the expression of certain dispositions, but actively stretches and develops them. In such an environment, Muijs *et al.* (2001) point to the need for teachers to create an unthreatening environment where children's opinions are valued, respected and solicited.

(Adapted from: Claxton and Carr, 2004: 91).

The need for children to have the freedom to move about within the classroom has received much attention (Gandini, 1998; Massey, 2004; Moss *et al.* 2002; Moyles, 1992; Rinaldi, 2006; Spodek *et al.*, 1991). However, Elkind (1977) claims that teacher mobility is central to the spirit of the classroom. He typifies the teacher as one who moves among children; does not assume to have all the answers; works alongside and communicates with children; conveys a spirit of cooperation; one of working together toward common goals “buttressed by mutual respect and consideration” (ibid: 233).

Explicating the need to create a respectful environment, Bosch (2006) and Miller and Pedro (2006) suggest that respect is a critical variable in education, both in terms of each child and the teaching and learning that takes place in the classroom. Nutbrown (1998 and 1999) ponders the meaning of respect, suggesting that in the first instance, teachers must have respect for each other, for each child, and for parents and families. Evidently, Nutbrown (1998) believes that respect is a complex concept that is not about being “nice”, but about being “...clear honest and consistent” (ibid: 36). A respectful classroom is one where all children feel physically and emotionally secure and valued for whom they are (Wessler, 2003). Hence, security is imperative to children’s education. Fundamentally, a child who is not secure cannot learn, and a child who is not cognitively stimulated is not being given appropriate care (Bertram and Paschal, 2002a; Wessler, 2003; Rushton and Larkin, 2001).

In summary, the link between pedagogy and the learning environment is clear. In addition to good organisational and management skills, teachers must create a safe, welcoming physical environment and establish a positive social environment. The quality of the learning environment in all its aspects is determined by the teacher and is central to children’s learning in pre-school and infant contexts. As noted by Beyer *et al.* (1995), both theory and practice are essential in formal and informal education contexts. It is this combination of theoretical knowledge and understanding, embedded in everyday practice that defines pedagogy within the learning environments in which young children participate.

4.3 Section 2: Fusing Theory and Practice

Walsh (2005) argues that contemporary developmental theory is fundamental to pedagogical theory for young children. The interconnectedness of theory and pedagogical practice is central to quality discourse. Thus, in common with Malaguzzi (1993), Walsh (2005: 46), purports that pedagogues must see children in all their possibilities and potentials, which “...cannot be done without effective developmental theory”.

Strauss (2000) asserts that theoretical positions about learning and development result from the respective stances taken in relation to three core positions:

1. Origins (what infants come into the world with),
2. How that which infants are born with changes over time, and
3. Relations between the individual and the environment, and domain-general versus domain-specific knowledge (ibid: 8).

However, as Reunamo and Nurmilaakso (2007) point out, pedagogical views are deeply rooted in the functions of the basic understanding of early childhood learning. Such views are intertwined with knowledge of child development theory. Researchers (Chafel and Reifel, 1996; Fler, 1995; Folque, 1998; Dahlberg *et al.*, 1999) contend that for many decades, early childhood teacher education has been dominated by child development theory. Therefore, while this study is located within a socio cultural context, it would be impertinent to disregard Piaget's legacy to the ECCE field. The following sections explore the concepts of developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) and child centeredness.

4.3.1 Developmentally Appropriate Practice

Piaget "...instilled a deep seated positivism and rigid empiricism into our contemporary understanding of the child" (James *et al.*, 1998: 19). Consequently, the concept of DAP, resulting from Piagetian theory, has been widely accepted as a guide to the nature and quality of ECCE (Bredekamp, 1987; Bredekamp and Copple, 1997). DAP echoes long standing, traditional child-centred values that were reinforced by Piagetian theory (Cullen, 1999; Horn and Ramey, 2003). It results from the process of professionals making decisions about the well-being and education of children, based on at least three kinds of information and knowledge:

1. Knowledge of child development and learning,
2. The strengths, interests and needs of each child, and
3. Knowledge of the social and cultural contexts in which children live (Bredekamp *et al.*, 1997: 8-9).

Proponents of DAP suggest that it creates a rich classroom environment that supports learning, cognition and social development (Bredekamp *et al.*, 1997; Elkind, 1986 and 1987; Stipek *et al.*, 1995). It contributes to children's development in areas where development is critical; notably in literacy and numeracy (Bredekamp *et al.*, 1997). It endorses the idea that learning activities should be tailored to each child's needs and presented in ways that

recognise young children's concrete stages of cognitive development and their natural integration of practical learning across multiple domains (Carsaro *et al.*, 1992).

While, Huffman and Speer (2000) claim that empirical support for the academic benefits of DAP is weak and mixed, De Vries *et al.* (1987) argue that research evidence points to the validity of Piaget's staged model of development.

AS DAP is premised upon accepted, taken-for-granted truths about child development, Prout and James (1997) argue that it is difficult to think about and understand children from outside this knowledge. Irrespective of the enthusiastic acceptance of DAP throughout much of the 1980s and early 1990s, many have criticised the approach and its implications for ECCE (Cannella, 1997; Lubeck, 1994 and 1996, Mallory and New, 1994; Smith, 1996; Woodhead, 1996). This is primarily because of its insensitivity to cultural diversity in children's experiences and parenting practices. DAP is underpinned by culturally specific assumptions. The child "...reified in Piaget's protocols is one who is White, Western and Middle class" (Lubeck, 1994: 155). These middle-class, white values cannot be transferred or applied to more collectivistic cultures. DAP makes no allowances for individual or gender differences, or for any other aspect of diversity.

Moreover, Piaget's work focused on the active involvement of the individual child working with objects and making sense of the world through such activity. The socio-cultural context of children's development received scant attention in much of his work - although De Vries *et al.* (1987) claim that the social context advocated by Piaget is characterised by collaborative relationships among children, and between teachers and children. They also claim that the teacher's role is to establish an environment where social life among children is characterised by growing consciousness of others and a desire to collaborate with them.

4.3.2 Child Centeredness

The concept of child centeredness is closely aligned to DAP. It infers that activities, opportunities and experiences are inherently centred on the child with the child's best interests at the core of practice. Child-centeredness means that the child is the agent of his own education (Entwistle, 1974). Many scholars claim that child centeredness is in fact dominated by adults and developmentally laden with inherent biases and modernist views (Bennett, 2004; Cannella, 1997; Dahlberg *et al.*, 1999; Lubeck, 1994 and 1996; Mc Naughton, 2000; Sugrue, 1997). Lubeck (1994), for instance, claims that this position is

predicated on a belief that certain parents will not, or cannot, provide children with what they need; some cultural practices are more preferable and others "...if not deficient are certainly less desirable" (ibid.: 20-33). Parents who are unfamiliar with child-development are "...expected to listen to those who make claims to greater knowledge and authority" (ibid.20-33]). Accordingly, Piagetian theory is perceived as being oppressive and unjust, rather than being objective, developmental knowledge (Burman, 1994; Cannella, 1997; Dahlberg *et al.*, 1999; Mc Naughton, 2000).

Bennett (2004) highlights a further anomaly, purporting that while some pedagogues consider themselves to be child-focused; they actually avoid programming, relying instead on routines - thus, becoming observers rather than "active cultural agents" (ibid: 19).

In a critique of child centred teaching, Sugrue (1997) argues that the "...basic sentiment stands in opposition to the axioms of its traditional counterparts" (ibid.: 7). Therefore, it may be said to "favour learning more than teaching... this is to assume that teaching can only be didactic, formal and teacher centred" (ibid: 7). Others (Alexander *et al.*, 1993), argue that there is an over-concentration on individual discovery and creative work, where children are treated as passive recipients of what "teachers and parents do to them in the manner of socialisation and education" (Wyness, 2000: 27). Haste (1999) suggests that while few would claim that development happens in social isolation, the role of other individuals is predominantly seen as "a sort of catalytic intervention, providing challenges, which in Piaget's terms generate disequilibrium" (ibid: 181).

While acknowledging Piaget's contribution to education, critics argue that although his theory describes the child as an active learner, the situation is clouded and unclear in relation to the teacher's role (Fein *et al.*, 1982; Kirby and Biggs, 1980). Furthermore, Collis (1980) is critical of the ill-defined boundaries between the stages of development and the criteria for distinguishing one stage from another; suggesting that these limitations make it difficult to apply Piaget's theory to school learning. Alexander (1984) also asserts that Piagetian theory may be interpreted as "confirming a doctrine of readiness rather than challenging teachers' ingenuity to provide children with appropriately structured and sequenced learning experiences" (ibid: 93).

Katz (1995) suggests that, in DAP, decisions regarding what should be learned and how it is learned "depends on what we know of the learner's developmental status and our

understanding of the relationships between early experience and subsequent development” (ibid: 109). There are multiple dichotomies embedded within this paradigm:

- How can ECCE personnel know what should be learned?
- How do they decide what to teach next?
- How are children’s stages of development determined?
- How do pedagogues understand and make connections between early experience and later development?

In the words of Rinaldi (2006: 181): “when you start to see that there is a child that does not crawl but starts to walk, then you question the theory”.

In conclusion, although Piaget greatly influenced understandings of how children develop and learn, the crude application of Piagetian theory serves to limit the development of appropriate curricula and thus of children (Hyson, 1996; Siraj Blatchford, 1995). In the words of Siraj Blatchford (1995: 10): “cognitive developmental stages have been applied to children and the curriculum matched to the levels that research showed they already achieve rather than being set up to surpass them”. This constitutes a significant limitation in Piagetian theory, where development is seen to precede learning, posing the risk of keeping development static by rigidly adhering to a linear ‘ages and stages’ model.

Other theories, notably Vygotsky’s socio-cultural theory, point to the limitations of the DAP approach (Berk *et al.*, 1995; Cole, 1995; Daniels, 2005; Haste, 1999; Raeff *et al.*, 2003; Rogoff, 1994, 1998, 1990 and 2003). Vygotsky’s socio-cultural theory has dominated ECCE literature from the 1970s onwards, emphasising the importance of adult/child and child/child dyads in cognitive development.

4.3.3 Vygotsky and the Nature of Human Development

Vygotsky’s socio-cultural perspective was predicated on the concept that individual intellectual development cannot be understood in isolation from the social milieu in which the child is embedded. It challenges the individualistic view of development proposed by Piaget. Accordingly, Vygotsky focused on the processes of socio-cultural activity, involving active participation of people in socially constituted practices, together with the development of skill, through the use of socio-historically developed tools that mediate cognitive activity.

Commenting on Piagetian theory, Vygotsky (1987: 83) stated that:

“[The child] is not seen as a being who participates in the societal life of the social whole to which he belongs from the outset. The social is viewed as something which stands outside of the child”

Vygotsky contends that the history of cultural development does not proceed along a linear pathway, i.e. ‘ages and stages’, but instead occurs, to an enormous extent, through sudden, leap-like changes taking place in the child’s development. In discussing the development of the brain, Vygotsky holds that as higher centres develop, the lower, older ones do not “...just move aside... [but continue to work as] subordinate instances under the direction of the higher centres, so that in an intact nervous system they cannot usually be set apart” (Vygotsky, 1966: 35). Crucially, the subordinate centres transfer an essential part of their former functions upward to the new centres being constructed over them. The brain develops according to the “...laws of stratification and addition of new storeys over old ones” (ibid: 35).

The basic goal of the socio-cultural approach is, to “explicate the relationship between human actions on the one hand, and the cultural, institutional, and historical contexts in which this action occurs on the other” (Wertsch, 1991: 6). Human development results from social processes, regardless of the child’s location whether at home, pre-school, primary school, or other social setting in which the child is embedded. As articulated by Newman *et al.* (1989), the individual and social world is entirely intertwined. Table 11 provides an overview of the basic principles underlying Vygotskian theory.

Table 11 Basic Principles Underlying the Vygotskian Framework

1	Children construct their knowledge
2	Development cannot be separated from it's social context
3	Learning can lead development

Wertsch (1991 and 1998) views human beings as coming into contact with and creating their surroundings, as well as themselves, through the myriad of actions in which they engage. Thus development has its beginnings in action (Wertsch, 1991 and 1998), as opposed to approaches that treat the individual as a passive recipient of information from the

environment, or that focus on the individual, treating the environment as secondary and serving to trigger certain developmental processes.

Fundamentally, Vygotskian theory is concerned with the social formation of mind. Any function in the child's cultural development appears twice: on the social plane and the psychological plane:

“First it appears between people as an interpsychological category, and then within the child as intrapsychological category” (Vygotsky, 1978: 163).

Wertsch and Tulviste (2005) claim that this statement moves beyond the assumption that mental functioning begins first and foremost within the individual, to appropriating equal importance to mental processes as occurring between people on the inter-psychological plane.

The process whereby the social becomes the psychological is termed internalisation. Fundamental to Vygotskian theory is the concept that children's participation in cultural activities, together with the support or guidance of a more skilled partner, permits children to internalise the tools for thinking and for taking more mature approaches to problem solving in situations that children have encountered and practiced in social contexts.

Accordingly, it is the personally meaningful experiences that emerge in the child/environment relationship that guides the further process of development. The higher psychological functions initially emerge in the collective behaviour of the child, in the form of cooperation with others, and only subsequently become internalised as the child's internal functions. Strauss (2000) suggests that Vygotsky's view of internalisation has a “...ring of absorption, rather than the sound of reconstruction” (ibid: 22). He claims that contemporary adherents of the socio-historical approach have added constructivism, in order to make it more conducive to current views of cognitive function. Lave and Wenger (1991) conclude that learning is a process of “...becoming a member of a sustained community of practice” (ibid: 65), rather than the internalisation of knowledge by the individual.

Although Vygotsky's theory is complex and multifaceted, some tenets have found particularly fertile soil in ECCE, most notably the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), i.e. the collaboration of a more skilled partner in the child's acquisition of knowledge and skills (Berk *et al.* 1995; Fleer, 1992; Galloway and Edwards, 1991; Haste, 1999; Palincsar, 2005; Strauss, 2000). But also, his focus on cultural variations in cognitive capacities and the expression of those capacities (Crain, 2005; Ivic, 1994; Rogoff *et al.*,

1993), and the socio-cultural origins of children's ideas, concepts and mental functions (Resnick *et al.*, 1991).

Whereas the phenomena of the ZPD and inner speech (Vygotsky, 1978 and 1987) have taken on particular importance in contemporary developmental psychology in the West; Wertsch and Tulviste (1992) argue that it is essential to remember that they are situated in an overall theoretical framework. Thus, the ZPD and inner speech are "...specific instances of more general claims about the social origins of individual mental functioning" (ibid: 449).

4.3.4 The Zone of Proximal Development

Vygotsky developed the construct of the ZPD as a means to redress the problem that learning should be matched in some way to the child's level of development. ZPD is defined as the distance between a child's "...actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving" (Vygotsky, 1978: 86), and their higher level of "...potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (ibid: 86). The power of the ZPD is as a "...bridge between the individual and the interpersonal" (Haste, 1999: 183), which recognises the role of the teacher in introducing the developing child to new concepts.

According to Vygotsky, the level of actual, independent development was characteristic of the intellectual skills already mastered by the child, representing his/her already matured functions. Therefore, the ZPD "...defines those functions that have not yet matured but are in the process of maturation, functions that will mature tomorrow but are currently in an embryonic state" (Vygotsky, 1978: 86).

In accordance with Vygotsky's (1978) claim that "...the only good learning is that which is in advance of development" (ibid.: 89), productive adult interactions direct instruction towards the ZPD. This serves to precede and facilitate learning and in so doing, prevents instruction from lagging behind the development of the child. Learning would be "...completely unnecessary if it merely utilised what had already matured in the developmental process, if it were not itself a source of development" (Vygotsky, 1987: 212). Thus, learning is both the source and the product of development in the same way that development is the source and product of learning. Holzman (2006) holds that the relationship between learning and development is "...dialectical, not linear or temporal, one doesn't come before the other, or causal, one isn't the cause of the other" (ibid: 10).

Theoretically, the developing child lacks the skills to independently carry out or complete a task. In the first instance, activities are found in interactions between the learner and a more competent other, followed later by the learner's independent activity having mastered the task. Consequently, cognitive change occurs within the ZPD, which is considered in terms of the individual's developmental history (prior knowledge, ability and skill) and in terms of the support structures created by other more knowledgeable people, and the cultural tools in the setting: language, various systems for counting, mnemonic techniques, algebraic symbol systems, works of art, writing, schemes, diagrams, maps, mechanical drawings and all sorts of conventional signs (Vygotsky, 1981c).

In terms of teaching and learning, Galloway and Edwards (1991) hold that new information/skills must be organised by teachers into manageable, relevant and carefully sequenced experiences for the child. The effective teacher knows that learning cannot be left to discovery. Rather, teachers must structure activities at the optimal level, and support learning through a combination of modelling, conversation and active participation in activities.

A number of socio-cultural theorists have expanded upon understandings of the ZPD. Learning is conceptualised as distributed (Cole and Engeström, 1993), interactive (Chang-Wells and Wells, 1993), contextual (John-Steiner, Panofsky, and Smith., 1994) and the result of the learner's participation in a community of practice (Rogoff, 1994; Gauvain, 2001).

Working within the ZPD is not a simple task and almost certainly requires teacher skill and knowledge. As noted by Rushton and Larkin (2001), teaching complex skills too soon "...may impede learning, and conversely, not teaching children when they are ready, may result in boredom or lack of interest" (ibid: 30). Similarly, Tharp and Gallimore (1988) suggest that distinguishing the proximal zone from the developmental level, by contrasting assisted versus unassisted performance, has profound implications for educational practice. It is within the proximal zone that teaching may be defined in terms of child development (ibid.). The challenge for teachers lies in identifying the proximal zone and matching their level of support to the child's actual level of development.

The metaphor of the "scaffold" (Wood, Bruner and Ross., 1976: 90) describes the "...process that enables a child or novice to solve a problem, carry out a task or achieve a goal which would be beyond his unassisted efforts". Thus, scaffolding refers to the nature and quality of

instruction or assistance. Irrevocably, the scaffolding metaphor conjures up an image of a vertical structure with limited options for supporting development. However, Bruner (1984) argues that in order to capture the important ways in which adult understanding of goals, structures the sequence of activities: "...we would need to add architects and foremen to the building process that scaffolding indexes" (ibid: 47). Moreover, building would have to commence with all the scaffolding in place, and work would have to start with the "...uppermost reaches of the roof as well as the basement" (ibid: 47). This synthesis infers that scaffolding is in fact intended as an all-encompassing support mechanism. Theoretically, at least, scaffolding may simultaneously support learning at all levels, commencing with the foundation level and continuing throughout childhood.

In terms of pedagogy, Tharp *et al.* (1988: 46) claim that assistance should be offered in those "...interactional contexts most likely to generate joint performance". Rogoff *et al.* (1984) posit that the adult does not solve the problem within the ZPD, while the child passively observes and "...spontaneously extracts the information" (pg. 33). In the effective use of the ZPD, the adult guides the child through the process of solving the problem, with the child participating at a comfortable but slightly less challenging level.

Reunamo *et al.* (2007) allude to certain limitations within the ZPD, suggesting that it is best suited to reproductive problems, where the other knows the answer in advance or can solve it along the lines of previous experience. This implies a constant state of readiness on the part of the teacher who must engage in cycles of assessing, planning and reflection.

Rogoff (1984) delineates the adult's role as emphasising crucial actions, providing guidance at choice points, and indicating important alternatives in the solution to the problem at hand. While admirable, this approach is contingent upon in-depth knowledge and understanding of each individual child within the setting, together with one-on-one interaction between child and teacher. It makes greater demands than "...more conventional methods on practitioner's pedagogical and organisational expertise" (Sugrue, 1997: 17).

Tharpe *et al.* (1998) suggest that in the first days of school, children can only solve simple problems if attentional processes are brought into a new relationship with memory and perception. Moreover, while the attention span of the five year old may be in the ZPD, so that the child is capable of attending to teacher instruction, it can only happen when a "...rich diet of teacher praise is available" (ibid: 47). The teacher's praise assists the child's attendance to

a task, through a process of queuing and reinforcement. Such assistance is seldom required in higher classes, as children have become self-regulated (ibid.). Crucially, the teacher's role in assisting development is particularly important in the early years.

Wertsch (1979, 1981 and 1985) explains how, over time, and primarily through conversation in the performance of the task, the child comes to understand the complexity and the ways in which the different parts of the task relate to each other. When the child has grasped the concept of the overall goal, the adult may then assist the child by other methods; such as questions, feedback and other cognitive structuring. Griffin and Cole (1984) explain that changes in adult support can be qualitatively different "...sometimes the adult directs attention. At other times, the adult holds important information in memory... [or,] offers simple encouragement" (ibid: 47).

Emphasising the importance and complexity of the ZPD, Holzman (2006: 11) describes it as the "...ever emergent and continuously changing distance between being and becoming". She claims that, to understand ZPD, we need to envision a new kind of entity that is neither process nor product, but is simultaneously both. Because we are socialised in Western culture to only see products, i.e. things, objects, and results, we find it difficult to see the process. While we tend to see ourselves and others as "...who we are (products)... [and not simultaneously as] who we are (including our history of becoming who we are) and who we are becoming... human activity gives birth to and nurtures the ZPD and, with its creation, human learning and development" (ibid: 11).

Teachers must break down the barriers between theory and practice by finding ways to use their classrooms and other settings in the "...construction zones for cognition" (Newman *et al.*, 1989: 1). Working within the ZPD is something "...more than the social support... called scaffolding; it is not just a set of devices used by one person to support high-level activity by another" (ibid: xii). Instead, it is the "...locus of social negotiations about meanings" (ibid: xii). In the context of schools, it is a place where teachers and children may appropriate one another's understandings; where through acting together, they may bring about a meeting of minds (ibid.). Holzman (2006: 19) suggests that children develop so quickly and learn so well because "...they and we create ZPDs in which they can be who they are and who they are becoming". According to Newman *et al.* (1989), it is not necessary for teachers and pupils to understand one another much more than people generally do, or achieve precision of communication to enable or maintain a worthwhile educational process.

4.3.5 Zone of Proximal Development as Assessment

Vygotsky disapproved of the use of static individual forms of assessment. He claimed that traditional methods of psychological assessment only uncover, in the child, those mental functions that have already matured, functions that indicate the “fruits... [or] end products of development” (Vygotsky, 1978: 86).

Within the ZPD, two children can differ significantly; one child may do his/her best while working independently, while another needs the assistance of another. In the following example Vygotsky (1978) discusses the ability of two children, both of whom are twelve years old chronologically and 8 years old in terms of mental development. He asks: “Can I say they are the same age mentally? It means that they can independently deal with tasks up to the degree of difficulty that has been standardised for the eight year old” (ibid: 85).

Developing his hypothesis, he suggests that if we stop at this point people will imagine that the subsequent course of development, and of school learning, of these children will be the same because “...it depends on their intellect” (ibid: 85). He asks us to consider our response, were he to illustrate that these children had various ways of dealing with a task, solving it with his assistance:

“Under these circumstances it turns out that the first child can deal with a problem up to a twelve year olds level. The second; up to a nine year old. Now are these children mentally the same... this difference between twelve and eight, or between nine and eight, is what we call the Zone of Proximal Development” (Vygotsky, 1978: 85-86).

The ZPD therefore, is crucial for identifying each child’s readiness to benefit from instruction. Its application to classroom practice calls for teacher awareness of child development and an ability to plan for “...qualitative changes in the teaching toward a certain goal” (Hedegaard, 2005: 247). Even though each child is unique and individual, they each share common features, which, if not developed, lead adults to conclude that children are deviant and so offer special instruction to each child in the class (ibid.). Alternatively, instruction must be based on the development of common knowledge and skills. In such circumstances, the ZPD must be used as a “...tool for class instruction” (ibid: 247]).

Consistent with Newman *et al.* (1993), Sternber (1998) holds that instruction should be directed not just “...toward imparting a knowledge base, but toward developing, reflective, analytic, creative, and practical thinking with a knowledge base” (ibid: 18).

Likewise, Cheyne and Tarulli (2005) posit that the teacher must have an agenda or curriculum, however implicit. While Cole (1985) suggests that the ZPD allows children and

their partners to derive a shared understanding through their efforts in applying the tools of the culture, Rogoff (1990: 16) asserts that interactions in the ZPD are the “crucible” of development and of culture. Such interactions allow children to participate in activities that would be impossible for them to do alone.

4.3.6 Mediated Action

Wertsch (1994) elaborates on the centrality of mediation in understanding Vygotsky's contributions to psychology and education. Thus, it is the key to understanding how human mental functioning is connected to cultural, institutional and historical settings, which shape and provide the cultural tools that are mastered by individuals to form this functioning. Consequently, Wertsch (1994: 204) defines the mediational means as the "carriers" of socio-cultural patterns and knowledge.

The powerful relationship between the tools for thinking provided by culture and the development of individual thought processes is provided by Leont'ev (1981):

“...the tool mediates activity and thus connects humans not only with the world of objects but also with other people...higher psychological processes unique to humans can be acquired only through interaction with others...through interpsychological processes that only later will begin to be carried out independently by the individual” (ibid: 55-56).

Wertsch (1991: 25) argues that “...any attempt to reduce the account of mediated action to one or the other of these elements runs the risk of destroying the phenomenon under observation”. Similarly, Tudge and Winterhoff (1993) agree that these units of analysis integrate the micro-social contexts of interaction with the social, cultural and historical contexts that encompass them.

Cole (1996) concludes that culture is the fusion of contexts and their histories (macro and local) with activities and action to both shape and be shaped by the mind. Therefore, Chaiklin (2001) states that culture is incorporated into the individual; it is both reproduced and enriched in the individual's actions.

An important aspect of socio-cultural theory is the idea that material artefacts, i.e. language and actions, carry multiple potential meanings that are revealed in the actions they call forth (Bakhurst, 2001; Cole, 1996). Following this line of thought, Edwards (2004) suggests that it enables us to see that meaning-making is located within the practices that make up an activity and in the system in which the activity occurs. Moreover, Edwards (2004) suggests that meaning-making can be seen to be both “...public, shared across settings, and local, specific

to a particular setting” (ibid: 90). Edwards suggests that the existence of a multiplicity of meanings, as proposed by Cole (1996) and Bakhurst (2001), highlights the necessity to explore possible meanings with children and to expand the object of the activity as well as recognising children’s abilities and working with them. Lockman (2005) concludes that while tools afford many possible uses, it is the actions of more skilled individuals in the culture, that largely determine the specific ways in which young children use particular tools.

4.3.7 Language as a Mediation Tool

Language as a form of mediation preoccupied Vygotsky above all others. He saw language acquisition as evolving through a “...series of spiralling stages, each with a particular function in terms of shaping the problem-solving skills of humans” (Lee, 2005: 253). While Piaget perceived private speech as ego-centric and immature, Vygotsky (1987) saw it as a critical tool of thought during early childhood; describing it as the “...most direct manifestation of the historical nature of human consciousness” (pg. 285). In keeping with his socio-cultural approach, language acquisition was perceived as a mechanism for communicating with others.

Reunamo *et al.* (2007), claim that the acquisition of language provides a paradigm for the entire problem of the relationship between learning and development. Initially, language occurs as a means of communication between the child and people in his environment. Subsequently, on conversion to internal speech, language comes to organise the child’s thought - becoming an internal mental function.

Minick (2005) identifies two core aspects of Vygotskian theory where the word assumes a function that is distinctly different from other forms of communication:

1. The child learns word meanings in certain forms of school instruction, not as a means of communication, but as part of a knowledge system, and
2. This learning occurs, not through direct experience with things or phenomena, but through other words (ibid: 45).

Language development, therefore, necessitates social involvement as well as the construction of understanding through a process of communication. Arnold *et al.* (2007) claim that language is a basic tool for thought, communication, reasoning and making sense of the world. Likewise, Rogoff (1990: 75) claims that it is a social activity that can be regarded as the “...bridge between one understanding of a situation and another”. She further states that

the "...provision of a language system teaches children the meanings and distinctions important in their culture" (ibid: 75).

Reflecting his more general concern with the socio-cultural origins of individual mental functioning, "egocentric" and "inner" speech are central to Vygotskian theory. Ego-centric speech is found in the transition from external to inner speech that usually occurs around the age of 3 years and reflects the emergence of a new self-regulative function, similar to that of inner speech (Rogoff, 1990; Wertsch and Tulviste, 2005). Vygotsky (1987: 71-72) explains that the ego-centric speech of a pre-school child and the inner speech of an adult are "...divorced from social speech which functions to inform, to link the individual with others". Ego-centric speech is used by the pre-school child in the performance of a task. Vocalisation increases as the task becomes more difficult, becoming more covert and abbreviated as the child matures. After a time, the child will perform a task without the need to verbalise. Thus, the child has internalised their ego-centric speech in the form of inner speech, which have now become their thoughts. Ego-centric speech may reappear when the child is confronted with a difficult task, e.g. when sounding out words during a reading task (Pressley, 2002). Ego-centric speech becomes a tool for problem solving.

According to Vygotsky (1987), aspects of external or communicative speech as well as ego-centric speech turn inward to become the basis of inner speech. Therefore, inner speech is "...speech for oneself... [while] external speech is speech for others... Speech for oneself is very different in its structure from speech for others. It cannot be expressed in the foreign structure of external speech" (Vygotsky, 1987: 257-261). In Vygotskian parlance, inner speech is portrayed as a form of internal collaboration with oneself.

Both inner and ego-centric speech shows how language can mediate the acquisition of knowledge; where the child internally interprets the external environment. Hence, the use of language as both a socially communicative act and a means of internal organisation of experience requires an element of give and take. As Vygotsky (1987) explains, intersubjectivity provides the basis for communication, while at the same time supporting the extension of the child's understanding to new information.

Communication both generates and depends upon common ways of simplifying and making sense of experience: "...words mean what people mean when they use them" (Parker-Rees, 1999: 65). Word meanings are far from fixed or static, therefore:

“Our personal sense making can never correspond exactly with another person’s because, although we may share a broad system of simple definitions, the colour, richness and warmth of the meanings and connotations which we attach to these is rooted in our own unique, subterranean tangle of experiences” (ibid.: 65).

Haste (1999: 186) posits that “...frames and schemas for making sense emerge through the everyday discourse and negotiation of meaning with significant others”. This discourse occurs within the wider social context, where “...culturally specific frames delineate what is available and salient for the discourse” (ibid: 186). The process is therefore dialectical. Building on this discourse, Galloway *et al.* (1991) claim that the interplay between language and action in the construction of meaning implies a need for adult and child to work alongside each other for at least part of the child’s learning process. As Raeff *et al.* (2003) note, children and care-givers do not step into “pre-existing contexts... [rather they jointly negotiate their] social contexts through linguistic communication” (pg. 6).

For Vygotsky, speech represented the embodiment of semiotic mediation; where more experienced members of the community teach children the skills, values and knowledge of the community. In this way, children become productive members of that community. Verbal communication is central to child development, in general, and to higher mental functioning, in particular. While this is indeed important with significant implications for adults working with the pre-school and school-going child, it may be counter indicative in children for whom language is not sufficiently developed.

Significantly, Vygotsky (1962 and 1987) differentiated between concepts that develop within the community and the formal school setting. “Spontaneous” concepts (situational, practical and empirical) develop within the community; while “scientific” concepts, which develop in school, exist within a hierarchical network of related concepts. As articulated by Vygotsky (1962):

“...an everyday concept clears a path for the scientific concept...it creates a series of structures necessary for the evolution of a concept’s more primitive, elementary aspects, which give it body and vitality. Scientific concepts in turn supply structures for the upward level of development of the child’s spontaneous concepts toward consciousness and deliberate use” (ibid: 109).

Although Lee (2005) questions Vygotsky’s application of spontaneous concepts to community, and scientific concepts to school, Crain (2005) claims that Vygotsky was one of the first psychologists to give careful consideration to the ramifications of school instruction on the mind of the developing child. According to Reunamo *et al.* (2007), language is not just the means of communication or understanding; it is an ingredient in cultural production.

Learning and teaching are interwoven and cannot be considered separately (ibid.). The teacher's task is to understand the link between different types of learning and pedagogy, and to choose one that is appropriate for the situation (ibid.).

Vygotsky's concept of the ZPD leaves a powerful legacy for teachers in assessing each child's potential for new learning; as well as affording importance to school instruction which gives development a forward thrust. Crain (2005: 123) concludes that instruction "...stimulates capacities that are still in an embryonic state and pushes development forward". There is a risk that such an approach may lead to attempts to accelerate the child's development, pushing them forward without giving them time to develop their capacities at their present stage.

Consequently, teachers would be well advised to heed Vygotsky's theory on children's play, which he saw as a unique, broadly influential ZPD:

"In play the child is always behaving beyond his age, above his usual everyday behaviour, in play he is, as it were, a head above himself... The relation of play to development should be compared to the relation between instruction and development... Play is a source of development and creates the zone of proximal development" (Vygotsky, 1978: 102).

This statement calls for a sense of breadth, balance, flexibility and choice within ECCE curricula, and, perhaps there is a veiled warning for teachers - that an over emphasis on instruction may in fact hinder the child's development.

In conclusion, while the key aspects of Piaget's and Vygotsky's theories differ, they both offer considerable insight to the ways that children learn. Piaget held that children learn through interacting with their environment and that learning follows development. Conversely, Vygotsky stated that learning precedes development and that children learn because of history and symbolism. At the core of Vygotskian theory is the importance afforded to language, perceived as being critical to helping children think, communicate and learn. While Piaget did not identify a specific role for the adult in supporting the child's development, Vygotsky believed that input from others working within the ZPD was critical to achieve maximum learning. Vygotsky leaves little doubt that the teacher has a proactive role in guiding and supporting the child's development.

4.3.8 Guided Participation

Amid growing recognition that learning does not occur within a social vacuum (Vygotsky, 1978; Corsaro, 1985; Goodwin, 1990; Rogoff, 1990, 1994 and 2003; Lave and Wenger,

1991; Cole, 1996; Maynard, 2005; Gauvain, 2001 and 2007), increasing attention is being paid to the ways in which cognitive development is shaped through participation in culturally relevant activities. In fact, Graue and Walsh (1995: 141) argue that "...to try to think about children without considering their life situations is to strip children and their actions of meaning".

Building on Vygotskian theory, Rogoff (1990) extends the concept of the ZPD by emphasising the interrelatedness of the roles of children, caregivers and others in shaping intellectual development. She emphasises the importance of "...tacit and distal as well as explicit face to face social interaction in the process of guided participation" (ibid: 16). Perhaps, more than any other scholar, she elaborates a socio-cultural framework with particular relevance and applicability to ECCE. Thus, in expanding upon Vygotsky's genetic law of development, Rogoff (1990) characterises the process of guided participation as embracing, more fully, the complimentary roles of children and caregivers in fostering children's development.

Guided participation is defined as, the "...process and systems of involvement of individuals with others as they communicate and engage in shared endeavours" (Rogoff *et al.*, 2003: 175). It is premised upon recognition of children as active participants in their own development; they not only seek structure - they demand the assistance of those around them in learning problem-solving skills (Rogoff, 1990 and 1994).

Children learn by observing and listening-in on the activities of adults and other children (Rogoff *et al.*, 2003). Many of the routine activities that parents engage in with their children contain implicit messages about cultural values pertaining to cognitive skills. Some of these involve passing, onto children, ways of using tools or artefacts that support mental activity (Gauvain, 2001, 2005 and 2007; Maynard *et al.*, 2005; Rogoff, 1990). As Lemke (2001) points out, we grow and live within a range of different contexts that provide us with tools for making sense of the world and of those around us.

The concept of guided participation is a tool for examining the way in which children are initiated to the cognitive and social skills, perceived as relevant to their particular community. In communities where children have access to many aspects of adult life, Rogoff (2003) contends that they take a leading role in managing their own attention, motivation and

involvement in learning; through their observation and participation in ongoing mature activities.

Coining the phrase ‘legitimate peripheral participation’ (LPP), Lave and Wenger (1991) emphasise the role of observation in exposing children, or less experienced members of a community, to more experienced members, as they participate in valued cultural practices. They suggest that LPP is important in situations where explicit adult/child instruction is less common than in Western Societies. For instance, Rogoff (1990) describes how in a Guatemalan Mayan town, a foraging community in the Democratic Republic of Congo and a tribal community in India, young children had opportunities to observe first-hand their families economic activities, including working in the fields, weaving, or shop keeping. Gauvain (2007) suggests that children do not need to devise the psychological tools and activities that support higher mental functioning as they already exist in the culture, where they learn to negotiate their social worlds through the daily activities of their communities (Corsaro, 1985 and 2005; Goodwin, 1990). Learning is shaped by those living and working alongside children, teachers, peers, parents and caregivers.

The most important differences, across cultures, in guided participation involve variations in the skills and values promoted regarding cultural goals of maturity (Rogoff, 1994). Rogoff describes how, in Western society, children are often excluded from many mature adult settings, making it difficult for them to observe the full range of their communities practices. Instead, children are found in the home or in school settings, where the adult’s primary role is the provision of care. Consequently, these children are not exposed to the wider range of work or social activities of their communities.

Convergent with the principles underlying knowledge societies, discussed in Chapter 3, Cole (1992) suggests that education is perceived as having the potential to develop the minds of the world’s non-literate populations, serving as the “engine” of economic and political development. While acknowledging that education provides new tools of the intellect, he argues that, without “...contexts of use, these tools appear to rust and fall into disuse” (ibid: 106). Rogoff *et al.* (2003) point to the limitations of such practices within both school and pre-school contexts. Using the factory analogy, she states that:

“Instead of routinely helping adults, children are often involved in specialised child-focused exercises to assemble skills for later entry in mature activities from which they are often excluded in childhood. These specialised ...situations-especially schooling, but also pre-school lessons...often employ instructional practices and a concept of learning that were heavily influenced by the organisation of factories...” (ibid: 181).

There is widespread recognition that much learning occurs as children live alongside others who are participating in, and demonstrating, culturally valued skills (Cole, 1996; Gauvain, 2001, 2005 and 2007; Lave *et al.*, 1991; Malaguzzi, 1998; Rogoff, 1990 and 2003; Rogoff *et al.*, 2003). Such skills are transmitted through the child's ZPD (Vygotsky, 1987), guided participation (Rogoff, 1990 and 2003), LPP (Lave *et al.*, 1991), and through a process of intent participation (Rogoff *et al.*, 2003), where the child keenly observes and listens in anticipation of, or in the process of, engaging in an endeavour.

Applying the term "apprenticeship in thinking", Rogoff (1990) describes children as being:

"...active in their efforts to learn from observing and participating with peers and more skilled members of their society, developing skills to handle culturally defined problems with available tools, and building from these givens to construct new solutions within the context of socio-cultural activity" (ibid: 7).

These interactions influence intellectual development in terms of how children think and in terms of what they are about. Guided participation helps to:

1. Build bridges from children's present understanding and skills, to reach new understanding and skills,
2. Arrange and structure children's participation in activities, with dynamic shifts over development in children's responsibilities. Children use social resources for guidance in assuming increasingly skilled roles in the activities of their communities (Rogoff, 1990),
3. Arrange and structure problem solving, and
4. Gradually transfer the responsibility for managing the problem solving to the child (Rogoff and Gardner, 1984).

Central to guided participation is the concept of inter-subjectivity portrayed as a:

"Sharing of focus and purpose between children and their more skilled partners, and their challenging and exploring peers. From guided participation involving shared understanding and problem solving, children appropriate an increasingly advanced understanding of and skill in managing the intellectual problems of their community" (Rogoff, 1990: 7).

According to Gauvain (2005), it involves the coordination of the attention of the social partners to one another, and may involve using and interpreting non-verbal cues, such as eye contact, modelling or verbal instructions (Gauvain, 2001 and 2005; Maynard *et al.*, 2005; Rogoff, 1990 and 2003). Acknowledging consistencies with the Vygotskian approach, Rogoff stresses a significant departure within her framework in that it provides more focus on the role of children as active participants in their own development.

Furthermore, Rogoff emphasises the importance of tacit forms of communication in the verbal and nonverbal exchanges of daily life and the distal arrangements for childhood involved in the regulations of children's activities, material goods and companions. This approach differs from the focus on explicit or didactic dialogue, characteristic of Vygotskian theory, with its predominant focus on the power of words (Rogoff, 1990). She presents a broader view of communication, encompassing nonverbal as well as verbal dialogue. This is particularly pertinent where words are not the primary currency of communication or in circumstances where there is less emphasis on the analytic use of language within various cultures. Rogoff's approach represents a more inclusive approach that facilitates the exploration of the myriad of routine daily activities in which children participate and that are not designed to instruct.

Equally significant is the role afforded to imitation in cultural learning (Rogoff *et al.*, 1993; Tomasello *et al.*, 1993). Children learn through imitating adult activities, after observing adults or after the adults have presented simplified versions of the adult activities to them (*ibid.*). Palincsar (2005) claims that social constructivists generally regard learning as the "...appropriation of socially derived forms of knowledge that are not simply internalised over time, but are also transformed in idiosyncratic ways in the appropriation process" (*ibid.*: 304). When beginning an activity, learners depend on others with more experience. Over time, children take on increasing responsibility for their own learning and participation in joint activity (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

In her cross-cultural studies, Rogoff documents children's varying forms of participation with parents and peers. She found that even when children were not conversational partners with adults, they were involved in the adult world as participants in agricultural and household work. As an example of how Mayan mothers support their children through non-verbal guidance, she explains how children engage with adults by participation in adult activities, which are taught by demonstration, including talk in context (Rogoff, 1990). By age 3 or 4 years, children are freed from direct adult supervision; moving around with a multi-age grouping of children, amusing themselves by observing and imitating their elders in play. By the age of 5 years, they participate in household activities; taking responsibility for sweeping, some food preparation and childcare. Interaction between older children and adults was in the context of adult work. Rogoff (1990) concludes that the child participates in activities of the

society, but that the patterns vary in terms of the child's or the care giver's responsibility to adapt in the process of learning or teaching the more mature forms of speech and action:

“So much of what children are able to do requires their being embedded in their culture” (ibid: 138).

Signifying the place of learning in context, Cole (1973) argues that all cultures known to man have:

“...elaborated the basic potential of language and tool use, but not all cultures have developed the forms of activity that we refer to as formal schooling or the forms of mediation that we call literacy and numeracy” (ibid: 93).

Essentially, children's cognitive development cannot be separated from their social milieu. Children learn a “cultural curriculum”, which, from their infancy, they are building on the skills and perspectives of their society with the aid and support of others (Rogoff, 1990: 190). Likewise, Gandini (1993) explains how social exchange is the paramount learning medium through “...shared activity, communication, cooperation, and even conflict, children co-construct their knowledge of the world, using one child's ideas to develop another's or to explore a path yet unexplored.” (ibid: 141-142).

Researchers Penn *et al.* (2006) and Irwin *et al.* (2007) suggest that while there are principles of ECCE programmes that are readily transferable between places, many programme features require tailoring to the social, economic and cultural contexts in which they are found. McCaleb (1997) asserts that children easily understand when curriculum and pedagogical practices do not fully respect their home culture. The school's failure to “...acknowledge and value the families learning and knowledge has a detrimental effect not only on the child's image of their parents but also on... [their] appreciation of themselves as members of their home culture” (ibid: vii).

In a study of four-year-old children who attended nursery class on a half-time basis, Tizard and Hughes (1984) compared informal learning at home with learning in school. They found that, irrespective of socio-economic background, the home provided a rich informal learning environment and that the:

“Most frequent learning context was that of everyday living. Simply by being around their mothers, talking, arguing and endlessly asking questions, the children were being provided with large amounts of information relevant to growing up in our culture” (ibid: 250-251).

Conversely, in the nursery class, Tizard *et al.* (1984) found that the questioning, puzzling child previously found in the home was gone: “...conversations with adults were mainly

restricted to answering questions rather than asking them, or taking part in minimal exchanges” (ibid: 9).

Likewise, in a study of parents as teachers, Farquhar (2002) found that the position of parents as teachers is very powerful. Parents know their children more intimately than professionals “...who do not have the same level of sustained contact and involvement” (ibid: 40).

Similarly, Wragg (2004) suggests that many parents are intuitively clever teachers, sensing their children’s needs and responding appropriately through conversations, games and activities. Significantly, Gauvain (2007) suggests that because learning in the social context involves people who are in sustained relationships with one another and interested in the formal and informal social arrangements in which learning occurs, it has the potential to reap substantial benefits for cognitive development.

Informal environments of home and community can be an effective learning tool that supports children’s intellectual development in the early years. Malaguzzi (1993), claims that children are autonomously capable of making meaning from their experiences in daily life, which they accomplish through mental acts involving planning, as well as coordination of ideas and abstraction. Critically, “...meanings are never static, univocal or final, they are always generative of other meanings” (ibid: 81). Furthermore, he asserts that the wider the range of possibilities we offer children, the more intense will be their motivations and the richer their experiences. Gauvain (2005) also suggests that both direct socio-cultural contexts and indirect social processes provide children with the knowledge and skills that are useful and valued by their culture.

In summary, Rogoff recognises that cognitive development is shaped through participation in culturally relevant activities including children’s experiences in the micro-environment of home. This represents a challenge for teachers in acknowledging that children’s cognitive development has already been greatly influenced by their experiences, prior to attending pre-school/primary school. Teachers are called upon to engage in the process of guided participation, which is directed towards: bridging children’s current understanding and skills to reach new understanding and skills; arranging and structuring their participation in activities, with dynamic shifts over development in children’s responsibilities; arranging and structuring problem solving and in the gradual transfer of responsibility for managing the problem solving to the child. Crucially, guided participation recognises children as active participants in their own development.

Importantly, in common with the concept of sustained shared thinking (Sylva *et al.*, 2002), Rogoff recognises the importance of reciprocal attention between social partners – teacher and child. This has implications for all those tasked with facilitating and supporting children’s development. It implies a proactive teacher role, surpassing that of instruction and including the use of and interpretation of non-verbal cues, such as eye contact, modelling or verbal instructions. This broad view of communication would see the realisation of children’s agency in pre-school and infant contexts.

4.4 Section 3: Family Involvement in ECCE

A core aspect of quality, as identified by Schweinhart (2004) and the OECD (2006), pertains to family involvement in ECCE. Family involvement is thought to benefit children, teachers and families (Bridge, 2001; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Carlisle *et al.*, 2005; Corter *et al.*, 2006; Davie, 1979; Epstein, 1990, 1992, 1995, 1997 and 2001; Lubeck, 1994 and 1996; Vandell and Wolfe, 2001). It helps to make the “...total fabric of a young child’s life more seamless, safe and supportive” (Carlisle *et al.*, 2005: 156).

Defining the construct of parental involvement is problematic, resulting in a variety of terms that are used interchangeably to describe the relationship between the parent and the school. These terms include home-school relationships, home-school collaboration, family-school involvement, home-school partnerships, and community of learners (Christenson, 1995; Christenson, Rounds and Gorney, 1992, Christenson and Sheridan, 2001, Epstein, 1997, McCaleb, 1997). For example, Pate and Andrews (2006) describe parental involvement in terms of having “...awareness of and involvement in schoolwork, understanding of the interaction between parenting skills and student success in schooling, and a commitment to consistent communication with educators about student involvement” (*ibid*: 1). McCaleb (1997: 33) asserts that teachers have an “obligation” to facilitate partnership with the child’s family and community so that the child can become an “...integrated, self assured human being”. Moreover, Mayall (1999: 199) holds that children’s ability to “...negotiate an acceptable daily experience” is heavily dependent upon the adult’s understanding of childhood and programmes of activities for children within social settings of home and school (*ibid*: 199).

4.4.1 Challenges Associated with Family Involvement

Effective ECCE is contingent on an attitude towards parents where teachers are “...prepared to think about and articulate their own pedagogy” (Nutbrown, 1999: 132) and to discuss it

with parents and wider community. Therefore, the "...greatest benefit to teachers in working with parents is the spur towards making their own pedagogy more conscious and explicit" (Athey, 1990: 66).

Lack of clarity about parental involvement leads to uncertainty for families and ECCE providers (Rous *et al.*, 2003). Indeed, Pugh (1999) asserts that while the role of parents in their child's learning is critical, and while most parents want to support this learning, they do not always know how to do so. Swick (2003) and Wyse (2002) propose that communication is the critical factor in relation to parent/teacher and family/school/community partnerships. They stress the need for teachers and parents to see their communicative relationship in a partnership manner.

Katz (1987) claims that while teachers may well understand the importance of communicating with parents, that their relationships with parents "...constitute one of the greatest sources of stress they experience on the job" (*ibid.*: 7). Drawing on an ecological model, Rinaldi (2006) holds that there are three main protagonists embedded within the setting/home relationship: the child, the family and the educator. These three constituencies are inseparable and integrated. The "...malaise of one... [is not only] correlated but interdependent [on the other two]" (*ibid.*: 27).

Regardless of its importance, the practice of parental involvement continues to be viewed with ambiguity. Researchers suggest that it is typified by parental volunteering and helping children with homework (Carlisle *et al.*, 2005; Jalongo *et al.*, 2004,) or annual meetings and demands for contributions (Arnold *et al.*, 2007). These aspects are more prevalent than regular exchanges between teachers and parents on the social interactions and learning progress of their children.

UNESCO (1998), claim that while the focus on parents as caregivers, learners and teachers is prevalent in ECCE rhetoric, it is often absent in actual practice. The theoretical assumptions underpinning the importance of setting/family/child relations have become the "...convictions of many, but the customary practice and action of few" (Rinaldi, 2006: 29). The emphasis tends to be on what the professional can contribute to parents and families (Corter *et al.*, 2006; Swick *et al.*, 2001). Crawford *et al.* (2006) suggest that schools must reject the family deficit model and move towards a view that includes parent participation and collaboration.

Mayall (1999) provides an insightful account of the differences between home and school, specifically that children's socialisation in the home is underpinned by personal relationships within which negotiation is a legitimate and normal activity that structures knowledge, activity and experience. Whereas within school, children are presented with a different weighting to various agendas, of which the curriculum takes precedence. Many school teachers think of their schools as child-centred, model environments, havens of ideals and good practices in an imperfect world (ibid.). The school's goals are founded on knowledge of the facts of child development, a critical factor for children who find that they are not taken seriously (ibid.). Mayall suggests that if children question school norms, teachers find it irrelevant to attend to the issues underlying the challenge. Since the school is a model environment, the fault lies with the children, or their homes. In school, children are "...essentially projects for adults work" (ibid: 210).

In exploring human relations, Valsiner (2003) supports the notion that relationships between parents and teachers are inherently unequal; that social relations and interaction occurs between individuals who are unequal in both social power and the "...semiotically constructed notion of responsibility" (ibid: 26). Parents and teachers are in control of the life worlds of children; hence, social power is constantly being created semiotically, thereby "amplifying" a difference of positions of the individuals involved in the communication process (ibid.). Valsiner concludes that the challenge relates to how a particular version of inequality of positions comes to be transformed as the communicative process unfolds. Depending on the capacity, ability and willingness of the negotiating partners, the concept of partnership is at risk of being caught in the trap of tokenism at best or doomed to failure at worst.

Parental involvement especially that of mothers; may be compromised by their involvement in the labour market (Weiss *et al.*, 2003; Stanley *et al.*, 2006). A study undertaken by Heymann and Earle (2000) found that a combination of inflexible work scheduling and lack of parental leave limited low-income mothers' availability to support their children. Another study by Moon and Ivins (2004), on parental involvement in children's education, found that the main barrier to parental involvement related to work commitments (53%), lack of time (8%) and childcare difficulties (7%). According to Weiss *et al.* (2003), time is a "...central aspect of employment that creates a barrier to educational involvement for low-income mothers" (ibid: 881). Consideration should also be given to the inflexible timing of

parent/teacher meetings in schools, which are out of sync with parents' work schedules and are therefore a barrier to parental involvement.

Epstein (1997) presents a view of parental involvement where children learn and grow within three overlapping spheres of influence: family, school and community. Each sphere forms a partnership to best meet the needs of the child. She identifies six types of involvement all of which must be included to have successful partnerships. Her model acknowledges the diverse needs and expectations of different families and teachers, reflecting the view that what works for one family may not necessarily work for another.

Significantly, parental involvement is not static - it is a complex phenomenon influenced by the characteristics of the overlapping spheres of influence and the nature of the participant's relationships. It may vary by the child's age and grade level, social background and experiences of families and school policies (Epstein, 1992). This perspective points to the importance of exploring how parental involvement alters within, and between, different educational settings as in pre-school and primary school.

Table 12 Epstein's Model of Parental Involvement

Type of Parental Involvement	Purpose
Parenting	Help all families to establish a home environment to support children as students
Communicating	Design effective forms of home-to-school and school-to-home communications about school programmes and their children's progress
Volunteering	Recruit and organise parental help and support
Learning at Home	Provide information and ideas to families about how to help students at home with homework and other curriculum-related activities, decisions and planning
Decision Making	Include parents in school decisions, developing parent leaders and representatives
Collaborating with the Community	Identify and integrate resources and services from the community to strengthen school programmes, family practices and student learning and development

Source: Epstein, 1997.

While the centrality of partnership between school, family and community is critical, Epstein and Sanders (2000) claim that in practice, teachers and parents have little understanding of each other's interests in children and schools.

There are claims that the sometimes unhealthy dissonance between teachers and parents/families is greatly influenced by teacher beliefs and attitudes (Carlisle *et al.*, 2005; Crawford *et al.*, 2006; Powell, 1998; Swick, 2004; Suoto-Manning and Swick, 2006). Indeed, Lawson (2003) believes that teachers tend to ignore the needs and perceptions of parents. Both Lawson (2003) and Swick (2004) suggest that many parents believe that they are seldom consulted on important issues relating to their child's schooling. Knopf and Swick (2007), advocate that teachers take the time and energy to come to know each parent/family member as a unique caring person, and account for these differences in their relationships with them.

A study by Teleki and Buck-Gomez (2002), into parental satisfaction with childcare, concludes that knowledge of family expectations for, and the level of satisfaction with, early childhood services can provide valuable information to classroom teachers, principals, community leaders and other professionals. Moreover, teachers can use this information to identify parents' perceptions of their work and make changes or provide explanations to create the most positive experience for the child.

To summarise, while there is widespread recognition of the valuable contribution that parents can make to their child's care and education, parental involvement continues to be viewed with ambiguity. Generally, it is limited to volunteering, helping children with homework, annual meetings and demands for contributions. These aspects are more prevalent than regular exchanges between teachers and parents on the social interactions and learning progress of their children. There are many barriers to parental involvement not least of which is a power differential between parents and teachers. Added to this are issues associated with parental participation in employment, which prevent them from becoming involved in their child's education. With regard to the nature of parent/teacher relationships, there is evidence that the emphasis tends to be on what the professional can contribute to parents and families (Corter *et al.*, 2006; Swick *et al.*, 2001). This approach is far removed from an ideology of parental participation and collaboration.

4.5 Section 4: Social Pedagogy versus School Readiness

This section is concerned with child outcome quality/performance standards (OECD, 2006a). As noted by the OECD, while positive child outcomes are a major goal for ECCE programmes, they can result in a “readiness for school” approach that may lead to a focus on “...assessment content and distract teachers from the intense relational and pedagogical work that young children need” (OECD, 2006a: 127).

4.5.1 Social Pedagogy

Bennett (2006) claims that the nature and quality of ECCE programmes is strongly influenced by what adults expect children to know and do. He asserts that there is little consensus regarding the critical skills, knowledge and pedagogical approaches that best serve children’s development. From the evidence gathered in the OECD reviews (2004b and 2006a) two broad curricular approaches were discerned. On the one hand is placed the social pedagogic approach; commonly found in the Nordic countries and in central European countries, while on the other is placed the pre-primary approach; implemented primarily in Belgium, France, Ireland, the Netherlands and the UK.

The social pedagogic approach combines four key elements required of a pedagogical framework:

1. A statement of principles and values that guide early childhood centres,
2. A summary of programme standards, delineating how programmes should be supported to facilitate learning and development,
3. A short outline of content and outputs that children at different ages can be expected to learn and master across broad developmental areas, and
4. Pedagogical guidelines, outlining the processes through which children achieve the outcomes and the manner in which educators should support them (Bennett, 2004: 1).

In the social pedagogical approach, childhood is valued in and of itself, rather than as a preparation for adult life in the future. Parents are afforded high importance as educational partners with teachers, and the ECCE setting is conceived as bridging the public and private spheres - as fully taking into account the rights of parents and the interests of young children (OECD, 2006a). A more holistic approach to learning is practiced with emphasis placed on learning to live together and on supporting children in their developmental tasks and interests. The social pedagogy tradition is grounded in a concerted effort to increase children’s agency

and to pursue broad holistic aims rather than a narrow focus on educational, subject-oriented, academic attainment.

Because of the benefits accruing from their ECCE systems, the Nordic countries see them as a public good, where society as a whole benefits from the investment (Bennett, 2006). It is legitimate that public monies should be invested in the sector. As highlighted in Chapter 3, this is "...often a difficult message to get across in liberal economies" (ibid: 14).

Accordingly, the wider dimensions of "...childcare are overlooked, with a preponderance to view the care of the child as a private market transaction between parents and providers" (Bennett, 2006: 1). These difficulties are reflected in investment in ECCE services ranging from about 2% of GDP in Denmark, to about 0.4% of GDP in Australia, Canada and Ireland (Bennett, 2006). The considerable difference in investment can be seen in the quality and range of services available to parents in the Nordic countries, in comparison to Ireland.

4.5.2 School Readiness

Countries, in which readiness for school is a central aim, adopt or continue a conception of ECCE much influenced by the primary school model. Highlighting the benefits of school readiness, the EFA argue that it enhances five areas where children differ considerably, i.e. physical well-being and motor development; social and emotional development; approaches to learning; language development; and cognitive development. However, the OECD (2009a and 2006b) claims that the programmes and methodologies utilised are "...poorly suited to the psychology and natural learning strategies of young children" (2009a: 15). Furthermore, as many of these programmes take place in classrooms with high adult/child ratios, the dynamics of the programme may be predominantly teacher directed (ibid.).

Conversely, Aubrey *et al.* (2000) suggest that nursery schools, with their more generous adult/child ratios and activity-based curriculum, may be better suited to the needs of younger children. However, as discussed in Chapters 1 and 3, as of yet, ECCE in Ireland is not characterised by these optimal learning conditions.

There are conflicting viewpoints regarding the appropriateness and efficacy of early years settings. For example, Myers (2006) highlights the tendency in ECCE programmes to think in terms of integral development that allows children to handle ever more complex levels of physical, social, intellectual, emotional and moral activity. In counterpoint, Spodek and Brown (1993: 101) note that many programmes "...consist of a collection of loosely related

activities...rather than reflecting any curriculum model”. Moreover, an inability to define developmental outcomes and appropriate testing mechanisms has “...left the field without an accepted equivalent of the national and international tests applied widely at the primary school level” (Myers, 2006: 12). As a result, there is a “hole” in public accounting that makes it difficult to “...put before policy makers and programmers the state of the practice so they can make indicated judgments” (ibid: 12).

The traditional construct of school readiness is criticised for its disproportionate attention to the child’s skill alone, as well as its narrow focus on effectiveness, where “...simplistic outcome measures, which only look to knowledge and skill competence in the short term, are seriously underestimating the issue” (Pascal and Bertram, 1999: 93). Children’s thinking is “...embedded in a context which has some meaning to them, whereas, much school activity... is disembodied” (Moyles, 2001: 14). Activities such as “filling in the blanks”, worksheets, and “colouring-in” often hold no meaning or purpose for the child and serve only to make the process of learning more difficult (ibid.).

Pointing to deficiencies within the educational system, Moreno and Dongen (2006) argue that if quality is poor, “...children can be pushed out or leave of their own, draining scarce resources needed for human development”. Moreover, O’Sullivan (2005) argues that school “codes of behaviour, expectations of pupils’ motivations and aspirations, styles of speech, and formal curriculum present a culture that is meaningless to many pupils” (ibid: 315). Unquestionably, school readiness and school success are determined by more than academic skills. Children’s motivations, orientation to learning and behaviour also serve as determinants of later school success (Alexander *et al.*, 1993; Reynolds, 1989). According to the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) (1995) “...the traditional construct of readiness unduly places the burden of proof on the child... it is the responsibility of the schools to meet the needs of children as they enter school” (ibid: 1). Rather than placing the burden of readiness on children, educators are challenged to reconsider traditional beliefs about the role of the school in helping children to continue learning and succeeding in the school culture (Katz, 1991; Dockett and Perry, 2002; Fabian *et al.*, 2007; Arnold *et al.*, 2007).

Many researchers (Claxton, 2008; Elkind, 1981; Gallagher *et al.*, 1987; Rescorla *et al.*, 1991) suggest that early introduction to literacy and mathematics may be unnecessary, inappropriate, or even harmful to children. This is especially so for middle or high socio-

economic families who may already exert undesirable pressure on their children to achieve. Others have added their voice to discourse concerning pressures on children in advantaged families and neighbourhoods, citing difficulties in adapting to stress and frustration - largely due to considerable economic and social change, and insecurity in which families and young children are particularly vulnerable (Bennett, 2007; Keating and Hertzman, 1999; OECD, 2006b). On the one hand, there are disadvantaged/marginalized children who, because of deficits within their communities, lack social capital (NESF, 2001, 2004 and 2006; OECD, 2004a and 2006b; Putnam, 2000; Woodhead and Oates, 2007) and equality of opportunity to experience and participate in activities available to children in more affluent neighbourhoods. On the other hand, there are children who may be considered privileged, but none the less they are pressured to perform, achieve, compete and participate in a matrix of organised activities with minimal opportunity to just be children (Moloney, 2007).

In reality, we never truly know what lies beneath the surface of daily life for children and families (Payne, 1996). Outward appearances are deceptive. Regardless of circumstances, children have needs and rights to quality services and supports (DHC, 2000; OMC/DHC, 2007; UNCRC, 1989).

The OECD (2006) purport that the readiness for school model is powerful, carrying the promise of children entering primary school already prepared to read and write and able to conform to normal classroom procedures. However, Choi (2006) is adamant that pre-primary education should not result in early schooling. The focus should be on helping children to build the “psychosocial foundations” necessary to undertake abstract learning later in primary school. The emphasis should not be on teaching specific reading and arithmetic skills that require abstraction (*ibid.*). The OECD (2006a) suggests that both approaches can be seen as two curricular emphases which merge as part of the same continuum.

Within this continuum, the focus is placed on broad developmental goals at one end, while at the other end the emphasis is on more focused skills and school-like learning such as language, literacy and mathematics. The child’s life is in the centre and the range of experiences offered to them plays a more “secondary role” (OECD, 2006a: 62-63). Because children are at the centre of ECCE programmes, they must be founded upon “...an abiding respect for early childhood as a developmental period in its own right, rather than replicate the curriculum and pedagogy that characterises later academic experience” (Jalongo *et al.*, 2004: 145).

Significantly, Abbott and Moylett (1999: 194) argue that while early childhood is not a “waiting room” for school, it must in some ways be a preparation. The challenge is to be careful that:

“Pre-school does not become the dominant idea, that preparation does not become the watchword, that play does not become denigrated and work elevated in an attempt to make young children more like older ones and therefore more like adults” (ibid: 195).

In Ireland, the economy and a focus on consolidating the future through the knowledge society, drives a strong focus on cognitive development, the somewhat privileged domain perceived as an indispensable element of progress. In a society that is increasingly characterised by the need to accomplish, accumulate and achieve, Katz (1993) claims that ECCE programmes are increasingly in danger of “...being modelled on the corporate/industrial or factory model so pervasive in elementary... levels of education... factories that are designed to transform raw materials into pre-specified products by treating it to a sequence of pre- specified standard processes” (ibid: 33-34).

Inherent within the school readiness paradigm is the danger of losing sight of the importance of educating the “whole child” (DHC, 2000; Rinaldi, 2006). According to Arnold *et al.* (2007), quality education is increasingly accepted as going beyond academic learning, encompassing children’s social and emotional development, their physical well-being and protection from harm. Therefore, educational development that goes beyond mere intellectual, cognitive or cultural development requires a “bespoke or tailor made” curriculum (ibid.).

4.6 Chapter Conclusion

Quality in ECCE is interwoven with the relationship between child and teacher. It is further dependent upon knowledge and understanding of how children learn and develop, as well as the capacity to translate such knowledge into practice within settings. Thus, the concept of pedagogy – the art, craft or science of teaching (Sylva *et al.*, 2002) and child development theory is central to how teachers facilitate children’s learning in pre-school and primary school contexts.

This chapter examined the contribution of Piaget, Vygotsky and Rogoff. Although Piaget left a legacy in terms of how children’s learning and development is understood, he paid little attention to the social milieus of children’s lives. Moreover, Piagetian theory offers little by way of delineating the teacher’s role. On the other hand, socio-cultural theorists, Vygotsky

and Rogoff, situate learning within a socio-cultural context - giving due recognition to the support of more knowledgeable and experienced adults/peers in supporting children's learning. Both Vygotsky and Rogoff explicate a pro-active teacher role that involves organising the learning environment, planning, implementing and evaluating a curriculum and guiding/scaffolding the child's learning and development.

The complexity and multi-faceted nature of the teacher's role is embedded within socio-cultural theory and is clearly linked to teacher knowledge and skill. Lack of knowledge and skill may lead to an inappropriate focus on literacy and numeracy in the early years. Therefore, as discussed in Chapters 1 and 3, the link between quality and teacher training is unequivocal. In turn, high levels of training are linked to teacher confidence, appropriate pedagogical practices, self-esteem, and professional identity. Chapter 5, the concluding chapter of this literature review takes an in-depth look at professional identity as well as the factors that shape such identity.

5. Shaping Professional Identity

5.1 Introduction

The link between trained pre-school and infant teachers and process quality has been reiterated throughout this thesis. This Chapter addresses the professional identity of pre-school and infant teachers. It explores a range of factors that shape professional identity, the most significant of which is training and development.

Teacher knowledge and skill is interwoven with teacher preparation in pre-school and infant class contexts. In exploring teacher knowledge, this chapter looks at the dualism between pedagogic content knowledge and subject knowledge in planning and implementing early childhood curricula. Anderson's (2001) revised taxonomy of educational objectives is applied as a methodological tool, to delineate the roles and responsibilities of pre-school and infant teachers. The chapter concludes by discussing the construct of assessment, evaluation and reflective practice - all of which are central to process quality.

5.2 Crisis of Identity within ECCE

Those working in the pre-school sector have had a historic struggle for recognition of their professionalism (Helterbran and Fennimore, 2004; Lobman *et al.*, 2007). This struggle has been sustained by the dichotomy between care and education, which reinforces a split and incoherent approach to services based on separate systems of care and education (Bowman *et al.*, 2001; Dalli, 2008; Fabian *et al.*, 2006; Urban, 2008). However, such cultural complacency is increasingly challenged by social and educational researchers and policy makers (CECDE, 2006; DES, 1999a; EFA, 2007; Hayes, 2007; Irwin *et al.*, 2007; NCCA, 2004; Shonkoff *et al.*, 2000), who purport that care and education are inseparable and central to quality services for children. Shonkoff *et al.* (2000) ask: "...what do we mean by childcare? It is not just day care... it is also not just care"

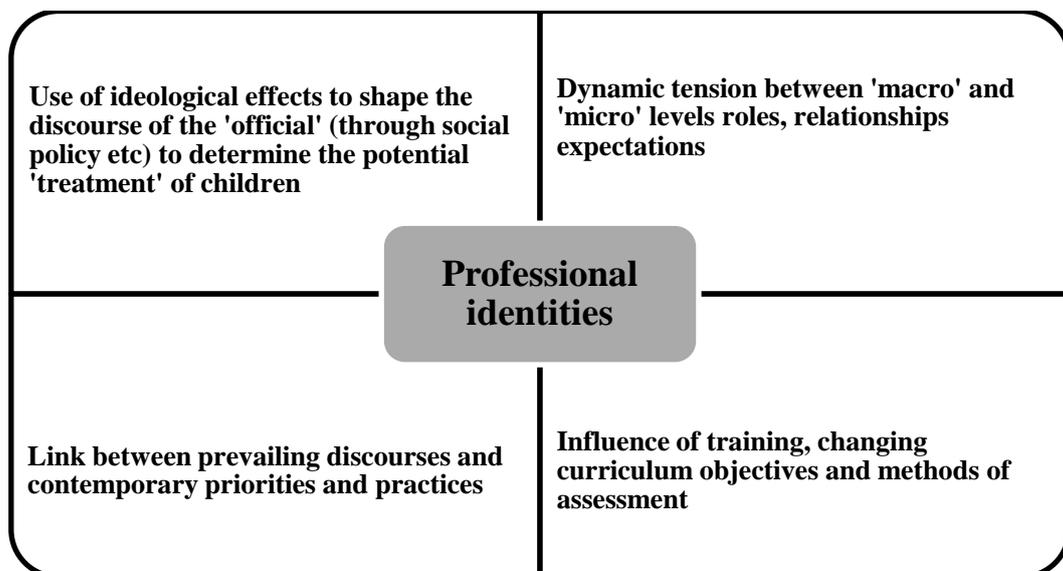
While the sector is perceived as caring, maternal and strongly gender-biased (Moss, 2000), there is an emerging consensus on the link between staff training, qualifications and ongoing professional development in the provision of ECCE (Dalli 2008; Hayes 2007; Moyles *et al.*, 2002; Moloney, 2010b; OECD 2001 and 2006; Saracho and Spodek 2003; Vandell 2004). Equally, there is agreement on the need to develop a coherent, recognisable body of professional practice (CECDE, 2006; DJELR, 2002; NCCA, 2004; Saracho *et al.*, 2003; Urban, 2008).

5.3 Primary School Teacher Professional Identity

A teacher is defined as a person whose “...professional activity involves the transmission of knowledge, attitudes and skills that are stipulated to students in an educational programme” (OECD, 2005: 26). It does not include “...non-professional personnel who support teachers in providing instruction to students” (ibid: 26). This definition clearly excludes all those working outside the domain of formal education, regardless of their qualification levels.

Tucker (2004) provides a framework for analysis that helps to identify a range of factors associated with the construction of professional identity. Within this model, professional identity is located at the confluence of historical, social, economic and political trajectories, central to which is investment in training, development and support mechanisms.

Figure 16 Factors Associated with the Construction of Professional Identity



(Adapted from Tucker, 2004: 88)

Professional identity is enmeshed in a broader societal discourse that is underpinned by values, personal qualities, ideology, status, training and qualifications (Dalli, 2008; Tucker, 2004; Urban, 2008). It results from connections made, and interactions between societal and personal philosophies and professional training and practice. Accordingly, it is an ever changing entity.

In Ireland, as highlighted in Chapter 3, teacher professional identity is underpinned by teacher training. This is typified by a “concurrent model” of teacher education, undertaken

over a three-year period (Killeavy, 2001; OECD, 2005). Bennett *et al.* (2004: 430) argue that in spite of being trained to degree level, teachers concentrate more on "...primary education than on specific skills and approaches for early childhood pedagogy". This is especially the case in Australia, France, Ireland, the Netherlands, the UK and the United States.

The teacher's principal role is to implement the *Primary School Curriculum*, which is synonymous with professional identity. Teachers have clearly defined roles and responsibilities, terms and conditions of employment and remuneration, all of which is monitored by the DES under whose auspices they are employed and to whom they are accountable.

Crucially, there are opportunities for career advancement within the teaching sector. In Ireland, teachers can access four categories of promotion, notably: Principal; Deputy Principal; Assistant Principal; and Special Duties Teacher. In England and Wales, the career grade of Advanced Skills Teacher allows teachers wishing to stay in the classroom an alternative route for career development (OECD, 2005). The Teaching Council of Ireland, legally established in 2006, regulates the professional practices of teachers, oversees teacher education programmes and aims to enhance their professional development. It provides teachers with a large degree of professional autonomy, helping to enhance their professional status and morale. Without doubt, teachers fit within the established social order. They are seen as valuable contributors to society, and are considered important, indeed critical, to children's education. Their value and professional status is underpinned by the systems put in place to support them.

In considering teacher professional identity, one thinks of the DES, the NCCA and the INTO - all agencies associated with the teaching profession and teacher identity. Just as the medical profession, for instance, is linked to the Irish Medical Organisation (IMO), the Hippocratic Oath and so on. According to Saracho *et al.* (2003), the learned professions, e.g.: medicine, law and the clergy were traditionally conceived as occupations that demanded a high degree of preparation in liberal arts or science. In contrast, the "semi-professions", e.g.: teaching, nursing and social work, require less preparation and their status is considered to be at a lower level (*ibid*: 213). Regardless of how these respective professions or semi-professions are viewed, they are marked by a professional identity that is instantly recognisable and linked to the practices, ethics, codes and core values which define them.

Although the OECD (2006b) claims that the social standing of teachers has remained relatively unchanged over the years, they express concern that, overall, teacher status is being diminished. Teacher issues increasingly appear on policy agendas. For example, a draft Education (Amendment) Bill 2010 makes provision to allow unqualified teachers a legal entitlement to teach. Commenting on this proposal, the INTO General Secretary, Sheila Nunan, said that "...Children are entitled to be taught by a teacher, a person with no teaching qualification is not a teacher". It is evident that the teacher role and status is undergoing considerable change (OECD 2006b; Sachs 2001 and 2003; Woods and Jeffrey 2002). The demands on teachers are ever more complex and, as discussed in Chapters 1 and 3, are interwoven with the concept of accountability which is increasingly to the forefront of discussion and debate concerning teacher practice. Indeed, teachers have witnessed their role being reduced to a list of competencies and performativities (Woods and Jeffrey, 2002). Thus, as they endeavour to become more responsive to external demands and judgements, teacher professional identity becomes less clearly defined.

Teacher professional identity is increasingly shaped by two "competing discourses", they are: managerial and democratic (Sachs, 2001: 153). Managerial, enforced by authority, emphasises accountability and effectiveness. It shapes professional practice and identity in terms of compliance with such elements. Democratic discourse, on the other hand, emphasises collaboration and "...cooperative action between teachers and other educational stakeholders" (ibid: 153). Sachs argues that teacher professional identities are "...rich and complex because they are produced in rich and complex sets of relations of practice" (ibid: 160). She stresses the need to nurture this richness and complexity in "...conditions where there is respect, mutuality and communication. (ibid: 160).

Belonging to a community of practice is instrumental in shaping professional identity (Sachs, 2001 and 2003). Being accepted by peers and feeling that you belong and are valued within the workplace, are significant affective aspects of professional identity. Communities of practice can have "...a profound impact on teachers' lives both in terms of their classroom practice and how they construct their professional identities" (Sachs, 2003: 133). Ball (2003) posits that teaching is increasingly concerned with outcomes and maximising performance. Teachers, therefore, are continually reviewing their professional role. In doing so, Woods and Jeffrey (2002) suggest that teachers may be forced to assume multiple identities to meet competing demands and expectations which can lead to a sense of volatility and uncertainty.

5.4 Pre-School Professional Identity

From the outset, professional identity within the pre-school sector is obscure. It is fraught with contradictions and challenges as reflected in four primary discourses:

1. Diverse nomenclature,
2. Diversity of the workforce,
3. Low status of the sector, and
4. Absence of a specific training requirement.

Mirroring the views expressed by the OECD (2001 and 2006b), Saracho *et al.* (2003) contend that those working with children outside the public school system have considerably less status, lower salaries and are required to have even less preparation than teachers. Indeed, the OECD (2006b: 158) observes that "...early childhood educators working closest to the school gate are better rewarded".

A number of researchers (Day *et al.*, 2006; Flores *et al.*, 2006; Tucker, 2004) agree that the "...performance of professionals who work with young children is shaped by two things: their education and training background... [and the] perceptions they have developed of themselves in relation to their societal value and their importance to young children and families" (Swick, 1985: 73). Based upon a national study on quality in ECCE in Ireland, Mahony and Hayes (2006) emphasise that "...a lack of professionalism of ECCE practitioners... low salaries, lack of staff training and poor working conditions" (*ibid*: 154) contribute significantly to the level of quality within settings.

The low status of ECCE has been situated within a feminist paradigm, where the traditional construct was that of physical care undertaken by women, predominantly without training (Cannella, 1997; Jalongo *et al.*, 2004; Lobman *et al.*, 2007; OECD, 2006). Young children's care has been treated as a "...natural outgrowth of maternal instincts, a role for which the rewards are intrinsic rather than material" (Jalongo *et al.*, 2004: 146). Carter and Doyle (2006) describe ECCE as being, fundamentally a practical matter associated with women and children "...far from the towers of academia" (*ibid*: 373). Such statements are unhelpful; serving to undermine both the identity and professionalism of the sector, whilst also obscuring the valuable relational aspects of this unique and specialised field.

As professional practice continues to dominate policy initiatives, professional demarcation in ECCE remains ambiguous. It is associated with terms such as "childcare assistant", "crèche

worker”, “pre-school teacher” and “practitioner”. While common, and frequently used interchangeably, these terms are but a sample of the multitude of descriptors used to describe the professions of those people working with children in the pre-school sector. Adams (2005), in attempting to understand the concept of professionalism in the Scottish ECCE sector, identified at least eleven job titles. Commenting on these findings, Urban (2008), notes that they reflect a broader picture that is identifiable in individual countries, as well as within international discourse. While the title may be an issue of semantics, it none the less raises important issues about what early childhood programmes should include, as well as concerns about the training and educational qualifications of the professionals and paraprofessionals who operate them (BERA, 2001; David, 2003; Swick, 1985).

Dahlberg *et al.* (1999) discuss the many constructions of the pre-school teacher where s/he is first and foremost a technician, whose primary task is to ensure the efficient production of the settings outcomes by “...transmitting a pre-determined body of knowledge to the child” (ibid: 67). Second, s/he is a substitute parent “...providing a close intimate relationship with the children in her charge” and thirdly, s/he is an entrepreneur who must market and sell her product (ibid: 67).

Increasingly, researchers suggest moving away from the role of technician to perceiving the role as that of reflective practitioner, thinker, researcher and co-constructor of knowledge, culture and identity (CECDE, 2006; Moss *et al.*, 2002; NCCA, 2004 and 2009). Conversely, Osgood (2006) suggests that this proposal is compromised by “social engineering”: a preoccupation to satisfy dominant and externally imposed constructions of professionalism, where the early years become “...constrained by technicist practice” (ibid: 5). Moreover, Osgood claims that practitioners are not passively shaped by social structure; they are active in “...challenging, negotiating and reforming the discourses through which they are positioned and defined” (ibid: 5).

Osgood’s perspective challenges pre-school teachers to question and challenge the status quo. It is precisely because the sector lacks a unified professional identity that, as a body, it is unable to challenge, negotiate and inform. Consequently, the pre-school sector is effectively silenced by the very discourses in which it is positioned and defined.

Douglas (2004) calls for enhancement of practitioner professional competence, confidence and assertiveness. To be assertive, one has to be proficient in knowledge associated with the

profession, as well as being comfortable speaking out and acting beyond regulatory and legislative limitations. Those who are able to challenge the established order of practice, to question, and to consider new and better ways of doing things, look beyond the "...strait jacket of constraints" (OECD, 2006b: 3). They have a sense of how things are done and understood, and importantly, a vision of how things could be done differently. Ultimately, they are confident and assertive enough to reflect upon, propose alternatives and follow through on possibilities, even when faced with challenge and adversity. Hence, it is the assertive, self assured and wise ECCE professional who challenges the status quo, low pay, poor working conditions, and who "...can muddy the water and offer the chance of a reconfigured professional identity and counter discourse" (Osgood, 2006: 12).

There is widespread agreement on the low status of ECCE characterised by low pay, poor conditions and few progression opportunities (Cameron, 2004; Bennett *et al.*, 2004; Sylva and Pugh, 2005; Urban, 2006). In a 2008 survey, Barry and Sherlock found that remuneration of childcare workers in Ireland was extremely low; ranging from €9.27 per hour for those with up to four years experience, to €10.03 for those with over ten years experience (*ibid*: 11). These rates are not much higher than the current National Minimum Wage of €8.65 (*ibid*: 11).

Early and Winton (2001) highlight the wide discrepancy between what research says about the important role of ECCE and the set of existing policies and practices that do "...not support an adequately compensated professional workforce" (*ibid*: 286). Moyles (2004) asserts that performance-related pay has to be "anathema" for those who teach young children, and asks: "...how can educational progress be separated from development, care, and family circumstances, other than at simplistic levels?" (*ibid*: 17). Murnane and Steele (2007) claim that teachers are influenced by more than financial incentives, including a wide range of "non pecuniary" incentives, such as working conditions, hours of employment, facilities and curricular autonomy (*ibid*: 20).

Practice can only be fully professional when "...informed by consideration of aims and values and the relationship of particular activities to overall purposes" (Golby, 1994: 71). Simply stated, pre-school teachers must have a plan; they must know what they want children to achieve; and more importantly, they must know how to get there. In their study of effective pedagogy in early learning, Moyles *et al.* (2002) found that practitioners were unable to articulate their own professional knowledge or skills. Such inability may put a significant

constraint upon pedagogical practices (ibid.). Improving the levels of professionalism within ECCE necessitates that standards be raised with regard to their levels of preparation, credentialing and certification (Barnett *et al.*, 2005; Bennett *et al.*, 2004; Saracho *et al.*, 2003).

In attempting to define the role of a “pedagogista” (teacher) in a Reggio school, Edwards (1998) describes how “...we define our professional roles in relation to one another... [It] can only be defined starting at the image of the child-consequently, our images of the teacher, school and family... contributes to those very images” (ibid: 127). Clearly the role of the pedagogista is founded upon shared aims, values and philosophy. Edwards (1998) summarises this in terms of a “...shared discourse, a coherent way of thinking and talking about the teacher” inside and outside the classroom, based on an “...explicit philosophy about the child as learner” (ibid: 179). She concludes that this “...language of education serves to organise and bring together all of the participants in the Reggio Emilia system into one community” (ibid: 179).

Consistent with Sachs *et al.* (1993), Wenger (1998) argue that identity and competence are inarticulately entangled. Researchers (Lave *et al.*, 1991; Rogoff *et al.*, 1993), purport that membership in a community of practice “translates into an identity as a form of competence” (Wenger, 1998: 153). In Ireland, the concept of community within the pre-school sector is considerably undermined by the dominant discourses underpinning ECCE; nomenclature, diversity of the workforce, low status and the absence of a specific training requirement. However, as discussed in Chapter 3, a number of initiatives, notably: *Síolta*, *Aistear* and the development of a Workforce Development plan, are directed towards redressing the professionalism of the ECCE sector in Ireland.

Caldwell (1989 and 1991) suggests that abandoning the term childcare entirely, and replacing it with the term “educare”, would more closely embrace the continuum of care and education. Similarly, Kagan and Cohen (1996) call for care and education to function as a single system rather than as disparate programmes. More recently, Urban (2006: 60) suggests replacing “...public school by early childhood sector and educants by practitioners”. Based upon an examination of Educare in the Irish context, Dinneen (2002) acknowledged that, as a concept, it certainly exists. However, mindful of the reality of the sector in terms of a lack of training and weak practices in ECCE settings, she concluded that “much work has yet to be done before it is embedded as a given in the Irish psyche” (ibid: 344-345).

Dalli (2008) tracks development in New Zealand, where terminology associated with the early childhood workforce has changed considerably. The term teacher is now applied to all qualified early childhood staff employed in early childhood centres. Significantly, early childhood is perceived as a teacher-led profession.

UNESCO (2004) highlights the fact that a number of countries have moved towards integrating divided systems. While Ireland can now be added to this growing list of countries (following the establishment of the OMCYA), departmental integration does not automatically translate into full integration of the two systems of services (UNESCO, 2004). One indicator of the progression of integration is, what happens to the divided workforce and, in particular, "...whether the workforce has been reformed around a core profession whose members work across all centre-based early childhood services, not just in one service for one group of children" (ibid.1]). Regardless of prolific policy developments, the integration of the care and education sectors continues to present considerable challenge in Ireland.

Commenting on ECCE in Ireland, Urban (2006: 45) states that, as a sector and a profession, it has "clear weaknesses regarding its visibility and influence in a highly competitive society". Haddad (2001) suggests that guaranteeing the specificity of the field under the auspices of one government department is fraught with difficulties and challenges. She cautions against exalting the educational sector as necessarily the most appropriate to guide the ECCE field. Her concern is linked to the school readiness discourse (presented earlier in Chapter 4) and a fear that services may become more 'school like'. To avoid these risks, it would be prudent to establish a hierarchy of priorities for the process of ECCE integration. Consistent with Choi (2006), Haddad (2001) suggests the need to start focusing on the requirements needed to build its own specific culture and identity.

Yelland *et al.* (2005) argue that the skills of pre-school teachers are broadening, and are being reconceptualised from teachers "...who do what is said to be right, to practitioners who ask, in what ways can we create effective learning environments" (ibid: 7). In common with the OECD (2006a), Yelland *et al.* suggest that maintaining currency and relevance in ECCE requires teachers to look beyond the boundaries of the field and to question their practice. Thus, through a process of "...conceptualising, postulating and recognising critical issues... [they will] create new understandings about significant educational issues in changing times" (Yelland *et al.*, 2005: 7). Thus, pre-school teachers will create a new identity based on common shared values and objectives, so that the concept of the reflective pedagogue

becomes a key component in establishing and improving practice (CECDE, 2006; Bertrand, 2001; Graham and Phelps, 2003; Moss *et al.*, 2002; NCCA, 2004 and 2009; Schön, 1983).

Moss *et al.* (2002) suggest that naming the ECCE field provides useful ways of thinking about and developing work with children. While acknowledging the difficulties associated with the term pedagogy, they claim that it could rescue us from some of the "...confusion in which we find ourselves when it comes to providing and discussing children's services, alleviating some of the incoherence... [revealed in policy documents and their] struggles to connect aspects of care, learning and upbringing" (ibid: 137-138). At the level of practice, pedagogy could "foster a unifying ethos across settings and age groups, with many workers in the children's sector reconstructed as pedagogues, sharing common values and approaches" (Petrie, 2004: 295). In Ireland, such a shift would require the acceptance and implementation of both *Síolta* and *Aistear* within pre-school and primary school, as well as a reconceptualising of teacher preparation in both contexts.

5.5 Diversity of ECCE Workforce

The ECCE sector is highly stratified. It comprises a mix of graduate and post-graduate qualified teachers who may, or may not, have specialist training in working with young children, as well as unqualified workers with no specialist training (Area Development Management (ADM), 2004; DES, 2007 and 2009; NESF, 2005; OECD, 2001, 2004a, 2004b and 2006a). Osgood and Stone (2002) argue that such diversity in provision encourages pre-school teachers to behave in isolated and defensive ways, where they lack a unified identity or a shared belief in themselves as a professional group.

The lack of uniform professional standards and certification creates a confusing situation where teacher quality ranges from inadequate to excellent, depending on the particular situation (Melhuish *et al.*, 2002; Moyles *et al.*, 2002; Sylva *et al.*, 2003 and 2004; Swick, 1985). Garet *et al.* (2001) associate the success of ambitious education initiatives with the qualifications and effectiveness of teachers. In contemplating professional discourse, practitioner education and training is paramount.

Many researchers cite the connection between child development gains and teacher education (Bowman *et al.*, 2001; Brooks-Gunn *et al.*, 1994; Brooks-Gunn *et al.*, 2002; Campbell *et al.*, 2002; Melhuish *et al.*, 2002; NESF, 2005; Ramey *et al.*, 1998; Schweinhart *et al.*, 1993; Sylva *et al.*, 2003; Sylva *et al.*, 2004; Schweinhart, 2004). In this context, researchers point to

a dearth of research on the effectiveness of teacher preparation programmes (Boyd *et al.*, 2007; Gore *et al.*, 2007; Hanushek *et al.*, 2007; Winton, 2006).

Typically, in the area of ECCE, research suggests that more ECCE coursework is linked with higher quality care (Blau, 2000; Blatchford *et al.*, 2002; Howes *et al.*, 1992; Phillips *et al.*, 2000; Sylva *et al.*, 2004). Specifically, the EPPE study (Sylva *et al.*, 2004) illustrates that settings employing staff with higher qualifications, especially those with a trained manager and a good proportion of trained teachers, demonstrate higher quality - particularly in the area of sustained shared thinking. Blatchford *et al.* (2002) found a similar link between staff qualifications and the levels of direct teaching and monitoring of interactions, and sustained shared teaching. Furthermore, staff with lower qualifications worked more effectively when working alongside qualified staff.

Professional practice emerges in a teaching context when an "...experienced teacher supports challenges and guides novice teachers in their teaching practice" (Odell *et al.*, 2000: xv). In fact, Jacobs (2001) supports the concept of 'scaffolding' as an appropriate mechanism in the preparation of teachers - suggesting that less skilled teachers can clearly learn from more experienced teachers within their ZPD.

Based upon an Australian study that investigated pre-school teachers' sustainment in the classroom, Kilgannon *et al.* (2008) highlight the importance of peer support and professional relationships. Significantly, 52.2% of participants considered that the relationships they developed with work colleagues and professional peers were crucial to their sustainment. Specifically, these relationships influenced job satisfaction (73.7%), effective teaching practice (71.9%), professional commitment (33.3%), occupational motivation (29.8%), and ability to cope with the implementation of mandated educational change (36.8%). Moreover, the full-time support of an educational assistant enhanced participants ability to cope with the daily demands of their work through sharing teaching duties and receiving emotional, physical and social support (63.1%).

Interestingly, while Sylva *et al.* (2004) highlight the benefits of highly trained ECCE managers and leaders, Kilgannon *et al.* (2008) found that line-managers provided EYTs with little leadership or support in coping with the daily demands of their work. Also of interest, in the context of those who cite the importance of caring relationships and positive interactions between teachers and children (as discussed in Chapter 4), are findings which indicate that

trained staff are warmer and more caring in their interactions with children (Barnett, 2004; Blatchford *et al.*, 2002; Sylva *et al.*, 2004).

Commenting on the connection between teacher training and quality, Douglas (2004), claims that training would have little purpose if it did not affect children. In discussing the challenges associated with untrained staff, Woodhead *et al.* (2007) hold that it is difficult for untrained caregivers to provide growth-promoting care. They claim that, critically, long hours and many years growing up in group settings that are of limited quality, pose clear developmental risks for children's well-being. However, other studies found no link between the quality of settings and the number of year's experience, or the level of formal education (Burchinal *et al.*, 2002; Gore *et al.*, 2007; Hanushek *et al.*, 2007). This may be indicative of the low impact of many professional learning activities on pedagogy, or to the limited professional development in pedagogy that many teachers have experienced (Gore *et al.*, 2007).

Based upon a national survey of the views of pre-school teachers in New Zealand on ethics and professionalism in their practice, Dalli (2008) found that respondents cited general knowledge about children, and the theory of ECE as being central to professionalism. The critical factors enabling respondents to acquire this knowledge were: qualifications, training and professional development. Equally, Coffman and Lopez (2003) agree that teacher qualifications significantly affect the quality of care and education provided to young children; with higher qualifications contributing to more positive short- and long-term child outcomes.

Doherty (2003) creates a link between the capacity of a sector to develop and maintain a workforce that is able to deliver quality services and its ability to:

1. Ensure widespread access for people to obtain and maintain knowledge, skills, abilities and attitudes required for quality practice,
2. Ensure that basic training provides students with the required core knowledge, skills and abilities for entry into the sector and serve as a foundation for life-long learning and the acquisition of advanced knowledge and skills,
3. Provide an educational ladder, enabling people to proceed to higher levels of competence; creating possibilities for increasingly senior positions and/or horizontal career moves, and retain trained people in the sector (ibid: 30).

When applied to the context of the Irish pre-school sector, there are deficiencies in all aspects of this framework. It is most notable in terms of career progression and staff retention.

Following a study of Early Years Education from an international perspective, Bertram *et al.* (2002) describe the complexity of staffing and training as "...idiosyncratic, with wide variations both within and between countries" (ibid: 25). In relation to Ireland, they found that, notwithstanding the existing B.Ed. courses for primary school graduates, a wide range of courses and qualifications exist in the pre-school sector, some lasting a few weeks and some comprising a 3-year degree.

Bennett *et al.* (2004) claim that many countries are beset by problematic legacies, of which the employment of underpaid and untrained personnel is paramount. Due to the historical emphasis on minding, "...the idea predominated that looking after infants and young children did not require any significant qualifications and could be entrusted to people with no special training" (ibid: 427). This is especially so in the pre-school sector in Ireland, where providers do not receive "...subsidies to make the employment of trained people possible" (ibid: 427). On the other hand, primary school teachers are employed by the DES and enjoy relatively good terms and conditions of employment and remuneration.

In 2007, the EYEPU at the DES undertook a national survey on the levels of ECCE qualifications. Findings offer little solace to those aspiring towards a sector that is "...comparable to the best of our EU partners" (DHC, 2000: 52). This survey provides an insight into levels of educational preparation within the ECCE sector. Findings indicate that 33% of overall staff held a third-level qualification. Although this is encouraging, upon closer examination it was highlighted that the most frequent childcare-specific qualification held by both full-time and part-time staff was a FETAC Level 5 accredited qualification (41%).

Of concern are findings relating to training levels among Community Employment¹¹ (CE) staff in community settings, where such staff account for 11% of the workforce. Furthermore, "...three in ten (29%) had no formal childcare qualifications" (DES, 2007: 35). The highest proportion of staff with no formal childcare qualification, across both the community and

¹¹ FÁS operate the Community Employment Scheme. FÁS fund sponsors to provide a work and training programme for persons who qualify for participation in the scheme. Eligible applicants are typically over 21 years, unemployed, and in receipt of a qualifying social welfare payment of at least one years duration.

private sector, were those whose native language was neither English nor Irish (30%). In addition, 12% of staff had no formal childcare qualification at all. These figures suggest that, when the numbers of CE staff and those for whom English was not their native language are combined, 59% of staff in the community sector had no formal childcare qualification.

Contrary to a recommendation in the guidelines of the *Child Care (Pre-School Services) (No 2) Regulations, 2006* (DHC, 2006), which outlines that the person in charge of a pre-school setting should aim to have at “...least 50% of childcare staff with a qualification appropriate to the care and development of children” (DHC, 2006: 39), the DES findings suggest that 41% of staff in community settings held an ECCE qualification. This is an unacceptable level of untrained staff in a sector that is responsible for the care and education of our most vulnerable children.

Furthermore, those in management positions within the ECCE sector held low levels of training and qualifications, similar to their subordinates. When located in the context of the findings from REPEY, EPPE and SPEEL, where more highly qualified managers and lead staff served as mentors providing challenge, support and guidance to less skilled teachers, these findings are of concern.

Cleveland *et al.* (2001) suggest that there is a trade-off between the educational expectations of pre-school teachers and the salaries paid. Jalongo *et al.* (2004) argue that if a nation truly believes that children are the future, it will make a commitment to training and adequately compensating those entrusted with that future. More importantly, when salaries are low, opportunities for advancement are limited (*ibid.*). Consequently, low salaries contribute to a risk that those who are trained will leave the field to seek employment elsewhere (Bogart *et al.*, 2008; Jalongo *et al.*, 2004). Jalongo *et al.* (2004) recommend elevating the sector, so that the most highly competent people are attracted and retained within the profession until they become master-teachers who can facilitate the professional development of the subsequent generation of early childhood teachers.

5.6 Complexities of Professional Development

Just as children’s learning does not happen by chance, neither is teacher skill and competence a chance occurrence. The weight of substantial evidence indicates that teachers who have more preparation are more confident and successful than those who have little or none (Darling-Hammond, 2002). Signifying the complexity of working with young children,

Bertram *et al.* (2002) note that to have an "...understanding of developmental psychology, to be able to respond to the exploratory young mind, to make these responses accessible while structuring and extending the next stage of development takes extraordinary talent" (ibid: 38). Conveying the multiplicity of demands placed upon them, Darling-Hammond (2002) articulate the need for teachers to: acquire deep and flexible knowledge of subject matter; understand how to represent ideas in powerful ways; organise a productive learning process for students who start out with different levels and kinds of prior knowledge; assess how and what students are learning; and adapt instruction accordingly.

Elucidating the dynamics of teaching; Bertrand (2001: 404) and Moriarty (2000), state that the purpose of "professional educators" is not to train individuals to acquire a particular set of skills, but rather, to develop the ability to be reflective practitioners in their work with children and families. Hence, teachers must engage in critical thinking, examine cross-cultural, multi-disciplinary human development and incorporate these goals into practice within settings (ibid.).

Gregory and Chapman (2007), articulate that, in classrooms where teachers only teach to the "middle", some children will be bored from the lack of challenge, while others may be placed under undue stress from too great a challenge. Therefore, one size doesn't fit all. The teacher can no longer teach the lesson and hope that everyone understands it. There is an onus on teachers to consider each child's needs, readiness, preferences and interests. Ramey and Ramey (1998) suggest that pre-school teachers encourage exploration, provide mentoring in basic skills, celebrate the child's developmental advances, guide and extend new skills, protect children from inappropriate discipline and utilise language that is rich and responsive. In addition, UNICEF (2007) posits the need for equity in treatment between boys and girls, with regard to opportunity, expectations and aspirations. Kagan and Britto (2005) claim that programmes must be founded upon consensus as to: the nature of successful child development; cultural sensitivity and awareness; partnerships among community, providers, parents and caregivers; enhancing the active involvement of families; and the need for an effective management plan that supports and facilitates the monitoring of quality and the assessment of programme effectiveness.

Bertrand (2001) questions our goals for young children's development. He suggests the need to address children's well-being, their ability to cope, to *get along* with others in a rapidly changing and diverse environment, as well as basic competence in literacy and numeracy

skills. Consequently, for 21st Century teachers, a child development teacher competency, or apprenticeship orientation is no longer sufficient (Jensen, 1999). Rather, teachers require broad-based knowledge and skills derived from trans-disciplinary approaches to pedagogy, curriculum and human services (ibid.). In order to become professional leaders in the 21st Century, field-based preparation experiences as well as "...work environments that nourish the development of their leadership capacities" (ibid: 174) are essential.

Lobman *et al.* (2007) undertook a study on pre-school teacher preparation and professional development, in which they found considerable variation. Findings indicate the need for foundational knowledge in child development and pedagogy, an understanding of curriculum content and how to teach diverse groups of children. Significantly, knowledge about how children learn and develop was identified by more participants than any other kind of knowledge. This knowledge was also considered as being central to being a well-informed teacher (Lobman *et al.*, 2007). For many, this knowledge enabled them to "...understand that development occurs in stages that young children learn differently than older children and adults... [and that they require] different teaching techniques" (ibid: 372). The researchers suggest that participants tended to speak about child development knowledge, not as a theoretical concept, but as teachers being knowledgeable in the components of DAP.

Saracho *et al.* (2003) purport that general education, characterised by two or four year programmes, is fundamental to all teacher education programmes. They specify that it helps to "...indoctrinate prospective teachers in the communities culture and essential frame of the scholarly disciplines" (ibid: 5). Each subject, integrated into the prospective teacher's general education, contributes a unique viewpoint, a way of thinking, a way of organising ideas and to the "distinctive preparation" of the teacher (ibid.).

An important contribution of teacher education is its "...development of teacher's abilities to examine teaching from the perspective of learners who bring diverse experiences and frames of reference to the classroom" (Darling-Hammond, 2002: 166). They highlight the many voices calling for educational reform in the area of teacher education, where at one end of a continuum, university-based preparation would be replaced by on-the-job training, and where professional training would expand to prepare teachers for a more adaptive, knowledge-based practice, while simultaneously tackling the redesign of schools and teaching. The OECD (2004a) combine both aspects of this continuum by suggesting that infant teachers in Ireland should have considerably more exposure to research-based ECCE pedagogy and, in so far as

is possible, prolonged practical training in model early childhood programmes. Learning to teach typically involves spending considerable time in schools, participating in field experiences: "...the staples of teacher preparation programs" (Wilson *et al.*, 2001). Both experienced and newly qualified teachers alike see field experiences as a powerful, if not the single most powerful component in teacher preparation (*ibid.*).

Halliwell (2004) highlights the many challenges associated with teacher preparation, suggesting that the tools commonly used to train teachers: lectures, tutorials, texts and practice teaching sessions, seldom bring student teachers face-to-face with the realities of having to make the best possible decisions within a certain time-frame, with conflicting expectations. While Halliwell raises some important issues, there is little doubt that field experience during both pre-school and infant teacher preparation plays an important role in shaping the trainee pre-school/infant teacher, who is tasked with learning from the more knowledgeable and experienced teacher.

As with definitions of pedagogy and identity, teacher training at all levels is a complex construct with little consensus about what constitutes effective teacher preparation. The inadequacy of pre-school teacher preparation has been discussed throughout this study. Unlike infant teacher preparation, there is no single training requirement or universal training programme for the pre-school teacher. As previously discussed, the pre-school sector is characterised by a combination of trained and untrained staff. Much of the ambiguity about pre-school training is rooted in a traditional feminist paradigm, associated with physical care undertaken by women who do not need specialised training. Equally, while two successive investment programmes (EOCP, 2000-2006 and NCIP, 2006-2010) supported the development of a physical infrastructure, they were primarily directed towards facilitating women's participation in the labour market. As a result, training and qualifications were a secondary rather than a primary consideration for the State. Pre-service training for the ECCE sector is pulled in different directions, enmeshed in numerous discourses that reveal a multitude of diverse influences crossing political, social, economic and intellectual domains.

5.7 Translating Knowledge into Practice

Farquhar (2003) argues that it is not what teachers know, their years of experience, their level of teacher education or their professional development that makes a difference in building strong early foundations for children's learning. It is how this, in turn, influences their practice. In the context of primary school teachers, Cochran-Smith (2002) contends that the

link between teacher preparation and being a well-qualified and competent teacher is a highly commented issue. Lobman and Ryan (2008) highlight the need for those tasked with training teachers to upgrade their knowledge of ECCE without which the gap between what teachers are trained to do and what they are able to do will grow. Teacher educators must place priority on preparing teachers who can deliver high quality pedagogy and provide students with quality learning experiences (Gore *et al.*, 2007). Drawing on preliminary findings from a large scale longitudinal study into the relationships between teacher learning, pedagogical quality, and the quality of student outcomes, Gore *et al.* (2007) conclude that teacher education is not yet consistently producing teachers who deliver such quality.

In an attempt to outline the complexities involved in connecting teacher education with student learning, Cochran-Smith (2005) proposes that such involves a chain of evidence with several critical links, central to which is “empirical evidence” that demonstrates:

“...the link between teacher preparation programs and teacher candidates learning... between teacher candidates learning and their practices in actual classrooms... between graduates practices and what and how much their pupils learn. Individually, each of these links is complex and challenging to estimate...” (ibid: 303).

Among the many variables that impact on the teacher’s ability to translate education into practice, Cochran-Smith states that the sites where student teachers complete field work and where they eventually teach are different from each other in terms of context, culture, resources, children and community. Students must be able to connect their own learning with their experiences (Wolf, 1999). What we do as teacher educators must be grounded in “practical knowledge”, what we know about teaching in the “...context of an early childhood setting” (ibid: 169). Moreover, Cochran-Smith argues that a framework is created based on previous experiences as a childcare teacher, plus ongoing observations and interactions with classroom teachers and students, thus providing the basis for adapting ideas from professional sources to classroom settings.

Equally significant in the study undertaken by Lobman *et al.* (2007) was the manner in which developmental theory was used as a tool to justify and explain early childhood methods to parents and administrators. The researchers concluded that it was utilised to combat parents who wanted their children to be engaged in more traditional academic work, and who were concerned that all their children were doing was playing. Given that pre-school teachers are often the first formal teacher with whom parents share the care and education of their child, Perry (2004) stresses the need for empathetic, skilled communication. Such skills create a

shared agenda for the child, based on acknowledging parental aspirations and responsiveness to the concerns of inexperienced parents (*ibid.*). This approach is akin to Nutbrown's (1999) call for teachers to think about, articulate and discuss their own pedagogy with parents. Finally, and worryingly in the context of pre-school, Lobman *et al.* (2007) found that very few participants in their study discussed the need for curriculum or content knowledge pedagogy, as something they needed to know or be able to use. Curriculum development undoubtedly influences how children are taught, what they learn, and how they develop.

Particularly salient to this discussion is the professional dimension aspect of the SPEEL research (Moyles *et al.*, 2002). They define the professional qualities, knowledge and thinking required of effective early year's practitioners as follows:

“Professional qualities are attributes and skills both brought to, and developed within, the role of the effective early year's pedagogue and are underpinned by a sense of self-efficacy. Professional knowledge - intuitive and explicit - is that understanding which practitioners have and employ to develop a wide range of learning experiences for young children... Professional thinking includes the ability to reflect on practice and to make informed decisions through well-conceived examination and analysis of pedagogy. It involves the thinking practitioner in articulating and evaluating practice and a continuous striving to improve. Professionals have a positive disposition to learn and are capable of extending themselves professionally” (Moyles *et al.*, 2002: 5).

Similarly, members of the BERA (2001) special interest group, in an extensive review of pedagogy, curriculum, adult roles, professional development, and training and the workforce, identified the centrality of principles, policy and practice. According to Bertram *et al.* (2002b), staff qualifications, training and professional development are the means by which practitioners can develop a rationale for their practice and “...locate the evidence and conceptualisations which underpin it” (*ibid.*: 37). Teachers need “...to absorb a broad knowledge of educational foundations to become cognisant of the history and traditions of their field” (Saracho *et al.*, 2003: 7), including knowledge of child development and learning theories (*ibid.*: 7). Halliwell (2004) also holds that to make good teaching decisions, teachers must understand the minds and personalities of each child and develop a keen eye for possible teaching moments. In this way, teachers can make each child's contact with valued cultural traditions such as reading, writing and mathematics exciting growth producing events (*ibid.*).

Pre-school teachers are the link to, and a bridge between home and school, between the child's past, present and future. Ultimately, they must continually situate themselves in relation to the child, asking: ‘Who am I in the lives of children?’, ‘Why do I do what I do?’, ‘How do I do it?’, ‘Can I do it better and how?’ Palmer (1997) articulates that, when working

face-to-face with his students, only one resource is at his immediate command, that is: "...my identity, my selfhood, my sense of this I who teaches, without which I have no sense of the Thou who learns" (ibid: 7). Cleveland *et al.* (2006) suggest engaging practitioners in a model of design research with cycles of trying out small-scale programme innovations, similar to an action research model, testing results and design. SPEEL was premised on this exact model yielding significant results on pedagogical practices and professionalism in ECCE.

In conclusion, the link between staff training, qualifications and continual professional development, and quality ECCE is unequivocal. Yet, in spite of various policy initiatives, professional identity within the pre-school sector is fraught with contradictions and challenges. Central to the lack of professional identity is the absence of a mandatory training requirement. Hence, there is a mismatch between teacher ability and policy maker expectations, in relation to process quality within pre-school settings.

On the other hand, while teacher professional identity is underpinned by a three-year teacher training programme, such preparation may be inadequate for early childhood education due to its focus on primary education, rather than on specific skills and approaches for early childhood pedagogy (Bennett *et al.*, 2004). However, unlike pre-school teachers, infant teachers have clearly defined roles and responsibilities, terms and conditions of employment, and opportunities for career advancement. Teacher status however is being diminished. As with the pre-school sector, teachers are increasingly expected to implement complex pedagogy, work collaboratively with colleagues, parents and other professionals and engage in reflective practice.

With this in mind, the remaining sections of this chapter are concerned with pedagogic content knowledge and subject knowledge, as well as the roles and responsibilities of pre-school and infant teachers.

5.8 Taxonomy of the Role of the ECCE Teacher

In 1956, Bloom and his colleagues developed a taxonomy of educational objectives. This was a classification system for both writing educational objectives and classifying instructional objectives. Learning is defined by learning objectives and further broken into discrete units each with an established level of performance. The taxonomy provides carefully developed definitions for each of the six major categories in the cognitive domain, i.e. knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation (Bloom *et al.*,

1956). With the exception of application, each category is broken into subcategories that are ordered from simple to complex and from concrete to abstract. The taxonomy is both hierarchical and cumulative; ensuring that successful mastery of initial units is achieved before students proceed to more complex ones.

It is underpinned by four principles:

1. Defining educational objectives – “...the way in which students are expected to be changed by the educative process” (Bloom, 1956: 26),
2. Creating appropriate learning experiences to achieve these objectives,
3. Organising learning experiences effectively, and
4. Evaluating (testing) learning outcomes.

The taxonomy relies heavily on frequent assessment through formative tests, providing a blueprint for teachers to articulate the intended outcomes of their classroom instruction, in terms of student learning.

In order to add relevance for the 21st Century, the taxonomy was updated by Loris Anderson, a former student of Bloom’s during the 1990s. Published in 2001, the revised taxonomy includes significant changes that can be summarised under three broad categories: terminology, structure and emphasis. Krathwohl (2002) highlights a major limitation in the original taxonomy, suggesting that while the ‘knowledge’ category embodied both noun and verb aspects, only the noun aspects were emphasised. The “...noun or subject matter aspect was specified in knowledge’s extensive sub categories” (Krathwohl, 2002: 213). However, the verb aspect was included in the definition given to knowledge, in that the student was expected to recall or recognise knowledge. This led to “undimensionality” in the framework, “at the cost of a knowledge category that was dual in nature and thus different from other Taxonomic categories” (ibid: 213). The revised taxonomy eliminated this anomaly: progressing from one dimension to two dimensions, and incorporating both noun and verb forms to fit the way they are used in educational objectives. The noun provides the basis for the knowledge dimension, while the verb forms the basis for the “Cognitive Process dimension” (ibid: 213).

Table 13 Comparison of Original and Revised Taxonomy

Old Version	New Version
Evaluation	Creating
Synthesis	Evaluating
Analysis	Analysing
Application	Applying

The new terms are defined as:

1. Remembering: retrieving, recognising, and recalling relevant knowledge from long-term memory;
2. Understanding: constructing meaning from oral, written or graphic messages through interpreting, exemplifying, classifying, summarising, inferring, comparing and explaining;
3. Applying: carrying out or using a procedure through executing or implementing;
4. Analysing: breaking material into constituent parts, determining how the parts relate to one another and to an overall structure or purpose through differentiating, organising and attributing;
5. Evaluating: making judgements based on criteria and standards through checking and critiquing; and
6. Creating: putting elements together to form a coherent or functional whole, reorganising elements into a new pattern or structure through generating, planning or producing (Anderson *et al.*, 2001: 67-68). (See Appendix F for structure of the knowledge dimension of the revised taxonomy).

Like the original taxonomy, the revised version cuts across subject matter lines. However, in the knowledge dimension, a fourth and new category has been introduced: meta-cognitive knowledge that involves knowledge about cognition in general, and awareness of and knowledge about one's own cognition. Congruent with Moyles *et al.* (2002), Anderson *et al.* (2001) and Krathwohl, (2002) stress the importance for students of being aware of their meta-cognitive activity. This awareness, where students use this knowledge to appropriately adapt the ways in which they think and operate, is also a central dimension of the High/Scope model.

Applying the revised Taxonomy to the ECCE field directs the unit of analysis away from a child-centred to a teacher-centred focus. It allows one to concentrate on the role of the teacher in planning for and ensuring that educational objectives and learning experiences are commensurate with the taxonomy. Thus, the teacher becomes the agent of the curriculum and consequently the focus of analysis. In this way, the analysis is concerned with processes within settings, i.e. the manner in which the teacher facilitates children's agency through the day-to-day activities within the setting.

The taxonomy is utilised as a methodological tool to classify the roles and responsibilities of the pre-school and infant teacher, which for this study, are considered through five broad themes:

1. Understanding the subject,
2. Learning environment,
3. Curriculum Development,
4. Evaluation and assessment, and
5. Reflective practice.

Knowledge is paramount to ensuring that teacher status and professionalism is upheld, enabling them to approach teaching with authority and competence, and confident in their ability to be effective teachers.

The researcher, therefore, proposes four types of teacher knowledge:

1. Knowledge and understanding of the subject: requiring in-depth knowledge of child development. In order to meet children's diverse needs, teachers must possess a basic knowledge of the "...general progression of child development and appreciation for the developmental variations which exist among children" (Jalongo *et al.*, 2004: 146).
2. Pedagogic knowledge: understanding of learning styles, knowing how/when to respond, using a range of methodologies, and ensuring that the individual learning capabilities of each child are supported.
3. Knowledge and understanding of the subject's world: bearing in mind that children's learning does not commence upon entry to pre-school or primary school.
4. Curriculum knowledge: directly influenced by subject and pedagogic knowledge, together with knowledge/understanding of the child's social network.

Proficient curriculum knowledge enables the teacher to identify all intended learning experiences, including subject areas and topics to be taught. It enables the teacher to classify learning into a range of educational objectives, which are further broken into discrete units (Anderson *et al.*, 2001; Bloom, 1956; Krathwohl, 2002) - taking account of prior learning and experience to bring about the intended pupil behaviour resulting from the learning. Without this knowledge, teacher ability to stimulate and extend children's learning beyond a basic foundational level is limited. As child development, pedagogy and the importance of the learning environment were addressed in Chapter 4, the remainder of this Chapter focuses upon curriculum knowledge, evaluation and reflective practice.

5.9 Curriculum Knowledge

In common with other countries (Germany, England, Scotland, Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Australia), Ireland published an Early Childhood Curriculum Framework: *Aistear*, in 2009 (NCCA, 2009). This framework is broad and contains goals and objectives, rather than a detailed prescription for teachers. As with other conflicting and contradictory aspects of ECCE, the field is polarised on beliefs about subject knowledge. Some scholars argue that a subject-knowledge approach to curriculum is contrary to the ways in which young children think and learn, ultimately leading to inappropriate pedagogical approaches (Blatchford *et al.*, 2002; Corrie, 1999; Hurst and Joseph, 1998; Nutbrown, 1999; Schweinhart *et al.*, 1997; Smith, 1996). For example, Bennett (2004) states that it would be unwise to move away from the traditional practice in ECCE, in favour of programmes that focus predominantly on achieving "...itemised cognitive skills that are defined independent of context" (ibid: 20). However, a growing number of researchers agree on the importance of subject knowledge in early childhood teaching, arguing that subject-based outcomes are desirable (Blatchford *et al.*, 2002; Marcon, 2002; Mitchell *et al.*, 2003; Peters, 2001; Stephen, *et al.*, 2004; Wylie, Thompson and Lythe., 2001).

Shulman (1986 and 1987) provides a major focus through his classification of teacher knowledge into various components, the most significant being pedagogical content knowledge:

"...that special amalgam of content and pedagogy that is uniquely the province of teachers, their own special form of professional understanding...it represents the blending of content and pedagogy into an understanding of how particular topics, problems or issues are organised, represented, and adapted to the diverse interests and abilities of learners, and presented for instruction" (Shulman, 1987: 8).

This knowledge represents a "...combination of levels of knowledge acquired through experience and reflection through initial on-going training" (Moyles *et al.*, 2002: 12). It does not comprise traditional subjects such as are associated with formal schooling, rather, it represents a broader general pedagogical knowledge, separate from subject knowledge. Turner-Bissett (2001) claims that pedagogical content knowledge underpins teaching and is "...enriched by theoretical knowledge, an understanding of how children learn, familiarity and confidence within the curriculum and on-going, reflected-upon knowledge" (ibid: 125). Instead of giving children knowledge, skills and qualities, Parker-Rees *et al.* (2007) suggest that teachers should "...seek to influence the robustness, depth and richness" (ibid: 4) of the ways in which children go about their learning, "...tending the cultural dynamics of a group by adapting provisions to shifts in the quality of children's dispositions" (ibid: 4).

Hayes (2007) argues that the move to understand and explain the dynamics of the early learning processes and practice presents a "...difficulty in separating out pedagogy from curriculum content" (ibid: 23). While both are central elements in a continuous process, the practice must be content rich. This is the crux of the matter for pre-school and infant teachers. Closely linked to Osgood's (2006) portrayal of the complexities in defining professionalism within conflicting discourses, Kennedy (2006) highlights a number of contradictions experienced by teachers in supporting children's learning in everyday practices in settings (Table 14).

Table 14 Overview of Conflicting Societal Desires in Supporting Children's Learning

Societal Desire	Conflicting Societal Design
Accommodate individual needs	Treat all children equally
Follow student interests	Ensure that desired content is covered
Provide students with basic skills	Enable students to engage in abstract reasoning
Develop children as ethical human beings	Endow children with the skills required to find employment

Adapted: Kennedy, 2006: 206

Perhaps the question should be: 'What can teachers do to help children develop skills and knowledge?' Rather than: 'What knowledge and skills are children expected to know and have at the age of three, four or five?' This line of questioning positions the teacher in

relation to the child, drawing attention to the guiding principles within the work of Vygotsky and Rogoff for instance, such as ZPD and guided participation.

Good teachers:

“...create challenges and support children in extending their capabilities, and provide specific directions or instruction... [they] plan ways to pursue educational goals for each child as opportunities arise in child-initiated activities and in activities planned and initiated by the teacher” (Bowman *et al.*, 2001: 10-11).

The UNCRC provides guidance for teachers in supporting children’s evolving capacities, which should be seen as “...a positive and enabling process, not an excuse for authoritarian practices that restrict children’s autonomy and self-expression” (UNCRC, 2005: General Comment 7, Paragraph 17). This Convention challenges education systems “...to allow a high degree of initiative to young children, and to identify and reinforce those aspects of curriculum that contribute to the well-being and involvement of children” (Bennett, 2004: 3). In the context of ECCE, questions abound about the specific knowledge that is needed for teaching and the more general knowledge that is needed to prepare children for life in the 21st Century.

Central to Shulman’s classification is subject matter knowledge and curriculum knowledge. Accordingly, subject matter knowledge refers to knowledge of facts and concepts, as well as understanding the structure of the subject. Curriculum knowledge includes knowledge of the sequence of topics or concepts to be taught and the materials and resources deemed necessary and suitable for a particular topic (Aubrey, 1994; Grossman, 1990; Shulman, 1986).

There is little consensus on what constitutes appropriate curricula within ECCE, with a myriad of mixed approaches proposed. Myers (2006), for instance, suggests that it should be:

“...coherent, multi-dimensional and integral, predictable but allow for flexibility, culturally pertinent, child-centered, responsive and interactive, active, based on play exploration and discovery. It should allow for assessment, incorporate technology, use relevant materials, and be consistent with a child rights perspective, and respect diversity and individuality” (ibid: 25).

Teachers differ not only in their curriculum planning, teaching and assessment, but also in their knowledge of subject matter and in their beliefs about what is involved in learning and subjects (Aubrey, 1994). Subject knowledge does make a difference and “...effective teachers know how to select content and to identify key points” (ibid: 5). They must also know how to “...understand the subject in contextually appropriate ways” (ibid: 5) and present topics to children in ways that they understand.

Following up on an earlier study examining the impact of the National Curriculum in the UK on professional educational practice, Alexander *et al.* (1995) found significant change in curriculum planning, assessment and record keeping. In concluding that a predominant focus on curriculum content and assessment had pushed pedagogy into the background, they suggested the need to know more about the relationships between subject structures, teachers' understandings of subject matter and the nature of teacher/child interactions.

Likewise, in a study to examine policy process in the development/implementation of the National Numeracy Strategy (1997 – 1999), Brown *et al.* (2000) concluded that the curriculum shift had gone too far. They argued that the strategy resulted in a lack of attention to children's experiences of creative applications, investigations, problem solving and a loss of meaning in numeracy tasks.

Cullen (1999) argues that the informal knowledge acquired by children in contexts other than the educational domain, raises many issues about the place of content knowledge in ECCE. Describing his first day as a teacher, Ayers (2005) provides an insight into how children challenge teacher content and subject knowledge:

“In the first hour on the very first morning-a 5 year old boy asked me why the ball bounced. I knew I was in trouble. Before that day was done I was challenged to consider the blueness of the sky, the sticky residue from spilled juice, and the phenomenon of a man sleeping in a doorway on our way to the park. Why? Why? Why?” (ibid: 322).

We are all similarly challenged by the child's insatiable desire for answers that can leave us feeling lacking and inferior. This is one of the paradoxes of teaching where “...we encounter ourselves as uncertain, incomplete, not quite sure” (ibid: 322]). Teachers should be intellectually curious rebelling against a “...consumerist approach to knowledge... willing to build upon knowledge rather than to consume it” (Rinaldi, 1994: 49), and by being “...alive and dynamic” (Ayers, 2005: 84) and able to encourage, motivate and extend learning, scaffold, provide support, direction, guidance and teaching (Bredenkamp *et al.*, 1997; Perry, 2004). Others highlight the need for professional thinking, the ability to critically question, deconstruct and reason, which is dependent upon teachers acquiring, using and applying pedagogical knowledge (Dahlberg *et al.*, 1999; Moyles *et al.*, 2002). Specifically, the ability to be critical and to examine children's learning is dependent on teachers being sufficiently informed that they can be discerning (Moyles *et al.*, 2002).

The danger with thought is that “...it challenges; not only those doing the thinking... it requires high levels of professional knowledge coupled with self-esteem and self-confidence”

(Moyles, 2004: 16). Thus, children who think independently, who are social and scientific researchers within the early years classroom: probing, questioning and demanding answers, pushing the boundaries of knowledge in an attempt to satisfy their internal, innate capacity to learn, challenge teachers to respond in kind. Such questioning and freedom to explore would see the realisation of children's agency within individual setting contexts. The challenge for teachers is to facilitate children's agency, to respond in ways that satisfy children's quest for knowledge, while simultaneously guiding and extending their learning and co-constructing knowledge.

Blatchford *et al.* (2002: 11) claim that a good grasp of "...appropriate pedagogical content knowledge is a vital component of pedagogy". They reported that even in the most effective early childhood programmes, there were examples of staff having inadequate knowledge and understanding of subject content to support and extend children's learning and inquiry. According to Farquhar (2003: 2), "effective teachers use content knowledge confidently to support and extend children's learning in interactive and play-based situations". Mitchell *et al.* (2003) further emphasise the need for appropriate cultural and contextual pedagogical content knowledge.

Bertram *et al.* (2002b) suggest that teachers must understand the importance of establishing "...robust footings in those areas that will stand the test of time, and withhold the stresses of a lifetime and provide stability for further construction" (ibid: 241). This can only be achieved through a combination of skills and knowledge (Bertram *et al.*, 2002b; Perry, 2004; Shulman, 1999).

Among the elements required are:

1. Content knowledge, including the knowledge, skills understandings and dispositions that children will learn (Bertram *et al.*, 2002b; Perry, 2004; Shulman, 1999).
2. General pedagogical knowledge, with special reference to those broad principles and strategies of classroom management and organization that appear to transcend subject knowledge (Shulman, 1999).
3. Curriculum knowledge, which encompasses a myriad of strategies including the use and management of appropriate resources, with particular grasp of the materials and programmes that serve as the "...tools of the teacher's trade" (ibid:8]).
4. Pedagogical content knowledge.
5. Knowledge of learners and their characteristics that teachers gain about the children,

such as prior learning, interests and preferences (Bertram *et al.*, 2002b; Hayes, 2007; Perry, 2004; Saracho *et al.*, 1993; Shulman, 1999).

6. Knowledge of the aims and purposes of education, its philosophies and values (Beyer *et al.*, 1999; Elkind, 1977; Jalongo *et al.*, 2004; Katz, 1994; Moss *et al.*, 2002; Rinaldi, 2006; Stott and Bowman, 1996; Walsh, 2005).
7. Knowledge of educational contexts, ranging from understanding the social implications for children in learning within a large group, to knowledge and understanding of the expectations of others, including senior management, community and cultural expectations (Shulman, 1999).

In extending the significance of pedagogical content knowledge, Shulman argues that it is the category that is most likely to distinguish the understanding of the “content specialist” from that of the pedagogue (Shulman, 1999).

While acknowledging education in its broadest sense, Bennett (2004) highlights the importance of literacy-, numeracy- and technology-proficiency as some of the skills that are fast becoming indispensable in modern living. Equally, Stephen *et al.* (2005) hold that promoting the development of skills and understanding, in language and mathematics, is part of the task which those offering ECCE undertake. However, Bogart *et al.* (2008) argue that pre-literacy and math skills are not the only skills that young children need to succeed in school. Studies that focus solely on such skills may not be “...assessing important predictors of future academic achievement” (ibid: 4). In so far as the many longitudinal studies mentioned in this thesis attest to the relevance of literacy and numeracy, the challenge of how to appropriately include these aspects in early childhood curricula remains.

5.10 Assessment and Evaluation

Apart from its centrality in discussions relating to best practice in ECCE, there is a strong legislative basis for assessment in Ireland. In this respect, the *Education Act, 1998* (DES, 1998) and the *Child Care (Pre-School Services) (No 2) Regulations, 2006* (DHC, 2006) are pertinent. UNECSO (2004: 146-158) purport that “...regular, reliable and timely assessment” is central to quality teaching. Bowman *et al.* (2001) hold that assessment plays a key role in revealing a child’s prior knowledge, development of concepts, interaction with and understanding of the world. It enables teachers to choose a pedagogical approach and curricular materials that support further learning and development (ibid.). Teachers must assess their implementation of learning experiences to “...avoid placing undue pressure on

small children as they continue to respect their developmental needs and interests” (Helterbran and Fennimore, 2004: 268). Hence, assessment and evaluation are major components in quality ECCE practices.

While Bloom’s taxonomy has been used to delineate the roles and responsibilities of the pre-school and infant teacher, it has limitations when applied too rigidly to the ECCE field. Airasian and Miranda (2002) argue that having two dimensions to guide the process of stating objectives, planning and guiding instruction, “...leads to sharper, more clearly defined assessments and a stronger connection of assessments to both objectives and instruction” (ibid: 249). There is, therefore, a risk that the taxonomy may serve to over-objectify educational outcomes and so lose sight of many desirable objectives that are difficult to measure, such as child ability, interest and eagerness.

Teachers may be tempted to focus exclusively on tangible outcomes: reading, writing and numeracy, to the exclusion of curriculum breadth and depth. While acknowledging that assessment is one of the most important activities that teachers engage in, Muijs *et al.* (2001) claim that it is also the most contentious. It is, however, an invaluable tool that allows teachers to better plan their lessons (ibid.).

There is also a concern that teachers will utilise a deficit model of assessment, looking at what the child cannot do rather than what the child can do. Teachers must “look beyond deficits to assets and capacities, strengths and abilities, something solid that [they] can build upon” (Ayers, 2005: 325). Myers (2006) asserts that the tendency in ECCE has been to think in terms of integral development along various related and interacting dimensions. Even though considerable emphasis has been placed on intellectual development, the closest parallel to cognitive test outcomes - developmental tests - tend to be weighted toward physical, fine and gross motor development, while others stress emotional development (ibid.). Myers notes that developmentally-related competencies are being developed that emphasise the ability and motivation to apply knowledge and developmental advances in daily life, where outcomes are observed in context as well as an approach to defining developmental outcomes in terms of the relation of children to self, others and the broader world. Weikart (2004) asserts that children will only likely make progress on assessments that reflect the goals of the programme and that link assessment and curriculum.

In its broadest sense, assessment refers to all information gathered about children by teachers through “...formal testing, essays and homework or informally through observation and interaction” (Muijs *et al.*, 2001: 185).

Teachers establish the preconditions for success or failure when they establish their assessment system (Mergendoller *et al.*, 2006). Galloway and Edwards (1991) outline an important distinction between summative and formative assessment. Assessment undertaken for the purposes of selection, long-term prediction or reporting, that asks how well the child has done, either in comparison with other children or at the end of a programme of study, is summative and usually enters the public domain to become available to parents, other colleagues and so on. This form of assessment is prevalent in primary schools (Muijs *et al.*, 2001). However, if assessment is used to inform pedagogy, as proposed by the NCCA (2009), and asks: ‘How is the child making sense of this?’ this is generally considered to be formative, providing vital feedback on children’s strengths and weaknesses. It is initially private; remaining the direct concern of the teacher, who responds to this information with appropriate experiences for the child.

Assessment in early childhood is associated with formative, summative, evaluative and diagnostic functions (NCCA, 2004; Wood and Attfield, 2005). There is need for an informal approach to assessment in the early years that forms a routine part of the “...day to day interactions and observations [within the setting]” (NCCA, 2004: 58). Clemson and Clemson (1994), writing on assessment in mathematics in the early years, argue that in the absence of assessing children’s progress “...purposeful teaching is replaced with serendipity” (ibid: 97). The NCCA (2009) describe assessment in early childhood as being concerned with “...collecting, documenting, reflecting on and using information to develop rich portraits of children as learners” (ibid: 72). Seen in this broader reflective frame, teachers of young children are challenged to reflect upon and alter practice in order to respond to and support young children’s development and learning.

5.11 Observation as Assessment

Observation is a critical teaching skill and responsibility (CECDE, 2006; Dahlberg *et al.*, 2005; Hargreaves and Wolfe, 2007; Muijs *et al.*, 2001; NCCA, 2004; Spodek *et al.*, 1991). It is central to the process of assessment, evaluation and reflection on practice and action research (Moyles, 2007). Based upon a study to examine the development of language and mathematical skills in pre-school settings, Stephen *et al.* (2004) reported the need for adults

to spend time in focused observations or careful recordings of children's experiences. The curriculum, like all else in the pre-school setting, is a function of conditions and intentions (ibid.). Thus, Gretchen and Jones (1997) assert that teachers observe not only "...as the basis of information about individual children... but as the place from which teachers can begin to engage in the dialogic process of reflection, hypothesis building and planning" (ibid: 13).

In a study of early years teachers in Michigan, which examined the types of assessment techniques used, McNair *et al.* (2003) found that teachers cited observation as a favourite assessment strategy. Teachers explained how observations provided information required to individualise instruction and to develop the programme, as needs arise. Significantly, observations were most often used to garner information on behavioural rather than academic issues. Similar results were found by Hatch *et al.* (2002) in a study on the ways in which observations are used in the US and Australia. Among teachers of 3-5 year olds in the US, "assessing academic progress" was the most frequently mentioned use of observation. This was followed by: "...adjusting curriculum/teaching strategies and diagnosing instructional needs/readiness" (ibid: 227). However, Hatch *et al.* (2002) stress that teachers emphasised diagnosis of deficiencies in children's academic progress and adjusting their teaching techniques to move children more efficiently through the skills and concepts of their curricula. Similarly, while the Australian teachers most frequently used observations to "...identify individual strengths and weaknesses" (ibid: 227-228), they were discussed in terms of "...children's attainments in relation to some pre-determined standard and in this way, paralleled US teachers concerns for assessing academic progress" (ibid: 227-228).

Notwithstanding its value, Hargreaves *et al.* (2007) posit that teachers may feel that the demands of observation can outweigh its benefits, associating it with squandering "...teaching time" (ibid: 209), while others find it difficult to hold back their "...teacher's urge to intervene when children are struggling with a problem" (ibid: 209). The crucial task for teachers is to consider whether they are delivering a curriculum, as experienced by the children, which meets the curriculum goals (Stephen *et al.*, 2004).

Accordingly, consideration must be given to a number of core questions, i.e. 'Does the programme work?' and 'Do children experience the curriculum in the ways the teacher intended?' Stephen *et al.* (2004) conclude that answering these questions about children's experiences requires systemic observation by adults, who have specific time set aside to focus on that task with the support of the staff team to whom they report.

Observation is more than "...simply perceiving reality, but also constructing, interpreting and revisiting it" (Rinaldi, 1998: 120). Hence, pedagogistas in the Reggio schools embrace the concept of documentation, as an essential tool for assessment. Rinaldi (2001) explains how two contrasting viewpoints have emerged from debates in Italy about planning curriculum and activities for children under six years of age. The first defines planning as a process where educational and specific objectives for each activity are established in advance. The second defines planning as a process where teachers lay out general educational objectives, but do not develop the specific goals of the activities in advance. They "...formulate hypotheses of what could happen" (Rinaldi, 1998: 113) on the basis of their knowledge of the children and on previous experiences. They also formulate objectives that are flexible and adapted to the needs and interests of children. Throughout the activities, teachers engage in a process of documentation through which practice is made visible, examined, interpreted and discussed using the documentation produced.

Documentation makes "...timely and visible the interweaving of actions" (Rinaldi, 1998: 120) of children and adults. It is a process of reciprocal learning, making it possible for teachers to sustain children's learning, while also learning how to teach from the children's learning. This process is akin to "sustained shared thinking" (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2002), where two or more people work together in an intellectual way to solve a problem, clarify a concept, evaluate activities or extend a narrative for example. Thus, both child and teacher contribute to the thinking so that it develops and extends. Consequently, the teacher's role as observer is extended to that of interpreter and researcher (Dahlberg *et al.*, 1999; Dahlberg and Moss, 2005). Ultimately, Gandini (1993) and Rinaldi (1998) posit that a historical archive is created that traces the process of children's and teachers' learning experiences.

Signifying the difference between documentation and observation, Dahlberg *et al.* (2005: 109) advise that "documentation is not what it can easily become ...child observation that assesses children's progress... against predetermined and normative categories".

Documentation calls upon teachers to listen, observe, gather documentation and interpret them (CECDE, 2006; Hargreaves *et al.*, 2007; NCCA, 2004; Rinaldi, 1998; Spodek *et al.*, 1991). Thus, in the words of Dahlberg *et al.* (2005), the child is no longer understood as lacking or incomplete but "...intelligent... capable of making meaning of the world from his/her own experiences, not as a person who scores more than so many points on an IQ test" (*ibid*: 102).

In summary, the *Education Act, 1998* (DES, 1998) and the *Child Care (Pre-School Services) (No 2) Regulations, 2006* (DHC, 2006) provide the legislative basis for assessment in pre-school and primary school in Ireland. Furthermore, the importance of assessment and evaluation is highlighted at national and international level (DES, 1999; CECDE, 2006; UNECSO, 2004; NCCA, 2009). The practice of assessment and evaluation enables teachers to choose a pedagogical approach that respects children's developmental needs and interests, and so facilitates the child's agency within the learning environment. Assessment and evaluation undertaken on a regular basis are central to process quality in pre-school and infant class contexts.

In the context of ECCE, assessment should be embedded in the day-to-day interactions and observations within the setting. Hence, observation as informal assessment is an essential teacher skill and responsibility. Assessment in ECCE is a reciprocal learning process, where teachers sustain children's learning while simultaneously learning how to teach from the children's learning. Thus, the teacher's role as observer is extended to that of interpreter and researcher (Dahlberg *et al.*, 1999; Dahlberg and Moss, 2005).

5.12 Reflective Practice

Encounters with children call upon us "...to be smarter and better than who we actually are... [consequently] we teach to learn, we teach to stretch, we teach next to, not above our students" (Ayers, 2005: 322). Accordingly, teachers have a responsibility to critically reflect upon their own practice, to become researchers in their own classrooms as they use their documentation to create new knowledge and expand their vision of who they are and what they do. The NCCA (2004) claim that effective teaching is about constantly reviewing practice and looking for ways to improve, it is the cornerstone to improvement of quality.

Traditionally associated with formal education, the move towards fostering reflective practitioners (CECDE, 2006; Bowman, 1989; Hubbard and Power, 1999; NCCA, 2004; Schön, 1983; Stott and Bowman., 1996) has gathered momentum over the last twenty years. It has progressed to a stage where, it is now firmly embedded in ECCE discourse. According to Stott *et al.* (1996), because of its changing nature; the fact that it can only approximate reality, and its "...reflection of particular socio-cultural positions" (ibid: 170), child development becomes a "...slippery base for practice" (ibid: 170). Whereas it is necessary for teacher preparation, it is not sufficient and must be supplemented by attention to reflection on practice and self-knowledge (ibid.). Freire (1996) depicts the interconnectedness of theory

and practice, suggesting that "...practice needs theory and theory needs practice, just like a fish needs clean water. Practice apart from critical reflection, which illuminates the theory embedded in practice, cannot help our understanding" (ibid: 108).

Teachers must think about what they do. This involves reflecting on their own thinking about children's learning, as well as their own thinking about teaching, the contexts in which they teach and an ability to take responsibility for their future actions (Calderhead, 1992; Day, 2004; Hartman, 2001). Teaching is a process, involving a continual inquiry and renewal in which the teacher is first and foremost a questioner (Ayers, 1993; Hansen, 1997).

In discussing reflection, one must consider Dewey (1933: 118) who defined reflective thought as "...active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends". In every case of reflective activity, a person:

"Finds himself confronted with a given, present situation from which he has to arrive at, or conclude to, something that is not present. This process of arriving at an idea of what is absent on the basis of what is at hand is inference. What is present carries or bears the mind over to the idea and ultimately the acceptance of something else" (ibid: 190).

A perceived limitation of Dewey's work is that it portrays reflection as a process where the "...individual student learns to reflect on a particular experience individually" (Cinnamond and Zimpher, 1990: 58).

Lubeck (1996) defines the reflective practitioner as somebody who learns to think deeply about the implications of their choices, as a result of which, they are more likely to tailor their practice to the diverse needs of children in a multicultural society. Day (2004) suggests that it involves a critique of practice, the values that are implicit in practice, the personal, social, institutional and broad policy contexts in which practice takes place, and the implications of these for the improvement of practice. Clearly, Day, in common with many others (Calderhead, 1989; Jalongo and Isenberg, 1995; McIntyre 1993; Pollard, 2005; Schön, 1983 and 1987), is suggesting the existence of multiple levels of reflection and analysis. To this end, Schön (1987: 6) refers to the "...indeterminate zone of practice", characterised by "...uncertainty, uniqueness, and value conflict" realizations that remain critical to reflective thinking and practice" (ibid: 6).

Central to Schön's thesis are two distinct spheres of reflection; reflection in action and reflection on action. The former is the ability to think on your feet, responding immediately

to the unexpected occurrences within the classroom. The teacher is able to think consciously about what is taking place and modify actions simultaneously:

“The practitioner allows himself to experience surprise, puzzlement, or confusion in a situation which he finds uncertain or unique. He reflects on the phenomena before him, and on the prior understandings which have been implicit in his behaviour. He carries out an experiment which serves to generate both a new understanding of the phenomena and a change in the situation” (Schön, 1983: 68).

Reflection on action is undertaken after the event. Teachers write up recordings, talk things through with a colleague or supervisor, enabling them to spend time examining why s/he acted as s/he did, what was happening in the group and so on. In so doing, they develop a set of questions and ideas about their activities and practice. A key aspect of this approach is the concept of building a repertoire of images, examples and actions that the teacher can draw upon for future reference:

“When a practitioner makes sense of a situation he perceives to be unique, he sees it as something already present in his repertoire. To see this site as that one is not to subsume the first under a familiar category or rule. It is...to see the unfamiliar, unique situation as both similar to and different from the familiar one, without at first being able to say similar or different with respect to what. The familiar situation functions as a precedent, or a metaphor, or...an exemplar for the unfamiliar one” (Schön, 1983: 138).

Some researchers criticise the ‘reflection on action’ approach, stating that it is a descriptive concept, quite empty of content (Eraut, 1994; Richardson, 1990; Usher *et al.*, 1997). The difficulty for Eraut (1994: 145) centres on time: “...when time is extremely short, decisions have to be rapid and the scope for reflection is extremely limited”.

Furthermore, Usher *et al.* (1997) are critical of the extent to which Schön “...neglects the situatedness of practitioner experience” (ibid: 168). These criticisms are justified to the extent that Schön fails to describe the actual process of reflection, thus leaving a void in his work as well as obscuring the fundamental premise of reflection - to amend and bring about change. His predominant focus is on the area of framing, and specifically the impact of frame-making on situations, claiming that as teachers frame the problem of a situation they determine:

“...the features to which they will attend, the order they will attempt to impose on the situation, the direction in which they will try to change it... they identify both the ends to be sought and the means to be employed” (Schön, 1983: 165).

Schön’s contribution to understanding reflection is to be found in a teacher’s ability to utilise a repertoire of images and metaphors to develop systems of framing. In this sense, it has significance for practice.

More recently, Moore and Ash (2002) delineated four types of reflective activity:

1. Ritualistic reflection, where reflection takes on little more than spurious evidence of reflection in order to meet the requirements to reflect;
2. Pseudo-reflection, involving a genuine intention to consider important issues identified or accepted by the student teacher [or teacher], though not leading to development or change;
3. Constructive, productive or authentic reflection, which actively seeks to problematise situations and to challenge existing views, perspectives and beliefs, promoting or leading to development or change in terms of work-related understandings and/or outlooks; and
4. Reflexivity, whereby reflection is rendered potentially more productive through its situatedness in contexts beyond the immediate classroom situation (ibid: 2).

As portrayed by Moore and Ash (2002), reflective practice is little more than an abstract concept undertaken by the teacher acting in isolation. It is presented as a series of disconnected components that are lacking in specifics and direction and unrelated to the child in any coherent manner. Alternatively, Day (2004) identifies a relational approach rooted in receptivity, relatedness and responsiveness. He believes that relationships are more important than rationality, and that empathetic understanding is more important than abstract principles. He also defines a critical approach that entails a responsibility to interrogate broader social and structural inequalities. The teacher sets about rectifying these inequalities by changing institutional norms and practices where appropriate (ibid.).

The teacher's repertoire of multiple skills in inquiry; the ability to constantly document, analyse and reflect on classroom experiences, can add tremendously to the quality of professional experience and to the quality of teaching and learning in the classroom (Helterbran and Fennimore, 2004). While Wolf (1999) claims that an engaged teacher is an engaged learner, keeping abreast of current thinking within the field of ECCE, the OECD (2001) point to the need for more training of staff, as "...researchers including approaches to observing and assessing children using assessments for purposes that advance early childhood pedagogy, as well as self-evaluation strategies that promote reflective practice" (ibid: 101).

Pedagogy claims reflective practice as a core activity within settings (Moss and Petrie, 2002). Acknowledging the demands on the pedagogue, they call upon reflective practitioners to

provide a space for new possibilities to be explored and realised. Within this space, children and pedagogues construct rather than produce knowledge. Critically, the pedagogue makes no claim to be "...a repository of objects, of knowledge that can be duplicated in the children" (ibid: 145). Rather, they engage in a process that enables them to construct new epistemological understandings that are informed by theory, research and practice.

Reflective practice is indeed a demanding process, calling forth a dual role for the pedagogue whereby s/he is simultaneously both teacher and researcher. This calls upon the pedagogue to step outside of him/herself; to become the fly on the wall: listening to, watching, learning from and altering their own practice, while simultaneously co-constructing learning with the children as research partners. As commented by Riley and Roach (2006), every teacher needs to feel like they are growing, they need to "...feel the excitement of new possibilities. If you ignore this, then your teachers may begin to stagnate and you may lose them" (ibid: 368).

5.13 Chapter Conclusion

This thesis is concerned with quality in pre-school and infant class contexts. Drawing upon the DJELR (2003), Guralink (2006), the OECD (2006a) and Schweinhart (2004), the core aspects of quality have been delineated.

These are summarised as:

1. **Orientation quality** – Government engagement through national legislation, regulation and policy initiatives.
2. **Structural quality** – The overarching structures required to ensure quality in ECCE programmes.
3. **Educational concept and practice** - The curriculum framework underpinning staff knowledge and the application of this in practice.
4. **Interaction/process quality** – Children's day-to-day experiences.
5. **Operational quality** - The management and leadership (including policy and process) that guide the way in which a service operates.
6. **Child outcome/performance standards quality** - The environment and interactions that improve the present and future well-being of children.
7. **Standards relating to parent/community outreach and involvement** - Outreach to parent groups; efforts to improve the home learning environment responsiveness to local cultural values and norms; and participation in integrated programming (OECD, 2006a).

Thus far the study shows that, although the State has assumed increasing responsibility for regulating, monitoring and improving the quality of ECCE provision in Ireland, policy developments are contradictory. In the main, orientation quality within the pre-school sector has predominantly focused on supporting women's participation in the labour market. In contrast, a parallel aim to enhance the quality of provision and professionalism of those working in the sector has resulted in a range of policy initiatives through which a comprehensive construction of childhood has been delineated. Children are seen as active agents in their learning and in society and their learning is recognised as being developmental in nature.

This construction of childhood directs attention towards processes within pre-school and infant class contexts. A stark example of the many contradictions within policy is to be found in the revised *Child Care (Pre-School Services) (No 2) Regulations, 2006* (DHC, 2006). Critically, while oriented towards process quality, these regulations undermine the complexity of achieving such quality in settings by failing to redress ambiguity about staff qualifications and training.

Primary school policy and practice is equally contradictory. Doubtless, the primary school system is concerned with process quality as evidenced through the *Primary School Curriculum* (DES, 1999) as well as Whole School Evaluation which is concerned with quality in the areas of management, planning, curriculum, learning, teaching and supports for children. However, notwithstanding a 3-year B.Ed. teacher training programme, there are concerns that teaching approaches and methodologies used, may be unsuited to the needs of young children. The OECD (2009a), for example, claim that teachers in Ireland use "...structuring teaching practices much more than they do either student-oriented practices and enhanced activities" (ibid: 443). Disproportionate class sizes, coupled with inappropriate teacher/child ratios are equally problematic within the primary school sector.

Overall, in Ireland, whether in the domain of pre-school or primary school, irrespective of their child-centred positioning within policy, the pervading influence of the macro-system pushes children to the periphery of practice. Such is the gap between policy and practice that children's needs and rights are far removed from policy, values and priorities at the centre. Hence, the concept of quality in ECCE remains elusive. Chapter 6 presents the research findings, analyses and discussion of the current study.

6. Findings, Analysis and Discussion

6.1 Introduction

This study set out to locate quality in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) discourse in Ireland. The overarching objective was to determine the extent to which macro policy translates into practice at micro level in individual setting contexts. The study sought to examine how policy has impacted upon the quality of ECCE provision in Ireland in pre-school and infant classrooms.

Chapter 1 outlines the significance of ECCE as a mechanism that lays the foundations for lifelong learning (Arnold *et al*, 2007, Barnes *et al*, 2002, Bennett *et al*, 2004, CECDE, DES, 1999a, NCCA, 2004). However, as discussed in Chapter 2 benefits accrue only when programmes are of good quality and based upon children's natural interests and innate capacity to learn (Waldfogel *et al*, 1999). Drawing upon the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, (2003), Galinsky, (2006), the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (2006a), and Schweinhart, (2004), seven core aspects of quality were delineated (see Chapter X). These were 1) orientation; 2) structural; 3) interaction; 4) operational; 5) process quality; 6) educational concept and practice and 7) standards pertaining to parent/community outreach and involvement (OECD, 2006a).

Chapter 6, which is divided into five sections, presents the research findings from this study, locating them within the context of the core aspects of quality delineated (table 6.1) and discusses them against the backdrop of the literature review in Chapters, 3, 4 and 5. Research findings are based upon analysis of child observations (150 hours), IEA/PPP observations (90 hours), 80 interviews with policy makers, pre-school and infant teachers, childcare providers, representatives of the City and County Childcare Committees, the National Childcare Voluntary Collaborative, and the HSE pre-school inspectorate, as well as B.A ECCE and B.Ed graduates and 6 focus group discussions with B.A (ECCE) graduates, infant class teachers, and FETAC Level 5 and Level 6 students.

In terms of locating quality in early childhood care and education discourse, we must consider the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) which has greatly influenced child policy development in Ireland throughout the past two decades. The UN Convention advocates for three major concepts in services for children: protection, provision and participation. Consequently, the focus of discourse is increasingly child-centered with an

emerging child-as-agent theme taking precedence within policy. The extent to which the child-as-agent theme has become embedded in practice within settings is questionable. This study indicates that although the concepts of provision and protection are manifest in practice within both pre-school and infant classroom contexts, children's participation is severely compromised.

Findings show that pre-school and infant teachers genuinely cared for young children and had their best interests at heart. For the most part, children's care and education occurred in the context of warm caring relationships. None the less, there is compelling evidence of a considerable gap between policy and practice that seriously undermines children's experiences in pre-school and infant classrooms. Thus, in the context of this study, quality practice was sporadic rather than consistent in both contexts. Congruent with the OECD (2004a, 2004b, 2006a, 2009a) the issues impacting quality were; the lack of a mandatory training requirement coupled with poor overall levels of training; and weak pedagogical practices within the pre-school sector: and large class sizes; high teacher/child ratios; and didactic methodologies within the primary school sector. These issues are endemic in the ECCE sector and stand in the way of translating policy into practice.

Table 15 Overview of research findings in the context of core aspects of quality

Aspect of quality	Research findings
Orientation quality	Diverse understandings of ECCE policy in Ireland leading to ambiguity about the purpose of ECCE. Consequently a focus upon school readiness prevails at in pre-school level while and cognitive development is the watch word in infant classes
Structural quality	<p>Predominant focus upon the Childcare (pre-school services) Regulations, 2006 rendering other policy initiatives redundant</p> <p>Inappropriate pre-school inspectorate qualifications coupled with policing of pre-school sector leading to an unhealthy dissonance between the HSE and the pre-school sector</p> <p>Large class sizes, disproportionate teacher/child ratios and inappropriate infant pedagogy undermines the process of learning in infant classrooms</p>
Educational concept and practice	<p>Non statutory early childhood curriculum framework together with overall weak capacity of the pre-school sector considerably impacts upon children’s experiences within individual setting contexts</p> <p>Pressure on infant teachers to implement the primary school curriculum resulting in didactic teaching methodologies</p>

<p>Interaction or process quality</p>	<p>Gap between policy and practice undermining children’s experiences in pre-school and infant classrooms.</p> <p>Evidence of inappropriate pedagogy in both domains and a dearth of communication between both sectors</p>
<p>Operational quality</p>	<p>Lack of a mandatory training requirement is problematic within the pre-school sector resulting in the absence of professional identity within the pre-school sector.</p> <p>Diminishing status of primary school teachers as well as disquiet about how colleagues perceived them.</p>
<p>Child outcome quality or performance standards</p>	<p>Predominant focus upon a school readiness approach, didactic pre-school and infant teacher methodologies compromises children’s agency within both contexts.</p>
<p>Parent/community outreach and involvement</p>	<p>Diverse approaches to parental involvement in both sectors.</p> <p>Involvement of parents compromised by involvement in the work place</p>

Section 1 Awareness of Early Childhood Care and Education Policy

6.1.1 Introduction

Section 1 examines awareness of national ECCE policy and initiatives within the pre-school and primary school sectors. It indicates that although a very clear vision for ECCE has been articulated at macro level, it is not shared at the level of practice within the micro environments of pre- school and infant classrooms.

6.1.2 The Vision Unfolds

As elucidated in Chapter 3, conceptions of ECCE are intertwined in constructions of childhood. Consistent with researchers (Corsaro, 2005, Matthews, 2007) ECCE policy acknowledges childhood as a social construction where children are increasingly recognised as being “able, willing and reliable contributors within their own significant social contexts of home and school” (Wyness, 2000: 2-23). This construction gives voice and visibility to children in contexts where they live and learn including pre-school and primary school.

The extent to which Societies understand the importance of early childhood as a critical period in the child’s learning trajectory determines orientation quality and consequently the level of investment in ECCE. Thus, concepts of childhood are culturally located and time specific (Hayes, 2002). They are subject to review and reconstruction as societies evolve and in accordance with societal priorities, concerns and prevailing supports at any given time. Findings in this section indicate that in Ireland ECCE is in a constant state of flux.

The aspirations of policy makers are encapsulated in the following statement which holds that “*the vision for ECCE in Ireland is to provide the best experiences possible for children from birth to six to help them reach their full potential*” (policy maker, (PM 5)). The context in which this vision emerged was complex and arduous. Reflecting a traditional societal perspective in relation to the role of mothers, PM 1 stated that “*culturally, you minded your own children; you didn’t need care outside the home*”. This cultural belief is “*ingrained in our society... [it is] still a very strong cultural value*” (PM1). Thus, in terms of developing an ECCE infrastructure, the process was about “*slow, incremental change, building the sector step by step by step*” (ibid).

From the mid 1990s onwards, policy makers were monitoring the “*statistics and trends of women in terms of the equality European agenda*” and saw that the “*graph was accelerating rapidly*” (PM 1). Increasing numbers of mothers were entering the labour market. As

discussed in Chapter 3, the involvement of women in the work place marked a significant shift in society's view of women, resulting in a change in emphasis from primary carer within the home to that of participant in the labour market. Recognising this societal shift, policy makers acknowledged the need for out of home childcare, while also realising that considerable investment would be required to address the issue. Fortunately, there was a *“possible £250m” available through the European Structural Fund. Accordingly, the government “developed a labour market measure”* (ibid) directed towards supporting women to engage in/or return to employment or study. In effect, that was the only way that Government could access money *“to begin the process of developing a childcare infrastructure”* (ibid).

The allocation of the £250m ESF coincided with the introduction of the Childcare (Pre-School Services) Regulations, 1996 which allowed for an annual inspection of ECCE settings by the HSE pre-school inspectorate. Researchers (Baldock, 2001, Dahlberg *et al*, 1999, Gormley, 1999) warn of the dangers of policing the inspection process, claiming that it is essentially about controlling the environment rather than supporting childcare providers. The “enforcement” of the 1996 regulations was problematic for many existing services that were at risk of closure. Government had to reprioritise their objectives so that funding could be directed towards maintaining existing provision.

Developing the physical infrastructure was part of a broader strategy where it was recognised that *“quality and staffing was an issue”* (PM1). Again, mirroring a long held view that pre-school provision is primarily associated with untrained women who love and care for children (Carter and Doyle, 2006, Lobman and Ryan, 2007), PM 2 articulated how the *“prevailing belief in the 1990s was that anyone can mind a child”*. Moreover, as playgroups had emerged in *“an organic fashion....run by women in communities the length and breadth of Ireland”* staff qualifications had never been a requirement.

Even though the government was keenly aware of the need for staff training across the sector generally, they were restricted in their capacity to respond to this need, primarily because of the limited availability of resources (£250m). Equally restrictive, was the singular focus of the ESF on creating equality of opportunity for mothers to participate in the labour market or study opportunities. Thus, a pragmatic decision was taken to concentrate on building capacity within the community-based sector where issues of equality for women, and quality of provision for children were paramount.

Government thinking was that if “*we could get some current money we could put in some qualified people in community services*” (PM 1). The only current funding in the system was through FÁS and the Community Employment schemes. Hence, a progressive partnership with FÁS was established. The aspiration was to “*have one qualified person in each community setting where there was CE people...At least then you could begin to up the standards and improve quality.... that was the origins of addressing quality*” (ibid). Such was the demand for funding within the sector, that the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (2000 – 2006) was developed which introduced “*current funding for childcare, that meant we were able to work with more groups to improve supply and start looking at quality*” (ibid).

Although the physical infrastructure represents the visible and tangible reality of the vision for the pre-school sector, it is just one aspect of it. Attitudes towards ECCE have changed considerably since the 1990s. Congruent with national and international research concerning the benefits of quality ECCE (Arnold *et al*, 2007, Bennett and Neuman, 2004, Bowman *et al*, 2001, CECDE, 2004a, 2004b, 2006, DES, 1999a, 1999b, Farquhar, 2003, Irwin *et al*, 2007, Kagan *et al*, 1998, Schweinhart, 2004, UNESCO, 2006), policy makers asserted that in Ireland, ECCE is seen to have the “*potential to benefit all children regardless of background*” (PM 5). Furthermore, Ireland “signed up to various Bologna agreements and other international commitments” (PM 4) which changed the childcare landscape. It is “*no longer just about childcare*”. Early education and care are inextricably linked (DES, 1999a) and that perception is “*part of our psyche now*” (ibid). Cognisant of the link between quality ECCE and long term cognitive outcomes for children, PM 1 explained that while “*government would always have wished for universal pre-school for all children, we were taking small incremental steps*”.

6.1.3 Realising the Vision

Much of the vision for ECCE is packaged and expressed through policy. It is found in the “*National Children’s Strategy....it is underpinned by the ‘principles that characterise our vision, the whole child perspective, supports, pedagogy, partnership ...it has it all’*” (PM 5). Accordingly, there is a “*very articulate vision for ECCE and a very articulate vision of what we want for children in Ireland*” (PM 4).

Clearly highlighting the prolificacy of policy in Ireland throughout the last decade, PM 3 described how the National Children’s Strategy preceded a plethora of “*well thought out, innovative initiatives*” that stand as testimony to progress in the sector.

The development of Aistear and Siolta, the Workforce Development Plan, the revised Pre-school Regulations the development of the CCCs, the work of the NVCC, the free-pre-school year, the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, the capital programme and subvention schemes have helped us greatly (PM 3).

According to PM1, the focus of ECCE is increasingly on quality. That is not to say that quality was a secondary issue during the development of the physical infrastructure. On the contrary, it always featured. The difficulty was, that “*you could only work with what you had. Certain tough decisions were made, funding was prioritised. We were able to make a start...quality was always there*” (ibid).

Signifying the overall incremental approach, PM 1 articulated how it had taken fifteen years to develop the infrastructure, “*the quality phase is going to take another fifteen*”. Rather than feeling disillusioned about the road ahead, policy makers were “*very proud*” of what had been achieved and “*optimistic*” about the further development of ECCE.

We are now for the first time in the position to talk about quality with a view to getting where we want to be in ten or fifteen years time. This is year one of the quality journey [2009]. You cannot impose and you cannot demand until all the dots have joined up (PM1).

The dots have indeed joined up as evidenced by the “*historic departure from a sole focus on targeted provision to universal pre-school for all children*” (PM 2). From a policy perspective, the free pre-school year in ECCE scheme is part of the vision. It is associated with the development of a knowledge economy, as well as an “*absolute belief*” in the value of ECCE for children.

Ministers are very au fait with all of the research into the benefits of ECCE that prove beyond doubt that the most rapid period of brain development is in the early years. They know that if you want a knowledge economy it is vital that you start with your pre-school children (PM 6).

PM1 was confident that this scheme would “*level the playing field for everyone*” because it is cognisant of ‘*a cultural tradition that continues to value the role of mothers in the home...it’s [the scheme] being given to everyone*’. Since it is linked to qualifications it is “*huge in terms of quality, huge in terms of children because they now have equal access*” (PM 6).

Translating the vision into practice proved contentious for policy makers. Regardless of considerable progress there is still a long way to go “*before we can meet the vision of ECCE*” (PM 4). Policy makers cited the many difficulties that precluded the realisation of the vision; “*low wages*”, “*poor qualification levels*”, “*diverse standards of provision between community and private settings*”, “*lack of recognition*”, “*poor confidence and self esteem*”.

All of these factors were associated with a “*lack of capacity to implement many of the standards within policy*” (PM 6).

Two policy makers questioned where responsibility lay for realising the vision. There is a collective responsibility where people must move beyond making excuses that enable them to abdicate responsibility for realising the vision to others.

Until we individually take collective responsibility for making that vision a reality through the everyday moments of our interactions with children regardless of whether we are directly or indirectly involved with children then we're not really going to be able to realise it. We're going to be forever abdicating all of this responsibility for this vision to someone else whether it's the government for not providing enough money, or my manager for not allowing me to go on that course or those parents who don't really understand what I'm trying or my grandmother who says this is all ridiculous this need to be educating children (PM 4).

Indeed, while PM 5 stated the need for public debate “*as to what that vision means for every individual*”, PM 4 was concerned that “*the message might have been lost in translation*”. To this end, she argued that Ireland had developed “*very good early childhood policies, where we know what it is we want for the sector*”, but there was difficulty in “*communicating the message*”. While it must be acknowledged that Ireland has developed a wealth of ECCE policies and initiatives throughout the past decade as discussed in Chapter 3, government has been remiss in relation to developing a comprehensive overarching implementation mechanism.

Policy exploration in Chapter 3 coupled with analysis of policy maker interviews, demonstrates that a vision for ECCE has been articulated at macro level. PM 1 expressed the wish to “*realise the vision, to have an ECCE sector that is as good as the best of them*”. Findings indicate that this national vision was not shared by the majority of stakeholders (73) who were sceptical of policy maker motivation. This was particularly the case in relation to free pre-school year in ECCE scheme.

6.1.4 Uneasy Juxtaposition

Commenting upon the myriad of policy development and initiatives throughout the past decade, support agencies (NVCC and CCCs) claimed that there was “*a huge move in favour of policy and quality within the sector. The national quality framework and the curriculum will greatly shape the development of the sector*” (NVCC1). Regardless of these positive sentiments, levels of awareness of national ECCE policy varied greatly within the sector (Appendix F).

With the exception of the revised Childcare (pre-school services) Regulations, 2006, there was limited awareness or understanding of other policy initiatives including *Síolta* and *Aistear*. The childcare regulations were described as a “*core part of our work with children*” (Private based pre-school teacher (PB – PST 3); whereas, policies in general, “*don’t impact on how we work with children*” (ibid). Bearing in mind policy maker concerns that the core message of policy was being lost in translation, findings show that for 75% of ECCE managers and staff, “*the regulations are the only ones that matter....the rest of them from a day to day and a working point of view, they’re kind of not relevant*” (CB- PST 5).

Likewise, while there was cautious welcome for the introduction of an early childhood curriculum, those working within the pre-school sector did not have a comprehensive understanding of *Aistear*. Hence, they associated the concept of curriculum with “*formal education*” “*reading and writing*”, “*moving away from play based learning*”. An overarching concern was that the introduction of a curriculum would negatively impact upon the sector, so that it would become “*like primary school*” (Private based manager (PB – M 3). On the other hand, there was a belief that *Síolta* and *Aistear* had the potential to underpin “*a standardised approach*” for the sector (PB - PST 2) that could redress the current ad hoc system where “*everybody is doing their own thing*” (PBM 3).

6.1.5 Infant Teachers on the Periphery

Although *Síolta* and *Aistear* traverse junior and senior infant classes there was limited awareness among infant teachers. Of the ten teachers interviewed, three were aware of *Aistear* while two were aware of *Síolta*. One teacher would be “*influenced a little bit by Síolta*” but a multitude of competing demands within primary school prevented her from using it.

She explained that

There is far more focus on our own curriculum because of the Whole School Evaluation and there is no doubt that has totally impacted on my practice. I would be much more into trying things out.... But generally our own curriculum would be where I’d be at this year in particular (Junior Infant Teacher (JIT 5).

As with the pre-school sector, teachers were concerned that the core message of policy had not been communicated. *Síolta* had not been “*sold in the way that it should have been; it’s a different approach and it’s a different way of looking at things. It needed to be in-serviced*” (ibid). Clearly pointing to the continuing dichotomy between care and education, teachers articulated the view that while *Síolta* “*may impact at different levels in the whole early*

childhood sector if work is done on it - it won't impact on our system unless some work is done to give teachers knowledge of what it is and how it actually works" (Senior infant teacher (SIT 1)). Moreover, seven of the ten teachers did not "*see the relevance of [Síolta], we have our curriculum and its fine"* (JIT 2).

In terms of *Aistear*, JIT 1 declared that "*it will be excellent if the resources are given to implement it"* while JIT 5, described its approach to working with junior and senior infants as "*innovative and refreshing"*.

I really like a lot of stuff in the framework. I like the attitude to play.... the way that portraiture was done, and that study was excellent. To my mind it is the first time I have seen a real engagement from the powers that be in terms of the department (JIT 5).

It was also "*the first time"* that JIT 5 had "*a bit of hope around the area of early childhood in the primary school, that something will be taken seriously in relation to it"*. As with *Síolta*, there were reservations about whether *Aistear* will ever be implemented. Reflecting the view of Vandebroek *et al*, (2006) that economic aspects dominate all other aspects of policy, JIT 5 was fearful that in the "*current economic climate"* *Síolta* and *Aistear* "*will never see the light of day"*.

PM 1 stated that it was "*essential to communicate the message about Aistear across to the primary teacher cohort"*. Pointing to the traditional bifurcation of the pre-school and primary school sectors, she claimed that "*there is a lot of rigidity with junior and senior infant teachers"*, who were "*always used to being told what to do, getting directives and instructions...They find it difficult to think outside the box"*. Accordingly, there is a "*lot of resistance among teachers"* (ibid). However, policy makers were sympathetic towards teachers.

It is very difficult to ask somebody to introduce a play-based methodology somewhere you have thirty children in a difficult environment with limited resources to play. That is a huge challenge so it's very difficult to have that expectation, whereas in a pre-school service you would have one adult for every ten children (PM 4).

This commentary belies a consistent diversity in approaches to the pre-school and primary school sectors by policy makers. Consequently, while policy makers acknowledged the difficulties for teachers in embracing change in the absence of training, untrained pre-school teachers are bound by statute to embrace Regulation 5 of the revised Childcare (pre-school services) regulations, 2006. This stance contradicts the DES (2004) claim that what is

considered pre-school education in other countries is provided through junior and senior infant classes in Ireland. Rather, it further polarises the care and education sectors.

The school starting age was also problematic for teachers. As commented by PM 4 “*you could have barely a four year old and a five and half year old within the junior infant class and the difference between ... [them] is huge*”. This anomaly alone, points to the necessity for a “*different pedagogy for juniors and seniors, we need more of a continuum between the early years people and primary school*” (ibid). Indicative of the polarity between formal and informal education sectors, NVCC 3 highlighted the need to “*find a way that both sectors will recognise and value the opinions of each other...it’s about recognising that early childhood education is particular to its own area of education and that it is not national school level*”.

6.1.6 ECCE Policy and the HSE

Although HSE interviewees were aware of *Síolta* and *Aistear*; in terms of their role as pre-school inspectors, their practical application was “*limited*”. This critique was particularly true of *Síolta* which was “*way too aspirational*” and “*not user friendly at all*” (HSE 2). Accordingly, the HSE had “*everything [they] need in the regulations*” (ibid).

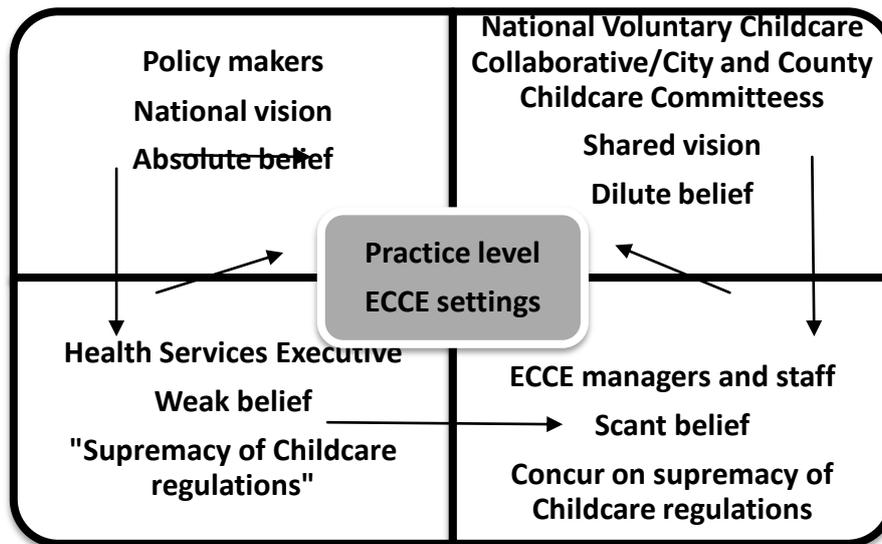
Other than the childcare regulations, the HSE was sceptical of a national vision for ECCE, and questioned whether in fact childcare policy actually exists. “*I don’t see policy, I don’t know it, I don’t know what it is, I don’t know who it is, I don’t know how it’s made*” (HSE 4). She referred to the lack of a “*systematic structure. There isn’t enough push to implementation*”.

Clearly identifying the HSE as the appropriate locus of implementation, HSE 4 asserted that the pre-school inspectorate was not “*robust enough about challenging people’s practice*”. On the other hand, the inspectorate was not “*sure about giving [pre-school staff] the tools to put things right*” (ibid).

6.1.7 Universal Provision: Vision or Opportunism

At macro level, policy makers upheld the vision for ECCE that lies at the heart of policy. Research findings indicate that belief in this vision became increasingly diluted the further stakeholders were located from macro level. There was scant belief where it matters most, at practice level within settings. Figure 17, based upon analysis of 80 interviews and six focus group discussions provides an overview of stakeholder belief in the national vision for ECCE as espoused at macro level.

Figure 17 Strength of stakeholder’s belief in the national vision for ECCE



Support agencies were primarily positive about the free pre- school year in ECCE. NVCC 3 claimed that it was motivated by ideology

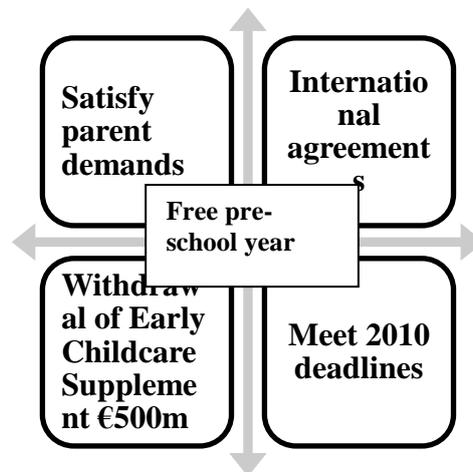
ECCE is more recognisable and more represented at a policy level. The NVCCs that represent providers highlight the importance of this and are highlighting it on a daily basis, and showing government how important the sector is....also, when we got the minister for children it was a recognition by the government that they now needed to look at the whole area of ECCE and through looking at other countries and seeing the important part that children play in other countries and how it works out; and the whole socio/economic scheme of things....

Kellaghan and McGee (2005) assert that government proposals are often the result of “exercises, not in participatory democracy, but in representative democracy from which many people feel excluded (pg 91). This appears to be the case with the free pre – school year in ECCE, with the majority (87.5%) of interviewees (managers, staff, graduates and students) expressing scepticism about the motivation behind it, particularly as it was introduced in times of fiscal austerity. Hence, there was a belief that it was the result of government opportunism. They suggested that it was driven by two factors:

1. Government commitments to various international agreements
2. Withdrawal of the Early Childcare Supplement

According to ECCE managers, staff, B.A ECCE graduates and students, the confluence of these factors resulted in the development of the free pre-school scheme (Figure 18).

Figure 18 Genesis of universal pre-school provision



On the one hand, *“time was running out to meet commitments under the Barcelona agreement. Some move had to be made on universal provision”* (CBM 1). Thus, the free pre-school year in ECCE enabled government to *“tick another box on the list of things we should have”* (ibid). On the other hand, it was directed at pre-empting parental *“anger”* regarding the withdrawal of the ECS. *“They wanted to see how some of that money could be spent that might take away some of the anger from parents”* (CCC 1). Fundamentally, it was perceived as a cost saving measure. According to CCC 4, while the ECS was *“costing €500m every year, the ECCE scheme is costing €170m. It’s about saving money at the end of the day”*.

In keeping with Kellaghan and McGee’s (2005) perspective, there was considerable disquiet that the free pre-school year in ECCE was introduced in the absence of any consultation with the sector. NVCC 2 described how *“people were spitting with rage”* because of the lack of consultation. It went *“against the core of policy documents that are very strong on partnership and collaboration”* (ibid).

Much of the anger expressed about the free pre-school year in ECCE was associated with a perception that government were determining the cost of childcare provision. According to the NVCCs, the scheme was presented from a *“children’s rights” perspective. Therefore, parents will want to exercise this right and the sector will have to provide it for the price “dictated by government”*. NVCC 3 explains the dilemma

The whole idea of giving a free pre-school place is absolutely fantastic for parents and children. It’s what we want. But if you have a cost base that is over €64.50 per week then you are effectively subsidising that place. Nobody looked at what it is going to cost to provide that place (NVCC 3).

Equally disconcerting was a perceived lack of choice for settings in relation to their participation in the scheme. The NVCCs argued that the government was “*disingenuous*” in telling people that they did not have to join the scheme.

On the one hand, providers are saying that they won't be able to provide the service within the funding available, on the other if they don't apply for the scheme they are worse off because parents will vote with their feet and go where they can get free pre-school (NVCC 4).

These misgivings were coupled with awareness that parents were losing jobs, withdrawing children from settings, or reducing their hours of attendance. Accordingly, the NVCCs and CCCs agreed that the scheme would potentially save some services at risk of closure because of the economic down turn.

6.1.8 An Unresolved Clash of Ideologies

Making profit from ECCE was highlighted as an issue. This issue is embedded in societal perceptions of childcare that associate it with care and altruism and has been perpetuated by a focus on targeted provision. Hence, from the perspective of the community based pre-school sector there was something wrong with making money from ECCE provision. However, 60% of private providers asked whether the community sector “*would work for the wages that are paid in the private sector...if they had to live on the left-overs after staff and bills are paid*”. Pointing to the contradictions at macro level, the NVCCs, argued that both perspectives were symptomatic of a “*clash of ideologies*” within the sector that was not redressed by the provisions of the free pre- school year in ECCE. As noted by NVCC 4

The scheme is being run off an ideology where the child has a right to education which is a good one; it is the child's right but its market driven. So there's a mismatch because if it's the child's right everything has to be in place to support that. Whereas market driven, market forces dictate costs, dictate that you have to drive costs down, the salaries.....so you have these clash of ideologies

This commentary reflects a broader societal discourse about the purpose of ECCE. In Scandinavian countries, it is considered to “constitute a unified socio-education system for children from birth to six.... and a social support system for their families” (Bennett *et al* 2004: 430). Successive OECD reports question the purposes of ECCE, asking how should young children be reared and educated. What are the purposes of education and care, of early childhood institutions? What are the functions of early childhood staff? In the context of this study, ECCE is simultaneously seen as a common good that benefits all children, as well as a necessary pre-requisite for working parents. Children and parents are perceived as “*consumers of services which sets the precedent of how we deal with them and what services are for*” (NVCC 4).

Clearly indicating that the core message within policy has not reached the ECCE sector, NVCC 3 claimed that *“there is no vision and there is nobody facilitating the development of that vision either. It’s been piece-meal development from start to finish”*. Likewise, even though the government introduced the free pre-school year in ECCE, it was suggested that *“nobody asked the real question: what is education about and what do we want for children”*. Or, in the words of Qvortrup (2009) in which way do children belong to the modern national economy; are they a public good or a private good? As noted by NVCC 3, the answer to that question should be debated at national level and involve all stakeholders, *“we all need to have our say, that has to be built into a visionary plan for the next ten years”*. Thus, in answer to Qvortrup’s question, Ireland has not yet arrived at a consensus on the purpose of ECCE.

6.1.9 Policy Lost in Translation

As evidenced through policy maker perspectives, Ireland has a national vision for ECCE. Consistent with claims by Kellaghan *et al.*, (2005) and Urban (2008), findings demonstrate that national policy has not reached those tasked with realising it. There was evidence that those working at varying levels in the pre-school sector did not believe in a national vision. There were many reasons for the mismatch between the ideology espoused at macro level and practices at micro level.

Prior to 2006, the pre-school sector was characterised by a complex web of government departments, each bearing some level of responsibility for certain aspects of child policy. The OMC brought together the DES and the DHC to maximise coordination of policies for children and young people. The aspiration was to facilitate “achievement of the multifaceted objectives” of the NCIP, covering “quality provision, early education, skills and training and social inclusion” (OMC, 2007: vi). The EYEPU has recently been established in the DES and co-located within the OMC with responsibility for the workforce development plan. In addition, ECCE programmes are managed by Pobal, an intermediary that works on behalf of the Government.

Policy is further mediated through the NVCC and the CCCs who in turn, support the sector to implement policy. Putting all of these layers into context; policy implementation continues to be mediated through multiple departments and agencies. This represents a fundamental flaw in the ECCE infrastructure.

Figure 19 Overview of ECCE organisational structures

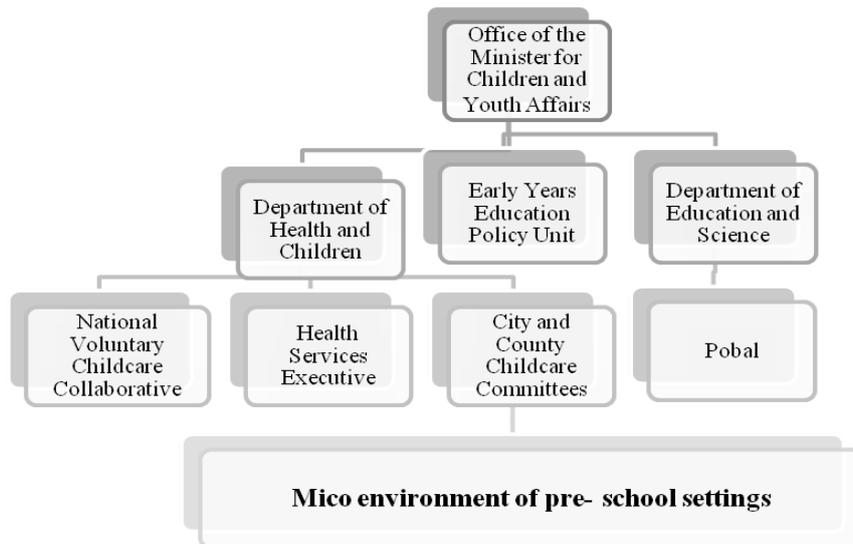


Figure 20 transposes this structural mechanism to the ecological spiders’ web framework outlined in Chapter 3. Conceivably, by the time policy reaches those tasked with translating it into practice, understandings become blurred.

By contrast, primary school policy is developed and implemented by the DES. It is not dependent upon an intermediary. Communication between the DES and primary schools occurs in a straightforward manner (Figure 21). In this construct, infant teachers are fully aware of departmental expectations.

Figure 20 Policy trajectory Early Childhood Care and Education settings

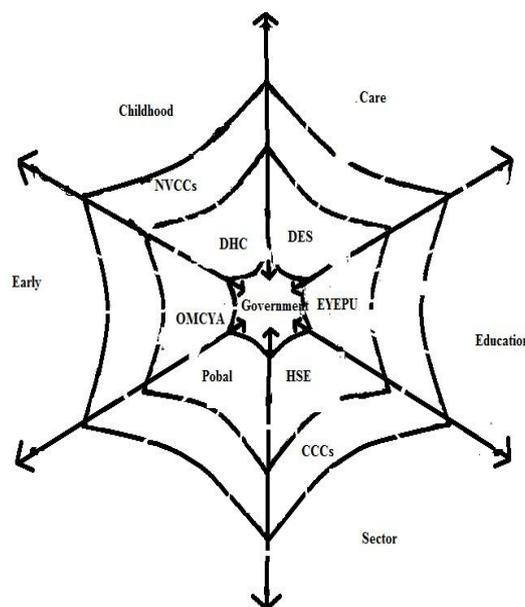
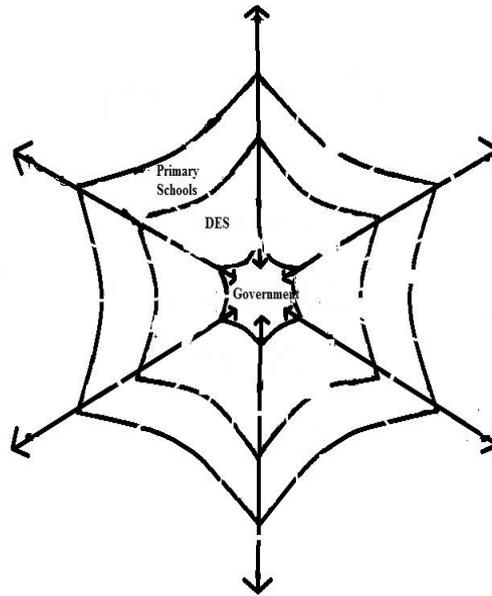


Figure 21 Policy trajectory infant classes



As figure 20 demonstrates, although the child is at the centre of policy development, the layers of mediated action between policy and practice relocate the child to the outer rim of the framework. Accordingly, government and government departments take centre stage. Influences are mediated through multiple channels in a predominantly linear fashion. By the time policy reaches those tasked with realising it within the micro environment of pre-school settings, it is little wonder that the core message is lost in translation.

6.1.10 Catalyst for Change

Regardless of concerns about the origins of the free pre-school year in ECCE, interviewees were positive about its potential to shape the development of the sector. In light of policy maker concerns regarding the school starting age, an overwhelming 92.5% of interviewees stated that the scheme would positively impact on parent decisions to send their child to school. There was a belief that the traditional focus on disadvantage had adversely affected “*middle class*” parents. This had often resulted in children being sent to school “*to avoid childcare costs*” (CCC 9). Consequently, the free pre-school year in ECCE “*would encourage parents to delay sending their children to school at four*” (ibid). Not only would this benefit children, it would impact on parents by reducing the financial strain associated with ECCE. Moreover, it would ease the burden for teachers in meeting the needs of four year old children.

As discussed in chapters 1 and 3, while two successive investment programmes (EOCP, 2000 – 2006 and NCIP, 2006 – 2010) resulted in the development of a physical infrastructure throughout Ireland, little attention has been paid to staff qualifications and training. Hence, the link between participation in the free pre-school year in ECCE and staff qualifications was described as historic and progressive. *“It is the first time that qualifications are being properly linked to the delivery of a quality service”* (NVCC 1). Over time, if staff *“don’t get their qualifications sorted, they will be asked to leave the scheme”* (ibid). As participation is linked to the provision of an appropriate curriculum, support agencies claimed that it would have a positive impact on quality by helping to improve standards. Although, there was concern about the capacity of the sector to meet the training and curricular components, support agencies agreed that overall, it was the most progressive ECCE initiative to date.

Regardless of these predominantly upbeat sentiments, there were under currents of anxiety. The primary concern was that there would be no increase in the amount of funding in the foreseeable future. In the absence of adequate resourcing, interviewees were concerned that quality would be compromised.

Just because we have capitation going into services doesn’t give us a high quality early childhood system, it helps but it needs to be increased year on year. Otherwise it is idealistic to talk about improving standards. Qualifications, up skilling; all that costs money....we need to think seriously about all of that and match it with investment (NVCC 4).

In sum, there were varying levels of awareness and equally diverse attitudes towards National ECCE policy. Regardless of the many progressive initiatives at macro level, the Childcare (Pre-School Services) Regulations, 2006 impact on all aspects of provision and take precedence over all else. However, as discussed in the following section, rigid adherence to the childcare regulations may in fact adversely affect standards within settings.

6.1.11 Supremacy of the Childcare Regulations

As the only statutory policy governing pre-school provision in Ireland, the Childcare (pre-schools services) Regulations, 2006 directly impact practice at micro level in pre-school settings. These revised regulations were broadly welcomed. In particular, participants lauded the emphasis on child development.

It was always about more than bricks and mortar... it’s about what’s happening to children in settings. You have to ask are the children happy playing, and working and being busy or are they sitting down at worksheets. Are they being stimulated, are they challenged. The regulations are beginning to look at all of these areas. It’s a step in the right direction (CCC 7).

Although, the regulations were viewed positively, there were multiple concerns regarding their implementation within the sector. Notwithstanding the emphasis on process quality, there was an overwhelming consensus that there was still an “*unhealthy obsession with health and safety*” by the pre-school inspectorate. 89% of interviewees claimed that this approach was inherited from the previous Regulations, 1996. Hence, there were two prevailing discourses both of which are intertwined at macro level but which filter through to practices within the micro environments of pre-school settings.

In the first instance, the focus on health and safety is a societal issue that is embedded in legislation which places a considerable onus on the ECCE sector to “*protect children at all costs*” (NVCC 4). Directly linked to this discourse, was a belief that the childcare regulations have sanitised the environment for children to the extent that those working in the sector are “*afraid to let children climb, run, fall or get dirty or any of the normal things that children do when they’re playing*” (CCC 2). CBM 2 for instance, described how she had been asked to “*remove a vase of flowers from a window ledge*” as the inspectorate felt that it posed a “*risk to children*”.

Overall, 84.6% of managers and staff stated that their primary role was one of supervision. They must “*ensure that [children] are safe at all times while they are in our care*”. Thus, the importance of the childcare regulations was primarily associated with the maintenance of records for the HSE including “*proper staff/child ratios*”, “*fridge temperatures*”, “*cleaning schedules*” and so on. Consequently, while there was an acute awareness of the need to develop and implement appropriate activities for children, a focus on structural characteristics was paramount.

Acknowledging the dilemma for staff, CCC 2 argued that the focus on health and safety was “*creating protected environments for children that are far removed from real life*”. In support of provider claims that they were not allowed to engage in certain activities, support agencies recounted examples where settings were *required to “cover the whole outdoor play area in multi-purpose matting*” or to “*prove that paint used by children is non toxic*” for example. This approach to children’s safety was “*unrealistic*” and associated with an overall absence of “*basic trust*” where “*the inspectors just don’t trust services....it’s about catching them out*” (CCC 3).

While acknowledging the challenges experienced by ECCE personnel, the NVCCs claimed that both discourses are valid...

There is a focus in terms of static control; what can you see and what can you measure... so all the static dimensions of quality were very much the focus of the inspections – safety....ridiculous, to the point of cutting down a tree in case a child would climb up it, getting rid of sand in case the child would slip (NVCC 3).

There is a societal focusthat has become very conscious of safety and health in general – in the work place for adults and the worker has to be protected. So you have this focus along with this huge investment in children in terms of fewer children, more time, effort, love; nothing is ever going to happen to my child. We talk about bubble wrapped children and that's part of the extra care, love and attention that's given to children; we don't want anything to happen to them (NVCC 4).

The sector is a victim of both societal values and regulatory regimes. The concept of accountability, resulting from public awareness and the needs and rights of parents as consumers, together with the demands of policy makers and funders predominates in the pre-school sector. Therefore, the concept of accountability was to the forefront of practice within settings. In the words of NVCC 4, those working in the pre-school sector have the “*HSE coming down on them telling them this is not safe that is not safe but they also have parents questioning practice*”.

ECCE managers and staff expressed considerable frustration with the focus on health and safety, suggesting that it tends to lose sight of the child; “*I know the building has to be up to standard but when you're pulled because there's a cobweb on the light, or the plug is missing from the sink; that's ridiculous*” (PBM 5). According to Gormley (1999) regulation is subject to the “*twin dangers of insufficient rigour and excessive severity*” (pg 117), consequently, a didactic approach to regulation can lead to an adversarial relationship between childcare providers and inspectors.

Findings indicate that the single biggest issue for the sector was the level of “*power that is given to the HSE over us*” (PBM 2). 92.5% stated that the HSE used a “*heavy handed approach*”. Within the current inspection system...“*[staff] never measure up because they'll always find something no matter how small it is*” (CB – PST 1). Indeed, 95% suggested that the HSE “*keep moving the goal posts; it's a no- win situation*” (PBM 2).

In the last inspection that we had it was all routines and we should be doing what the routine says and now they're moving away from that and saying “well we don't really want it to be routine based we want it to be freer”. You don't know where you stand. Before they didn't want the very young children mixing with the older ones and now they're encouraging that; so they do change their mind and you're getting a little bit frustrated that you're doing what they said the last time and now they've changed it again (CB-PST 1).

Consistent with the notion of policing the inspection process and controlling the environment (Baldock, 2001, Dahlberg *et al*, 1999, Gormley, 1999), ECCE managers and staff concurred on the need to “*keep the HSE happy*” (PB-PST 4). This is a difficult task for ECCE personnel, not least because they lack the knowledge and skills to comply with the regulations or indeed to justify their practice.

6.1.12 Difficulties with Article 5

Anomalies regarding the implementation of Article 5: Health, welfare and the development of the child were significant. NVCC 4 claimed that the sector was “*terrified of how Article 5 is going to be inspected*”. Inconsistencies between individual HSE inspection teams and regions was adding to confusion and creating additional concerns for the sector. According to CCC 8

They look for one thing in this county and something else in another county. Even within the same area there is lack of consistency. Some providers have been asked to do observations on each child in the setting while other providers haven't been asked to do any. In one setting they want to see a curriculum for the whole setting and in others the daily plan is enough.

Furthermore, issues with interpreting Article 5 were of concern. The “*problem for practitioners is number one their understanding and number two the inspector's understanding and is there a match or a marry – up there*” (CCC 3). Effectively, the sector is unprepared for inspection on Article 5...“*None of us are prepared for them because nobody knows what they're looking for*” (PB 2). An even bigger concern was that the inspectorate did not appear to know what they were looking for. “*They don't know from their right hand to their left hand what they're looking for*” (CBM 2). This had resulted in an “*avalanche of phone calls*” to the NVCCs, following which a number of NVCCs developed specific workshops to support the sector to meet the requirements of Article 5.

6.1.13 Issues with Capacity

There was a considerable “*capacity issue*” within the sector that undermined ability to engage with policy and enhance quality. Commenting on the unprecedented level of change within the sector, NVCC 3 articulated how “*individuals and individual services have only a certain capacity to embrace all of this change*”. Quality is compromised at multiple levels because of this lack of capacity.

Practice was undermined by a lack of basic skills. For example, the childcare regulations require that pre-school teachers undertake child observations. However, it was felt that many pre- school teachers did not know how to undertake observations. There was agreement that

if pre-school teachers are going to “*learn to follow children’s interests and strengths and support children they’re going to have to make notes about what they see children doing*” (NVCC 4). Consistent with policy maker perspectives, the NVCCs were focussed on building capacity slowly commencing with “*getting [staff] to make notes on what they see*” (NVCC 3). However, this is at odds with the HSE whom it was claimed tell staff “*that it is not good enough. They want 5 observations done on each child*” (CCC 4).

Acknowledging the capacity issue, policy makers claimed that it was the reason why, when reviewing the 1996 regulations, it was agreed to encourage the sector to put educational standards in place over a period of time so that “*they would be ready for when the day comes that they could get closed for not having them*” (PM 1). The overarching objective was to use the existing infrastructure; the CCCs and the NVCCs to work with the sector to support them towards meeting the requirements of Article 5. According to 89% of interviewees, this step was overlooked by an “*over zealous*” inspectorate with little “*understanding or regard for the issues faced by [staff] working on the ground*” (CBM 4). Although the focus on child development was welcome; it was seen as a new aspect of quality for those working in the pre-school sector. Rather than supporting the sector to improve practice, the HSE attitude was that “*it’s the law, comply*” (CBM 4).

6.1.14 Inspectorate Qualifications

As discussed in Chapter 3, the HSE pre-school inspectorate has a statutory duty to enforce the childcare regulations. Ultimately, it is the guardian of quality within the pre-school sector. The lack of appropriate inspectorate qualification was contentious with 94.7% of interviewees expressing concern about the absence of “*childcare personnel on the inspection team*”. Consistent with Bennett (2004) and UNESCO (2008), there was a belief that the inspectorate lacked curricular or pedagogical knowledge which caused variation and inconsistency in inspection.

Inconsistency is a problem; inspectors are simply learning and interpreting as they go along. They see something in your setting a policy, a toy or whatever that they like, then they look for it in the next place and if they don’t have it, they tell them they have to get it (PBM 2).

Because the inspectorate is uncertain about the dynamic aspects of quality, they “*concentrate on the area that they know best.... [they will] measure the place to bits; probe it and measure it and test it and count whatever [they] can count*” (NVCC 4). In this construct, quality is an “*inherently exclusive didactic process*”, undertaken by the HSE inspectorate whose “*power*

and claims to legitimacy enable them to determine what is to be understood as true or false” (Dahlberg *et al*, 1999: 94).

The acceptance of an inappropriately qualified inspectorate is indicative of systemic issues within the ECCE sector. As highlighted by policy makers, the HSE has the “*legal authority and power to inspect the sector*” (PM 5). Broadly speaking, the HSE is above reproach. The absence of pre-school inspectors “*with qualifications and knowledge of ECCE*” reflects the low status of the sector (PB – PST 3). Signifying anomalies between the sectors, CCC 7 stated that “*inspectors in the primary school system have been teachers but childcare is inspected by a public health nurse and that’s disgraceful*”.

Highlighting further anomalies within the sector that are directly related to the diversity and inconsistency of training and qualifications, concerns were expressed about the increasing numbers of B.A (ECCE) graduates who were considered more qualified than the majority of inspectors. NVCC 3 asked: “*how can you tell me that a pre-school officer can go out and inspect somebody that has that level of qualification in early childhood if they don’t have that qualification themselves?*”. Hence, a dual inspection system should be considered. This would involve the “*static elements*” such as health and safety and the environmental aspects remaining with the HSE while responsibility for “*curriculum and the more dynamic aspects of quality*” would be transferred to the DES (ibid). NVCC 4 argued that this would be “*the logical way to go where you’d have two inspectors; one to look at the regulations and one to look at curriculum programme and planning*”. Likewise, PM 1 “*saw education as the people who will eventually ensure that we have the educational standards in place*”.

Irrespective of a desire to involve the DES in pre-school inspections, the NVCC was fearful that this would result in the appointment of somebody with a “*qualification in national teaching*” (NVCC 3). Such an appointment would be inappropriate to the needs of the sector. Any additional personnel appointed to the inspectorate should have a “*qualification in the early years specifically*” (CCC 3).

6.1.15 HSE Perspective on Inspectorate Qualifications

The HSE was aware of criticisms relating to inspectorate qualifications. Consistent with policy makers, they agreed that when the Childcare (Pre-School Services) Regulations, 1996 were coming on stream that the “*natural home for them was with the HSE*” (HSE 1). As a result, the role of inspectorate was given to “*PHNs around the country*” (ibid). This stance

was justified as it takes “*seven years to become a PHN*”. Moreover, “*an inspectorate is a senior post*”. PHNs therefore, have the “*maturity of understanding the seriousness of the situation that children are in*” (ibid).

There was one dissenting HSE voice, who stated that

It was easy for the HSE to go “what’s this pre-school inspection role? Sure the nurses can do that. It’s all about babies and children”, that would have been the attitude and then they face challenges and their answer to the challenge is “well we do child development” but they do child development for mothers and children at home (HSE 4).

Clearly pointing to inappropriate inspectorate qualifications, HSE 4 stated that understanding of child development at PHN level is “*utterly different from group care*” and takes no account of how to “*support children’s learning and development in a group situation*”. As a result, PHNs “*don’t understand*” what they are looking at when they undertake inspections.

There were differing opinions on the ability of the inspectorate to inspect Article 5. These opinions are intertwined with inspectorate qualifications. An inherently didactic approach was evident. HSE 1 explained that when the 1996 regulations were introduced, “*we got on fine – we were able to measure rooms...I could do any part of it...I became an expert, the same will happen with Article 5*”.

However, HSE 4 claimed that “*Article 5 is a real challenge for the teams particularly the PHNs, they can’t do it*”. Indeed, findings indicate that the pre-school inspectors interviewed were confused about the meaning of early education. HSE 2 for instance “*found it extraordinary that learning was put in*”. She explained that the HSE is not an “*educational establishment...you cannot expect us to be looking at people with those eyes. We need education to come in with us*” (ibid). Both HSE 2 and 3 stated that they would like to see “*education removed from the regulations*”.

6.1.16 Driving Standards Down

There were concerns that “*providers don’t realise that the pre-school regulations are only minimum quality requirements*” (NVCC 4). As such, fears were expressed that the regulations do little to further the quest for quality within the sector. Daily practice is “*all about complying with the regulations*” (NVCC 2). Accordingly, the sector is “*more concerned with looking at what has to be done as opposed to what could be done*” (NVCC 3).

Highlighting the “*potential*” of *Síolta* and *Aistear* to improve quality and raise standards, support agencies questioned the capacity of the sector to engage with these initiatives. Currently, the sector was “*struggling to comply with the regulations. They simply don’t have the capacity to even think about those other policies that are so important for their service*” (NVCC 4). While the overarching objective is to improve quality, the regulations may in fact “*drive standards down*” (ibid).

Support agency concerns were associated with the “*top down heavy handedness of the HSE*” (NVCC 2). Unlike the Braithwaite *et al* (2007) strengths based model discussed in chapter 3, the HSE instils fear rather than building capacity. In turn, the sector attempts to achieve minimum standards as set out in the regulations rather than seeking to “*maximise quality by pulling standards up through a ceiling*” (Braithwaite *et al*, 2007: 318). Consequently, “*practice on the ground is poor*” (NVCC 3). Interviewees were disappointed that “*not enough thought at all is being given to the reality on the ground*” (NVCC 4).

6.1.17 Double Standards

Although there were misgivings about the childcare regulations, they nonetheless, establish a standard for the pre-school sector. There was considerable disquiet at a perceived “*total lack of regulations in primary schools*” (PB- PST 7).

I get so crosshere it’s put their lunch into the fridge, use paper towels, use antibacterial soap...have you enough space per child, one adult to every ten children, the list is endless. What happens in primary school just cracks me up. If you’re lucky its twenty children in the class, that’s seen as good...then there’s no hot water, cold is fine, one towel for twenty or thirty children and that isn’t even washed, there are no lobbies for the toilets....they don’t have to put their lunch into a fridge...I just can’t go on; I get so frustrated (ibid).

Without exception, interviewees felt that there were “*double standards*” (PBM 4) at play that were directly related to traditional views of care and education and had more to “*do with money than anything else*” (ibid). As noted by CB – PST 4, it would “*cost a fortune to bring the primary schools up to the standards that we have*”. There was also a more fundamental issue that was associated with societal attitudes towards the care and education sectors. PB – PST 7 stated that “*it’s the same old story...they’re being educated in school, so it’s seen as the real work. We’re only minding them and that has to be done in pristine conditions*”.

These issues are embedded in professional discourse which is discussed in detail in section 5. Managers and staff claimed that because they were not unionised, they were an “*easy target*”. By contrast, as highlighted in Chapter 3, the primary school sector is “*protected by the Department of Education and Science and the INTO*” (CBM 3). Teachers “*operate behind*

closed doors, nobody can question their standards....do standards go out the door when formal education begins? (CBM 3).

6.1.18 Building Bridges

The HSE was anxious to “*overcome some of the antagonism*” (HSE 4) towards them within the sector. Again, there were mixed opinions. Two interviewees claimed to have a “*very positive relationship with practitioners on the ground*” (HSE 2) that predates the 1996 regulations. Equally, the inspectorate had been “*made a bit the bogey men and that hasn’t helped trying to do this job*” (HSE 4). Within a parallel discourse, HSE 4 suggested that the inspectorate had fuelled the negativity “*we haven’t helped because we probably fit the picture that we’re creating. The standard of the inspection is pretty appalling in terms of how they do their business. So that whole sting goes on of providers versus the inspectorate*”.

Consistent with previous commentary relating to inspectorate qualifications, HSE 4 stated that there was no focussed discussion on the role and qualifications of the inspectorate at national level. Commenting on the emerging focus on human resources, training and qualification levels across the sector generally, she stated that “*we should also be talking about human resources in the inspectorate....*” There is a need to “*get people matched with the right training and experience for the right job...we’ve got quite a lot of mismatch going on*” (ibid) . Accordingly, the HSE should be more “*self-reflective and critical of themselves because they are in a powerful position*”. Although they provide feedback on service provision, they “*don’t have anybody looking at [them] to see if [their] service is any good or not*” (ibid). This is especially pertinent in relation to Article 5 where HSE 4 claimed that the key difficulty was that the inspectorate was “*looking at learning and development but they just don’t get it*”.

It was acknowledged that the inspectorate role was not solely the remit of PHNs. Specifically, in relation to Article 5, “*a different lens is required for the education side*” (HSE 4). The inclusion of ECCE graduates or experienced practitioners on the team would enable the inspectorate to “*be more credible and supportive to providers who are asking where they go next and how they can improve*” (ibid). In order to support the sector to enhance and implement best practice, the inspectorate needs to understand what it is they are talking about.

The concept of a trans-disciplinary inspection team is ideological. Irrespective of platitudes to the contrary, there was resistance among HSE interviewees. HSE 1 who had “*experience of working with various disciplines*” explained how “*you get problems...It depends on what kind of school you’re coming from*”. HSE 3 claimed that the “*whole team thing is really difficult and the more people you have on it the more difficult it gets and the harder it gets for the poor provider at the end of the day if we’re not agreeing on things*”. Elaborating on this theme, interviewees cited differences in approaches between PHNs and Environmental Health Officers who jointly inspect settings in the majority of HSE regions. In this respect, it was suggested that there were “*constant tensions there...*” Any attempt to introduce additional expertise would need “*very careful consideration*” (HSE 3).

6.1.19 Power and Authority versus Support

The HSE would like to see “*regulatory standards as part of daily practice*” (HSE 4). Thus, the “*inspection should not be seen as a heavy handed kind of thing...it would be very much about bringing people along*” (Ibid). At the same time, all four HSE interviewees were unequivocal that “*the regulations are the law, are the law are the law*” (Ibid). They were critical of a perceived government approach that wants legislation while simultaneously sending a “*political message to the HSE - don’t go too hard on [ECCE providers] we don’t want them to close*” (HSE 4). Regardless of ambiguity at macro level, the HSE took their responsibilities seriously, and were willing to “*take whatever measures necessary including court to make sure that the sector is compliant....it doesn’t bother us*” (ibid.). Ultimately, “*you should be comfortable with your authority*” (ibid).

Mirroring previous concerns regarding misinterpretation of the regulations, the HSE acknowledged that this was the case. HSE 4 stressed that the only people who can interpret the regulations are the HSE... *it’s our job to do that*”. Accordingly, they adopt a hard line attitude. The sector can “*disagree with it if they want to...that’s fine, you can discuss it with us or if we have to we’ll go to court*” (HSE 2). According to HSE 4, while the regulations are “*legal*”, they are “*actually a child centred thing, it’s for children. Providers are legally obliged to comply and our job is to make sure that it happens*”. While brandishing their statutory power, the HSE purported a wish to have a “*positive relationship*” with the sector and to “*support providers*” (HSE 4).

6.1.20 Conclusion

This section provides insight into a considerable gap between policy and practice that seriously undermines practice in the micro environments of pre-school and infant classrooms. From an ecological perspective, a national vision for ECCE has been articulated at macro level. Alongside this vision, policy makers acknowledge that the pre – school sector is beset by low salaries, poor qualification levels, lack of recognition, poor confidence and self-esteem and diverse standards of provision. The matter is compounded by a belief at micro level, that there is no national vision for ECCE.

Indeed, notwithstanding that *Síolta* and *Aistear* traverse infant classes; there was limited awareness of these frameworks within the primary school sector. While those in the pre-schools sector were aware of these initiatives, their primary consideration was the Childcare (pre- school services) Regulations, 2006. Thus, there were concerns that rather than supporting the sector to reach optimal quality, the regulations may perpetuate mediocre practice.

There is evidence of an adversarial relationship between the pre-school sector and the HSE. It is compounded by the manner in which the Childcare regulations are implemented as well as the totally inadequate qualifications of the pre-school inspectorate. This study reveals that a didactic approach to inspection has created an unhealthy dissonance between the HSE and the pre-school sector.

Regardless of their lack of training or understanding of early childhood methodology, which compromises their ability to inspect Article 5 of the Childcare (pre-school services) Regulations, 2006, the HSE inspectors are “functional authorised officers of the HSE” who are tasked with ensuring that the pre-school sector comply with the regulations. This involves going to court. In this construct, the HSE use their statutory authority to enforce aspects of the childcare regulations that they themselves do not comprehend. Given that the inspectorate is the ultimate guardian of quality within the pre-school sector, it is inconceivable that the government unquestionably accepts this level of ineptitude and dysfunction from those tasked with ensuring that the sector complies with basic minimum requirements.

This section also indicates that much less is expected of infant teachers in terms of embracing change. This is embodied in recognition at macro level that both *Síolta* and *Aistear* require alternative methodologies. Therefore, teachers cannot be expected to engage with these

frameworks. No such allowance is made for those working in the pre-school sector, many of whom have limited training. Contrary to the positive principles embedded in policy, diverse approaches to standards within pre-school and primary school perpetuate the polarity of care and education.

Section 2 Aspects of Quality ECCE

6.2.1 Introduction

This section presents findings with regard to the factors that research participants considered essential in the provision of quality ECCE. Findings are based upon analysis of interviews with infant teachers (10), ECCE managers (10), pre-school teachers (16), B.A ECCE graduates (10), B. Ed graduates (10), NVCCs (4), CCCs (10), and the HSE (4). Among a broad range of factors, the following were identified as the core aspects of quality:

- 1 The learning environment
- 2 A curriculum or programme
- 3 Qualified staff
- 4 Interactions between staff and children
- 5 Partnership with parents

Tables 16 through to 23 present an overview of the aspects of quality from participant perspectives in their entirety.

This section focuses specifically on the learning environment and the construct of parental involvement in children's care and education.

6.2.2 Overview of aspects of quality identified by stakeholders

Table 16 City and County Childcare Committee perspective

	Environment	Curriculum/ programme	Qualified staff	Interactions Between staff & children	Partnership with parents	Reflective practice	Good employment practice	Partnership with the DES
1	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	
2	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	
3	√	√	√	√	√	√		
4	√	√	√	√	√			
5	√	√	√	√	√		√	
6	√	√	√	√	√	√		√
7	√	√	√	√	√	√		
8	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	
9	√	√	√	√	√			
10	√	√	√	√	√	√		

Table 17 National Voluntary Childcare Collaborative perspective

	Environment	Curriculum/ programme	Qualified staff	Interactions Between staff & children	Partnership with parents	Reflective practice	Partnership with the DES	Working with communities
1	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
2	√	√	√	√	√	√		√
3	√	√	√	√	√	√		
4	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	

Table 18 HSE perspective

	Good employment practice	Environment	Good staff(not necessarily qualified)	Adult/ Child interaction	Curriculum /programme	Choice for children	Partnership with parents	Collaboration with HSE
1	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
2	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
3	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
4	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√

Table 19 Community sector: ECCE manager perspective

	Environment	Approaches to working with children	Good staff(not necessarily qualified)	Interactions Between staff & children	Partnership with parents	Good employment practice	Working with communities	Team work
1	√	√	√	√		√		√
2	√	√	√	√				√
3	√	√	√	√	√		√	√
4	√	√	√	√	√	√		√
5	√	√	√	√				√

Table 20 Private sector: ECCE manager perspective

	Environment	Approaches to working with children	Good staff(not necessarily qualified)	Interactions Between staff & children	Partnership with parents	Good employment practice	Working with Communities	Team work	Compliance with pre-school regulations
1	√	√	√	√	√	√		√	√
2	√	√	√	√	√				√
3	√	√	√	√			√		√
4	√	√	√	√					√
5	√	√	√	√					√

Table 21 Community Sector: pre-school teacher perspective

	Safe Environment	Activities	Qualified staff	Interactions Between staff & children	Partnership with parents	Reflective practice	Team work	Structure	Choice for children
1	√	√	√	√	√		√		
2	√	√	√	√	√	√			√
3	√	√	√	√	√			√	
4	√	√	√	√	√				
5	√	√	√	√	√		√		
6	√	√	√	√	√				
7	√	√	√	√	√			√	

Table 22 Private sector: pre-school teacher perspective

	Safe Environment	Activities	Qualified staff	Interaction Between staff & children	Partnership with parents	Reflective practice	Interaction with colleagues	Boundaries	Adult/parent interaction	Respect for children and parents
1	√	√	√	√	√		√		√	√
2	√	√	√	√	√					
3	√	√	√	√	√			√		
4	√	√	√	√	√	√			√	
5	√	√	√	√	√			√		
6	√	√	√	√	√				√	
7	√	√	√	√	√					
8	√	√	√	√	√			√	√	
9	√	√	√	√	√					

Table 23 Primary school sector: Infant teacher perspectives

	Environment	Teaching methodologies	Adult/ Child interaction	Interaction with colleagues	Planning	Structure	Emotional safety	Partnership with parents	Reflective practice
1	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
2	√	√	√		√		√	√	
3	√	√	√		√	√		√	
4	√	√	√		√		√	√	
5	√	√	√		√			√	
6	√	√	√		√	√	√	√	
7	√	√	√		√	√	√	√	
8	√	√	√		√	√		√	
9	√	√	√		√	√		√	
10	√	√	√		√			√	

As these tables demonstrate, while staff was identified across the sector as a core aspect of quality, differing opinions abounded in relation to necessity for staff qualifications. This is symptomatic of a broader discourse regarding the professionalism of the pre-school sector. In this respect, the CCCs, NVCCs and community and private pre-school teachers identified “*qualified staff*” as essential. Conversely, the remaining stakeholders (HSE, community and private ECCE managers) cited the need for “*good staff*” who need not “*necessarily be qualified*”.

The need for curriculum/activities was signified by the CCCs, NVCC, the HSE and private pre-school teachers. Curriculum was not identified as a core aspect of quality by either community or private ECCE managers or community pre-school teachers. Given their role in implementing the primary school curriculum (1999), it is not surprising that infant teachers did not mention curriculum but focussed instead on the need for planning and structure. Community pre-school teachers also identified structure as an aspect of quality, while private pre-school teachers cited the need for boundaries within the learning environment.

Indicative of their awareness of the focus on health and safety by the pre-school inspectorate, both private and community pre-school teachers prioritised “*safe environments*” for children, while private ECCE managers highlighted the need to comply with the Childcare regulations. On the other hand, infant teachers were more concerned with “*emotional safety*” in the context of creating a positive learning environment.

The importance of “*team work*” was identified by six ECCE managers (5 community, 1 private) and two community pre-school teachers. Conversely, only one infant teacher cited the need for “*interaction with colleagues*”.

Infant teachers explicated the importance of “*teaching methodologies*”, whereas, community and private ECCE managers identified the importance of “*approaches to working with children*”. Thus, although diverse terminologies were used within both sectors, each gave due consideration to how they approached their work with children.

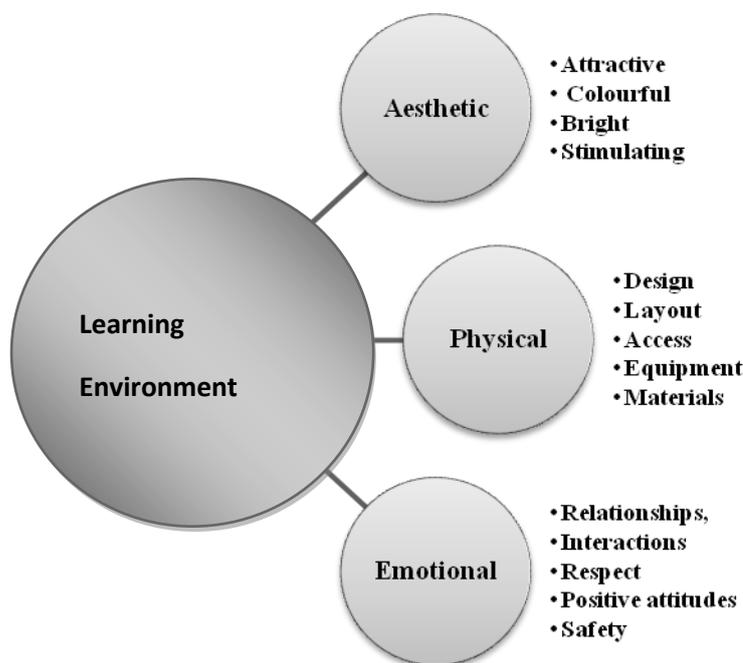
6.2.3 The Learning Environment: Physical Dimension

Consistent with research (Bosch, 2006, Dudek, 2003, Gandini, 1998, Spodek *et al*, 1991), the learning environment was identified as critical to children’s learning and development within pre-school and infant contexts. It was perceived along three dimensions: physical, aesthetic and emotional. PBM 4 described it as an “*important tool*” that “*provides the stimulus*” for

children’s early learning experiences. If the environment “*is right in all its elements, children will be happy to learn*” (ibid). Signifying the importance of children’s agency, CCC 3 claimed that the learning environment should be “*directed for children not for the adults*”.

Figure 6.2.9, based upon analysis of interviews with infant teachers (10), ECCE managers (10), pre-school teachers (16), B. Ed students (10), B.A EECE students (10) and B.A ECCE graduates (10), provides an overview of the critical dimensions of the learning environment from these various perspectives.

Figure 22 Critical dimensions of the learning environment



The dimensions outlined are consistent with Bosch (2006) who refers to the concept of classroom organisation, at the centre of which is the classroom environment encompassing physical aspects such as lighting and décor and the classroom operation; rules, routines, consequences and incentives imposed by the teacher. Pre-school and infant teachers had children’s best interests at heart. This was reflected in how they thought about and organised the learning environment.

The availability of “*age and stage appropriate*” equipment and materials was paramount in the pre-school sector (CB – PST 3). Piagetian influence was evident in how the environment was equipped. Accordingly, pre-school teachers believed that children need “*toys and equipment that are age and stage appropriate and child centred*” (PB - PST 4). Congruent

with Piagetian theory, pre-school teachers stated that it was through interaction with these materials that children learn. This belief is based upon taken for granted truths about child development (James *et al*, 1997) namely that children pass through universal stages of development and that learning results from interaction with age appropriate materials.

In counter point, infant teachers situated children's development primarily within the cognitive domain. Indeed when asked what kinds of resources help children to learn, all ten teachers immediately cited and linked concrete materials such as "*blocks, lolly-pop sticks, cubes*" to supporting mathematical competency. Likewise, "*books*", "*flash cards*", and "*word games*" were associated with supporting literacy (see appendix H).

In common with Midbjer *et al* (2007), infant teachers primarily perceived the environment in terms of how they could use the space. Their primary focus was on creating an orderly, well managed environment directed towards encouraging children to learn. Therefore, even though pre- school and infant teachers highlighted the need for "*circulation space*" within the environment, there was a considerable difference in rationale between both sectors. JIT 1 typified teacher responses describing how in her classroom, circulation space enabled her to "*go around to each child to make sure that they're engaged in the task which they are supposed to be engaged in, to understand, to see what their thinking is when they're completing a task*". Moreover, it enabled a child with "*cerebral palsy to move about freely... to come up to the board without causing disruption to the other children*" (ibid). Specifically in relation to ECCE, Spodek *et al* (1991) explicate the need for good organisational and management skills. Within the primary school context, the necessity for order within the learning environment was paramount, "*everything should have a place and everything should be in its place*" (SIT 2).

As discussed in Chapter 4, the arrangement of the physical space conveys a message about the relationship between the teaching and learning, the image of the child held by the teacher, and expectations for behaviour and learning (Gandini, 1998, Simco, 1996, Rinaldi, 1998). B.A (ECCE) graduates were emphatic about the importance of planning the physical environment..."*a well planned physical environment leads to a great flow in the day*" (Focus Group (FG 1) B.A ECCE graduate (ECCE – G)). While the environment took time and energy to plan, it was "*very worthwhile*". Planning was dependent upon knowledge of child development, without which you "*have little hope of planning the environment for the children in your care*" (ibid). Right across the sector, there was agreement that an

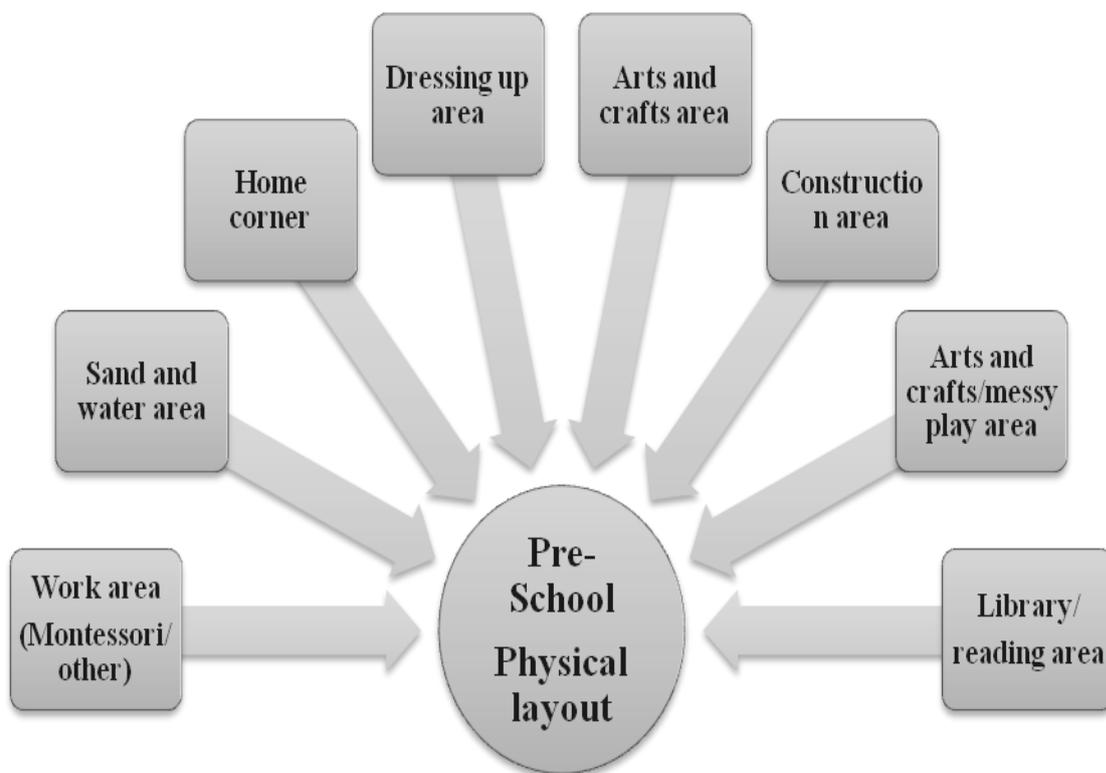
understanding of child development was the “key to working with young children” (CCC 2). This topic is analysed in detail later in this Chapter (section 4).

Analysis of interviews coupled with observations shows that the learning environment followed a specific layout within both contexts (Figures 23 and 24). In describing the physical layout of the learning environment, PB – PST 5, explained how the layout and materials within the environment supported children’s learning

We would have the home corner, with a little bed that they play in, a little kitchen and cups and saucers...We have the sand and water which is very important for language and cognitive....we have arts and crafts; dress up and we also have our library area...we have our work area which is for learning, our jigsaws, and educational things in that area. We have a big construction area where they can build and hammer and bang.

This distinctive layout was seen to provide children with the “space to actually move around and to have the materials accessible” (ibid).

Figure 23 Physical layout of pre-school environment

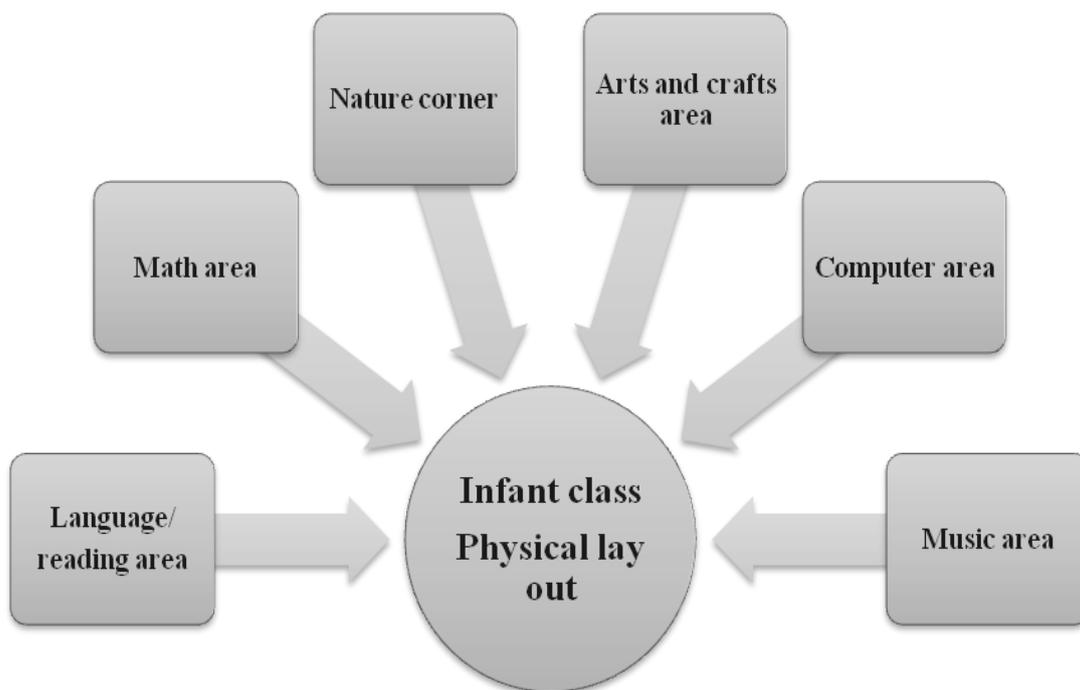


According to Midbjer *et al* (2007), teachers primarily perceive the environment in terms of how they can use the space. Thus, JIT 1 describes the learning environment in her classroom

We have a workspace to your left, and behind it is the reading corner and on the wall in the same place are Jolly Phonics sounds and the alphabet. All the language materials that we're using and all the books are on the far side of the book case. Then on the side that you can see from here are the workbooks and materials that we need for work like pencils and crayons. They stay in the same place the whole time so they know where to put it and where to get it from. We have the computer on the other side of the board. We have another art press for art material ...it's a press that I would be using. On top we have our DVD player and our CD player kind of an ICT music corner if you like. We have our reading shelf over there and then there is my art corner, nature corner, language area, and the math area.

Consequently, tables and chairs, equipment, materials and space was organised sequentially to ensure that children focus on the teacher and remain “*on task*”. Such an approach is predominantly associated with adult determined agendas and pre-academic work that is removed from children’s natural interests and innate capacity to learn (Waldfogel *et al*, 1999).

Figure 24 Physical layout of infant classroom



Two points are worthy of note. Firstly, due to space restrictions, these areas may not be represented by distinct physical spaces within the classroom; provision is however made for access to these “subject areas”. Secondly, unlike pre-school teachers, infant teachers did not refer to sand/water areas, home corner, construction area, dressing up or play area.

Regardless, children were observed playing in certain classroom contexts. This was most

prevalent in the DEIS band 1 school where it was customary for children to have thirty minutes of free play each morning before “lessons” began. As noted by the teacher “they need to get it out of their system, it’s the stage they’re at, it’s easier for them to work if they get a little bit of play time” (JIT 5). Other than this particular school, play was commonly used as a “*treat*” or a “*reward*” for children on completion of a task, good behaviour, and for paying attention during class in the other participating schools.

Infant teachers stressed the importance of structure and routine within the classroom. Thus, children were not “*allowed to just wander around and get things but they know that if we are reading or sorting the books that they go and get them*” (SIT 3). It was essential that children “*get into a routine and they have to know that there are certain things they can do at certain times*”. Perceived as a core aspect of the primary school system, teachers stated that “ultimately, there are rules, structures and boundaries” that determine how children behave within the classroom. It was “*vital*”, that children “*develop good habits, otherwise, it can cause chaos*” (JIT 3).

6.2.4 Aesthetic Environment

The importance of the aesthetic environment was stressed in Chapter 4. Researchers (Gandini, 1998, Kopacz, 2003, Mahnke *et al*, 1993, Olds, 2001, Pressley *et al*, 2001), emphasise the significance of aesthetics; notably, the importance of light and colour. Pre-school and infant teachers were keenly aware of the impact of a bright, colourful environment on children’s learning.

There was consensus on the need for the learning environment to be “*aesthetically pleasing*”. This was about “*making the room attractive*” and “*inviting*” through the use of “*colour*”, “*light*”, and “*displays*”. It was recognised that pre-school children spend long periods of time in settings, some of whom “*are with us from half past seven in the morning to five or six in the evening*” (CBM 5). Pre-school teachers similarly “*spend nine or ten hours there too*”. Therefore, the environment should be “*nice, bright and colourful*”. In the context of the pre-school sector, there was a belief that aesthetics were equally important for children and teachers.

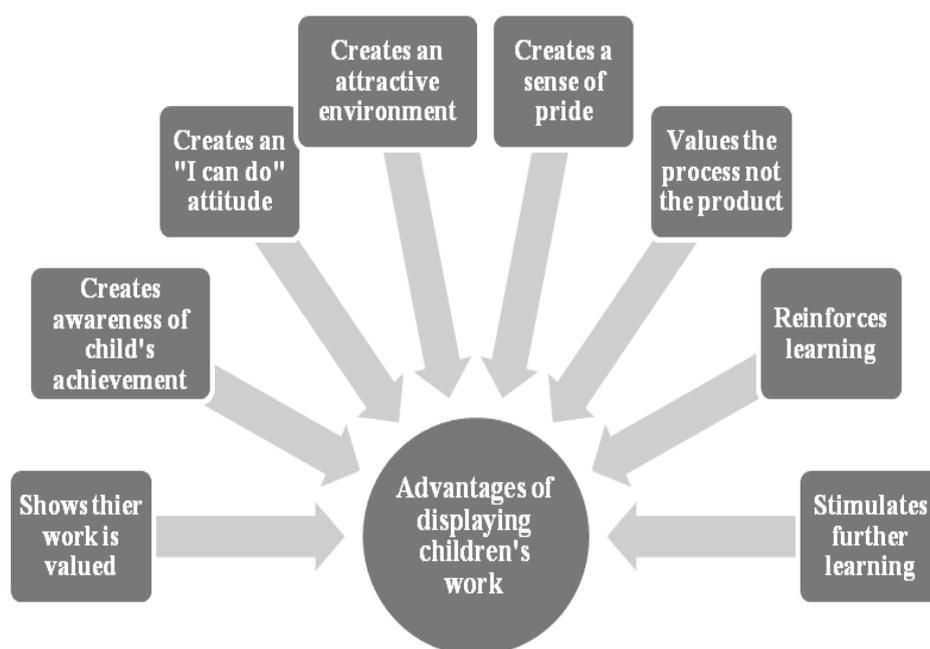
Highlighting the importance of light in the classroom, SIT 4 used the analogy of waking up on a bright morning, where you were instantly “*in a different humour and children must be like that as well. Brightness and light are very important*”. As with Gandini (1998), Rinaldi

(2006), SIT 4 explained how “*light streaming*” into the room changes the “*energy for everyone*” adults and children. In common with Kopacz, (2003) and Olds, (2001) who hold that that dull classrooms offer limited stimulation and are boring for children, CBM 5 stated that if the environment is “*dull and drab and there’s no atmosphere*” neither children nor staff will be happy.

Within both contexts, layers of cultural influence were found in the aesthetics; displays of children’s work and documentation of their learning (Rinaldi, 2006). The importance of “*presenting an attractive classroom*” was emphasised (JIT 2). In common with Kyriacou, (1991), JIT 5 stated that the appearance of the classroom sends a positive message to children that “*this is a nice place to be*”, while also portraying a message to parents and others that “*you care for the children and care for the environment. It shows respect*”.

There was consensus that the colour of the walls was not as important as what was on them. JIT 3 could not “*stress enough how important it is to have nice things on the walls*”. She suggested that teachers were trying to compete with a multiplicity of attractions outside the school domain including computer games and cartoons that were “*so colourful and so dynamic...they grab their attention; you need to match that in a way in the classroom*”. Thus, the many advantages of displaying children’s work were shared equally by pre-school and infant teachers as portrayed in Figure 6.9

Figure 25 Advantages of displaying children’s work



The environment should not remain “static”, rather the aesthetics should change as “new work is undertaken” or “they do different art and craft projects” or “learn something new and draw a picture or write about it”. JIT 4 and PBM 1 referred to children’s diverse learning styles. Resonant of Rinaldi (2006) who defines the physical space as a language that speaks, JIT 4 stated that “we must recognise that some children are very visual, colourful displays speak to them in their language”. In such an environment “children are happy and they love coming in”.

However, JIT 4, stressed the importance of ensuring that any work displayed

- a) Was actually the child’s “own work and isn’t altered by the teacher to make it perfect”
- b) Did not represent the “best examples of what the teacher thinks are wonderful examples of children’s work”

In relation to the former, there was criticism on two fronts; teacher’s who alter the child’s work by “tidying it up afterwards or drawing features on a face that the child couldn’t possibly have drawn” or finding “twenty perfect clowns or cats....and they’re all the same” (BA. ECCE (G) 10). JIT 3 was severely critical of such an approach which was disrespectful and served to undermine the child’s self-esteem: “it’s about perfection, about the productit destroys the child’s innovation and creativity, it makes children competitive, it makes them feel unworthy....”

Whereas the pre - school sector claimed to display every piece of work “[putting] it up on the wall for effort really rather than the end product” (PB – PST 3), observations showed a dependence on the use of templates for art work as well as considerable adult input during activities. As a result, the walls and children’s portfolios represented near perfect end products where the adult’s hand was clearly evident.

B.A (ECCE) graduates resisted the notion of sameness. According to BA.ECCE (G) 7, “colours; huge amounts of them should be given to children as they need and want them”. She was critical of what she had observed in pre-school settings, where, children “are given purple or given red, because the adults say so” (ibid). The result is a “whole load of purple pictures”. Children should be “given an opportunity to explore how the colours mix. If the picture comes out brown; then that’s a compliment to the pedagogy of the adult” (ibid).

Moreover, pre-school teachers associated displays of children's work with their innate curiosity and creativity. Hence, the walls were seen as "*attractive, with inviting things that [children] want to touch, investigate and admire*". Conversely, teachers proffered an alternative purpose

When the children are finished their work early they can look around; look at the word wall and practice their words and practice their reading and they enjoy it then as well. They can do all these different things just by being aware of what is on the walls (SIT 3).

This perspective was rooted in academia where children continued to hone academic skills by looking at and reinforcing their learning through wall displays.

Consistent with (Dudek, 2000, Moyles, 1992, Pointon *et al*, 2001), findings indicate that infant teachers tended to focus upon the practical use of space, to the extent that wall displays and presentations of children's work were directly linked to educational purposes. In this respect, Neuman *et al* (2000) decry the practice of cluttering the environment with labels, signs and print just for print's sake. In common with Moss *et al* (2002) and Olds (2001) pre-school teachers perceived the walls as attractive, with inviting things for children to touch, investigate and admire. Thus, the learning environment appealed to children's innate curiosity and creativity.

6.2.5 Emotional Environment

Researchers (Barnett, 1995, Reynolds *et al*, 1999, 2001, Shonkoff *et al*, 2000a, 2000b) agree that it is the quality of the daily interactions between teachers and children that underpins the effects of ECCE on children's development. There was consensus across both sectors that "if you don't have an emotionally safe place for children, you have nothing" (CB – PST 6). As commented by NVCC 3 "if the staff are poor, there is no quality.

BA.ECCE (G) 7 pointed to the central role of the adult explaining how in the past she had experienced

[an environment] that was broken down and not very rich in the modern sense of equipment and so on, but the adult made up for it all, it didn't matter because whatever happened between the people was so nice, so special that the leaking roof or whatever it was didn't make an impact.

Regardless of context, right across the sector, there was consensus that "*if you don't have happy children, they're not going to learn and that all depends on the teacher*" (JIT 1).

Against this backdrop, CBM 5, stated that it is "all to do with staff...you can go into a place

and straight away you can get an uneasy or a bad atmosphere. All you want is happy chattering children playing and happy. That for me is quality”.

The most critical component of the emotional environment was the manner in which the adult relates to children. 75% of ECCE managers and staff stated that a positive atmosphere “*filters down*” affecting children and adults alike. Children pick up on any negativity; therefore “*you put your best face on no matter what’s happening*” (PB – PST 4).

Analysis of pre-school (16) and infant teacher (10) interviews as well as Focus group discussions (6) with B.A (ECCE) graduates, infant teachers, and FETAC Level 5 and Level 6 childcare students identified a range of characteristics associated with the emotional environment that are depicted in table 6.2.13. On a continuum, these range from gentle adults who genuinely like children, to mutual respect between pre-school/infant teachers and children.

Table 24 Characteristics of the emotional environment

Characteristic	Primary sector	Pre- school
Gentle adults who genuinely like children	√	√
Happy, relaxed children and adults	√	√
Team work	√	
Motivated adults	√	√
Quality interactions between adults and children	√	√
Choice and flexibility for children		√
Patient adults	√	√
Adults who listen to children	√	√
Adults and children sitting and learning together	√	
Adults who give time to children that need extra time	√	√
Clear boundaries	√	√
Mutual respect		√

Notwithstanding the philosophy of the primary school curriculum (DES, 199b) that accords equal importance to what the child learns and to the process by which s/he learns; teachers did not cite the need for choice and flexibility for children.

In the pre - school sector, co-operation between co-workers was considered important...“*everyone should be singing from the same hymn sheet*” (PB – PST 7). The relationship between co-workers as well as co-workers and children should be positive and consistent. In the absence of consistency, relationships collapsed resulting in negativity and upset. Children cannot “*do well in that type of an environment*” (ibid).

Being positive does not mean that children “*run riot*”. Consistent with infant teachers, pre-school teachers emphasised the need for “*some boundaries otherwise [children] don’t learn*”. Again, aligning their perspective to Piagetian theory, CB – PST 3 stated that, “*there will be boundaries for [children] in the classroom... it has to be age appropriate but there has to be some boundaries in order to prepare them for the next step*”.

Bosch (2006), Miller and Pedro (2006), propose that respect is a critical variable in education both in terms of each child and the teaching and learning that takes place in the classroom. In relation to boundaries, there was agreement that reciprocity was essential; “*the kids have respect for me and I have a lot of respect for them; it’s a balance, you just want them to have that little bit of respect*” (CBM 3). Children understand and respect boundaries from a young age; “*they know what they can and can’t do*” (ibid). In turn, this enhances positivity within the learning environment. According to Nutbrown (1998) respect is a complex concept that is associated with being clear honest and consistent. Furthermore, Wessler (2003) holds that, in a respectful environment children feel physically and emotionally safe and valued for who they are. Fundamentally, a child who is not secure cannot learn and a child who is not cognitively stimulated is not being given appropriate care (Bertram and Paschal, 2002a, Wessler, 2003, Rushton and Larkin, 2001).

As discussed in section 1, there is a mismatch in the pre-school sector in terms of the ideologies aspired to and the capacity of pre-school teachers to embed those ideologies in practice. This point is further portrayed by NVCC 4

Adults must recognise that children can contribute and shape the environment. Small children can say that I like to go outside and dig for worms and if they are listened to maybe the whole nature of the place might change; maybe the doors get opened to the outside and children are let outside and adults make it their business to supervise them...I find an awful mismatch between talking the talk and walking the walk.

The contradiction between ideology and practice within both pre-school and infant contexts was considerable.

There is an emerging consensus on the link between staff training, qualifications, and ongoing professional development in the provision of quality ECCE (Dalli 2008, Hayes 2007, Moyles *et al* 2002; Moloney, 2010b, OECD 2001, 2006, Saracho and Spodek 2003, Vandell 2004). Yet, ECCE managers claimed that while “*qualifications are important, [they are not] the be all and end all*” (CBM 5). With the exception of two managers, who expressed a preference for qualified staff, the other eight were more concerned with staff attributes, all of which were associated with caring including “*great communication and devotion to the children*”, “*patience; kindness; caring*”, “*hands- on with the children; and “experience*”.

Echoing manager perspectives, pre-school teachers felt that “*you’re either cut - out for child care or you’re not*” (PB – PST – 6). Even though working in ECCE was both “*mentally and physically demanding*” it was “*very rewarding*” (CB - PST 2. Mirroring sentiments articulated in section 1 regarding the low status of the ECCE sector, BA. ECCE (G) 7 stated that “*it requires a very special person... it cannot be an underpaid, untrained, confused, insecure adult who doesn’t know what she’s doing*”.

6.2.6 Infant Teacher Perspective

It must be acknowledged that teachers come from a background where, unlike the pre-school sector; they hold a third level teaching qualification. Notwithstanding this difference in qualifications, their aspirations for children were similar. Hence, their priority was to create a “*safe and a happy place for children*” which was dependent upon their relationship with the children. Although teachers claimed that children’s care was an aspect of practice, it was constrained by the predominance of the primary school curriculum, large class sizes and disproportionate teacher/child ratios.

While cognisant of the limitations within which they work, teachers endeavoured to establish and maintain positive relationships with children. In common with Knopf and Swick (2007), JIT 5 stated that positive relationships with children were underpinned by “*getting to know the children; having a knowledge of where they are coming from home wise*”.

Consistent with pre-school perspectives on emerging social issues within middle class families discussed in section 1, infant teachers referred to similar issues in relation to primary school children. Thus, while the emotional environment was particularly stressed by teachers

within DEIS schools, it was also emphasized by teachers working within mainstream schools. Indeed, as highlighted in Chapter 3, Whelan and Maitre (2008) describe disadvantage as both individualised and transitory. It is not restricted to designated areas or socio economic classification. Likewise, Dunne *et al* (2007:18) suggest that normal expenses associated with contemporary living including mortgage and rent costs significantly impact on the disposable income and circumstances of supposedly well-off families. Thus, in the words of JIT 5, “*you can’t assume because a child comes from such and such a housing estate or whatever that they’re not disadvantaged...you’d be surprised the problems children present with*”. Teachers therefore, “*try to accept them for who they are and try not to expect them to be other than who they are*” (ibid).

Teachers were cognisant of children’s vulnerability specifically in relation to their age and dependency. As with the pre-school sector, they stressed the importance of trust, that children understood that “*you’re for them, that they’re not afraid, not wondering are you out to get them, and that you won’t ridicule them*” (JIT 1). According to JIT 4, in the absence of trust; the “*fundamentals of the relationship are missing*”. Overall, the emotional environment helped to establish a “*good learning environment, where children tend to learn more and they tend to be happier and to engage in tasks and listen*” (ibid). The opposite was also true, “*if you’re always cross with them and telling them they have to do this and they have to do that, learning would seem like a chore*” (JIT 2).

Of the ten teachers interviewed, eight stressed that they were talking about an ideal world, and that their attitudes would not be shared by all teachers. They spoke of the immense influence that teachers have on children saying that “*some teachers don’t seem to understand the power that we have over children, if we say a certain thing to them in a certain way repeatedly that we can actually harm them, harm their development*” (FG 3 JIT). Concurring with B A. ECCE (G) 7), teachers agreed that “*it takes a special type of person to teach infants*” (JIT 4). In this respect, there was consensus that they have considerable influence on children’s learning trajectory and that it should not be “*taken for granted*”.

6.2.7 Partnership with Parents

A large corpus of literature highlights the critical importance of working in partnership with parents (Arnold *et al*, 2007, Bronfenbrenner, 1979, Carlisle *et al*, 2005, Eldridge, 2001, Fabian *et al*, 2007, Lubeck, 1994). It was widely acknowledged by pre-school and infant teachers that parents are the “*the first teachers of their children*” (PB – PST 5). They are the

other” *half of the child’s life*” in terms of care and education (ibid). Although there were similar approaches to working with and involving parents in both contexts, the level of parental involvement differed considerably between sectors (Table 6.2.10). The data presented was collated by analysing participant responses to interview questions about parental involvement in their child’s care and education in both domains.

Table 25 Overview of parental involvement

Pre – School sector	
Nature of involvement	Frequency
Information sharing	Daily during drop - off and collection Monthly or quarterly newsletters
Parent teacher meetings	Once annually
Other meetings	As necessary
Involvement in outings	Once annually
Volunteering in setting	Occasionally – community sector only
Information night	Once annually
Involvement on parent committee	Frequently – community sector only
Fund raising	As necessary – community sector only
Social event	Annually
Primary school sector	
Homework support	Daily with the exception of Friday
Information sharing	Infrequent on a need to know basis only A small minority of teachers try to meet parents daily
Parent teacher meetings	Once annually
Other meetings	As necessary
Information evening	Once annually

Commonly within the pre-school sector, there was an “*open door policy*” enabling parents to come and go as they pleased. Parents could “*walk into any room in the crèche, so they meet directly with the staff on a daily basis*” (PBM 1). Managers and staff “*chat*” to parents daily during drop off and collection. Such chats were central to “*building a relationship*” with parents and impact on the child’s experience in the setting (ibid).

It’s vital that they tell us how the child was that morning or during the night...is the child in good form or were they upset coming in, did something happen at home, we need to know this because it affects the child’s day with us so we need that information, it helps us understand (PBM 1).

Likewise, it was important for staff to “*know what children like and don’t like, what they’re interested in and the things that they’re good at*” (PB – PST 3). Equipped with this information, pre- school teachers can “*follow children’s interests and support their*

development” (ibid). Open, honest and transparent communication was seen as the key to successful partnership. The need for both parties to “*divulge*” information was essential.

Indeed, congruent with Teleki *et al* (2002), pre-school teachers agreed that knowledge of family expectations for and the level of satisfaction with the service provided them with valuable information that enabled them to make changes or provide explanations to create the most positive experience for the child. Thus, in the pre- school sector, partnership with parents resulted in mutual exchange of information, ideas and suggestions that enabled pre-school teachers to “*make suggestions...talk to [parents] about things and they don’t feel that we’re dictating it’s shared*” (CB – PST 4).

Nutbrown (1998) holds that effective ECCE is contingent on an attitude towards parents where teachers are “prepared to think about and articulate their own pedagogy” and to discuss it with parents and wider community (pg 132). Similarly, Athey (1990) notes, that the greatest benefit to teachers in working with parents is the urge to make their own pedagogy more conscious and explicit. Infant teachers sought to articulate their pedagogy (Athey, 1990, Nutbrown, 1998), citing the importance of “*explaining what you’re doing and why you’re doing it*” (JIT 1). However, communicating with parents was a “*bit hit and miss*” with two conflicting systems at play. On the one hand, teachers “*meet [parents] every day; they drop them into the class, they collect them from the class*” (JIT 5). On the other hand, children “*line up in the school yard, parents stay outside the gate, and then at collection, parents stand at the wall and the kids are sent out*” (JIT 3).

There were limited opportunities for exchanging information with parents. Teachers were dependent upon providing information and explanations about practice at “*a meeting with parents at the beginning of the school year*” (SIT 5). This approach prevented “*mixed messages*”, where the teacher used one approach and parents used an alternative. It was essential that parents and teachers were on the “*same page*”. It is difficult to see how a once – off parent/teacher meeting at the beginning of the school year is sufficient to ensure that teachers and parents are on the “*same page*”. Such an approach smacks of a tokenistic, tick – box approach to partnership.

Communication is the critical factor in relation to parent/teacher and family/school/ community partnerships (Swick, 2003, Wyse, 2002). In this regard, there was a marked contrast in communication styles and relationships between parents/pre-school teachers and

parent/and infant teachers. Exemplars 1 – 3 based upon observations of practice provide insight into the diverse interaction styles in both contexts. Few professional boundaries existed between parents and pre-school teachers. Observations of practice coupled with analysis of interviews, indicate that their relationship tended to be informal and characterised by friendly exchanges. Parents behaved more formally and cautiously in their interactions with teachers. Valsiner (2003) supports the view that parent-teacher relationships are inherently unequal. The challenge relates to how a particular version of inequality of positions comes to be transformed as the communicative process unfolds (ibid).

Exemplars 1 – 3 Nature of parental interaction in pre-school and infant contexts

Exemplar 1: Pre- School room	Exemplars 2 and 3 : Infant classroom
<p>Context: There are twelve children and two adults in the pre-school room of a large urban community based crèche. The adults and children have spent the morning making spiders and ghosts for Halloween.</p> <p>A mother arrives to collect her child from the crèche at 12.30pm. She knocks on the door, enters the room and walks directly to where her daughter is sitting. The child continues to draw “eyes” on her spider with a black marker.</p> <p>Addressing the adult, the mother says “<i>oh, she was telling me all about these last night. She couldn’t wait to get in here this morning</i>”. To the child she says “<i>did you do that? That’s brilliant</i>”.</p> <p>The adult tells the mother that “<i>they’re really easy to do...all you need is an egg carton, coloured pipe cleaners, eyes, glue and these little white fiber balls. Here I’ll give you a set to take home and ye can do it together</i>”. She picks up a selection of items and hands them to the mother who says “<i>you’re great, where do you get all your ideas, I need all these ideas for myself</i>”</p> <p>Adult “<i>I researched on the internet last night</i>” Mother “<i>Do you know what’s brilliant? Pre-school express. Check it out, it’s brilliant. Well, are you ready miss? Say bye to everybody.</i> It is now 12.33.20pm.</p>	<p>Context: There are twenty children and one teacher in an infant classroom in a large urban school. It is 10.00am. The children are doing Jolly Phonics.</p> <p>At 10.01am, there is a knock on the door and a man enters the classroom. He hands a book to the teacher. A girl gets up runs over to him and gives him a hug saying “<i>dad</i>”.</p> <p>As she returns to her seat the teacher says “<i>good girl</i>”. It is now 10.01.10am.</p> <p>Context: There are twenty nine children and one teacher in an infant classroom. It is 9.57am; the teacher opens the classroom door saying “<i>if you need to go the bathroom, line up here now please</i>”. Fifteen children line up and are allowed to leave the classroom to go to the bathroom.</p> <p>At 9.58am a mother arrives with her son. She smiles at the teacher who is standing at the top of the room waiting for the children to return from the bathroom. The mother tip-toes into the classroom. She sits the boy down, whispers to him and then leaves again tip-toeing out of the classroom.</p> <p>It is 9.58.30am.</p>

6.2.8 Difficulties in Working with Parents

Although pre-school and infant teachers were generally well disposed towards parents, they agreed that there was a “*small minority of parents who just don't seem to be interested in what you're doing with their child*” (JIT 3). It was claimed that “*you could be telling them anything and you know they're not listening*” (JIT 1). ECCE managers and staff spoke of parents “*being caught up in their own lives*” and felt that pre-school was seen as someplace “*convenient to put the child while they go to work*” (CBM 4). They spoke of being “*disheartened*” by parental attitudes saying that “*you put your heart and soul into caring for their child and they couldn't be bothered even listening*” (CB – PST 3).

Mirroring research (Heymann *et al*, 2000, Moons *et al*, 2004, Stanley *et al*, 2006, Weiss *et al*, 2003) this study confirms that parental involvement was compromised by their involvement in the labour market. As noted by JIT 3 “*parents don't have much time because of the amount of time they spend at work*”. This affected their involvement in their child's care and education in a number of ways, not least of which related to “*homework support*”. Teachers gave children “*word boxes*”, “*shared reading*” or “*worksheets*” to take home so that parents could be involved in their child's education. Such activities were “*never even taken out of the child's school bag*” (SIT 2). This issue crosses socio-economic environs, and, while it might be “*associated with disadvantaged children, it happens more and more in so called well off homes as well*” (ibid).

Teachers claimed that parental involvement in the labour market placed them in the unsatisfactory situation of having to communicate through an intermediary; a grandparent or a carer. Parents missed out when they were unable to personally collect their child from school.

If you ever want to say something; it might be something small, you don't want to worry the parent, you don't want to phone them up, you don't want to send them home with a note; you feel it has to be a big thing for that and yet it was just something that you wanted to talk to them about, just quickly, two seconds you get that chance but the parent that has to work and have a childminder come to collect their child, they do miss that opportunity (FG (3) JIT).

This scenario created a “*domino effect*” where children most in need of additional help from home may be delayed in getting this support due to a time lapse in communicating the information to the parent.

In the context of class sizes, teachers suggested that “*with twenty seven, twenty eight or thirty children you're not going to get around to every parent*” (ibid). In spite of their best

intentions it was simply impossible to chat to every parent on a daily basis. Communication was conducted on a need to know basis.

Lack of parental time was equally problematic in the pre-school sector. One community manager spoke of being “*very disappointed with my parents, I put up a rota for them to come in and help out - of twenty eight parents only two could put their names down*” (CBM 5). In another, a recent call for involvement in a fundraising activity had resulted in four parents making the “*meetings out of sixty five. We try to involve them but we’re not very successful*” (CBM 1).

There was a belief in the pre-school sector that parents were under a lot of pressure because of “*work or financial problems*”. This created challenges for the pre-school sector, where in their “*rush to get home*” parents “*just want to pick up their child and go*” (PM 1). Indeed, CB-PST 2 claimed that parents can be quite “*aggressive, even hostile*”. Parental aggression was a new phenomenon that had emerged in the “*last few years*”. None the less it was difficult to deal with and it made pre-school teachers “*wary of some parents....you know....how do you approach them, what do you tell them*” (PB –PST 1). Regardless of the challenges to parental involvement in the pre-school sector, there was a willingness to engage with them as much as possible and to “*keeping the lines of communication open*” (ibid).

6.2.9 Conclusion

Findings in relation to the construct of the learning environment are reassuring. Consistent with researchers (Bosch, 2006, Dudek, 2003, Gandini, 1998, Spodek *et al*, 1991), pre-school and infant teachers considered the learning environment as critical to children’s learning and development. It was perceived along three dimensions: physical, aesthetic and emotional. In common with other researchers (Irwin *et al*, 2007), Malaguzzi, 1993, Rinaldi, 2006) the relationship between children and teachers was highlighted as a core element in the creation and maintenance of a positive learning environment.

In the context of the social milieu of children’s lives, both pre- school and infant teachers agreed on the importance of parental involvement in their child’s care and education. Contrary to a claim by Rinaldi (2006) that parental involvement is the conviction of many and the customary practice and action of few, findings suggest communication was a very positive aspect of the parent/teacher relationship in pre-school settings.

The practice of parental involvement in the primary school sector was more ambiguous. This study supports claims by Arnold *et al* (2007), Carlisle *et al* (2005) and Jalongo *et al* (2004), that within the primary school sector, parental involvement was typified by helping children with homework, attending annual meetings and making financial contributions. Unlike the pre-school sector, there was limited opportunity for regular exchange between teachers and parents on children's social interactions and learning progress. As noted in Chapter 4, depending on the capacity, ability and willingness of teachers and parents, the concept of partnership in primary school is at risk of being caught in the trap of tokenism at best or doomed to failure at worst.

Section 3 ECCE, Pedagogy and Practice

6.3.1 Introduction

Drawing upon IEA analysis, observations of practice (150 hours) and interview transcripts (80), section 3 explores understandings of ECCE and pedagogy. It demonstrates that the concepts of ECCE and pedagogy meant different things to different people. This section also examines pedagogical approaches in both pre-school and infant class contexts, examining pre-school and infant teacher priorities for children moving on to explore approaches to teaching and learning and their practical application within individual contexts. It highlights contradictions between the ideologies espoused and the reality of practice within settings.

6.3.2 Understanding of ECCE: Support Agencies and HSE Perspectives

Of the NVCC and CCC representatives interviewed, 75% associated ECCE with the “*holistic development of each individual child and how early year’s practitioners support each child’s development*” (NVCC 4). Consistent with *Ready to Learn* (DES, 1999a), NVCC 4 spoke of an “*inextricable link between early care and education*”, that applied equally to pre-school and infant class contexts (ibid). While agreeing with this broad definition, the remaining 25% of support agency interviewees felt that ECCE applied only to children “*from birth up to before they go to school*” (CCC 2). However, in keeping with the thrust of *Ready to Learn*, there was 100% consensus that all teachers of “*young children must be committed to the fact that care and education work together*” (CCC 4).

The CCCs expressed disquiet regarding the term ECCE suggesting that it caused misunderstandings about the concept of education in pre-school. As noted by CCC 3, the “*very term ‘pre’ indicates that it is about what happens to children before school*”.

Accordingly,

Care and education are interchangeable; this is sometimes where the dilemma arises with services doing too much of the actual pre-school or preparatory work for school. An awful lot of what happens in pre-school should be happening in junior and senior infants in school.....the care is sometimes missed out on in that...I much prefer the terms care and development because the education makes it a bit misleading (ibid).

Mirroring the underlying principles of both *Síolta* (CECDE, 2006) and *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009) CCC5 suggested that pre-school should be “*very play based because it’s quite structured from the time they go to school*” (CCC 5). According to CCC 3, “*primary schools should have a very different approach*”. The infant curriculum should be “*play based*” and built on a

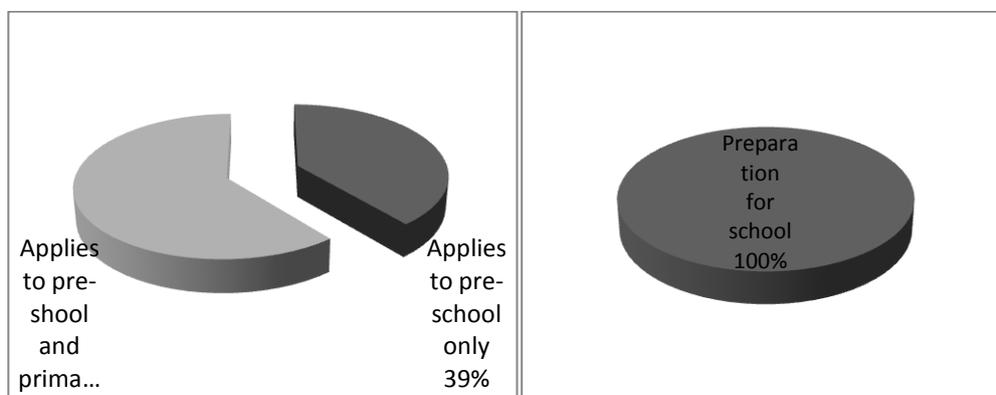
“philosophy that children learn through play as opposed to trying to push literacy and numeracy on them that is not suitable for their age or stage of development” (ibid). The “first two years of primary school should be fairly similar to pre-school in terms of the way the day flows, directed activities and self choice, the ways of working, teaching and learning should be similar”(NVCC 3).

From a HSE perspective, ECCE should not be about formal education. HSE 2 claimed to get “*very agitated*” when she saw “*people trying to cover the primary school curriculum*” so that children “*get this leg-up for when they go into primary school*”. Pointing to a lack of understanding of education in its broadest sense, she said that the pre-school sector should “*let those who are trained to teach – teach*”. By comparison, HSE 4 had a vision for ECCE that encompassed choice and flexibility for children, underpinned by “*a staff team who really were collaborating well all together around a shared understanding of children and where they wanted to go*”. However, as this study testifies, the capacity of the pre-school sector to think and act collaboratively was restricted for many reasons, one being the lack of a unified understanding of ECCE within the sector.

6.3.3 Pre-school Sector Perspective

Three different understandings of ECCE were delineated within the pre-school sector. While it was seen to encompass both care and education; 61.25% of interviewees perceived it solely in terms of the pre-school child, with 38.75% also associated it junior and senior infants in primary school. Irrespective of opinions about the age range, all participants, in so far as ECCE related to the pre-school sector, associated it with preparation for school.

Figure 26 Overview of pre-school sector understanding of ECCE

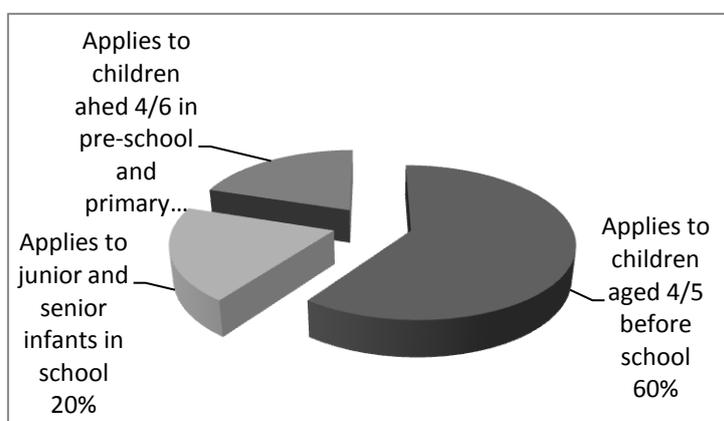


Thus, ECCE helped to “*prepare children for the next hurdle that is primary school*” (PBM 1). Broadly and ideologically speaking preparation for school was associated with “*looking at the holistic development of the child and not just how they develop intellectually*” (ibid).

6.3.4 Infant Teacher Perspective

Teachers also had diverse understandings of ECCE that were divided into three categories. 60% felt that it was for “*children under primary school age under the age of four or five*”, 20% saw it as “*the beginning years of school*” and the remaining 20% associated it with “*children aged four to six in pre-school and primary school*”.

Figure 27 Overview of infant teacher understanding of ECCE



Of the 60% who believed that ECCE related solely to pre-school children, 45% did not see an educative role for the pre-school sector, suggesting that it was “*about caring for and minding children...they shouldn’t be involved in education*” (JIT 2). While the remaining 15% disagreed with JIT 2, stating that the central focus should be on “*caring and nurturing*”, they too diminished the role played by the pre-school sector in terms of educating children, claiming that the “*little bit of learning they do*” in pre-school, gave children a “*gentle nudge into schooling*” (JIT 3). These attitudes, which undermine the complexity of the pre-school teacher role, are clearly linked to an overall lack of awareness of policy initiatives including *Síolta* and *Aistear*, for example, which highlight the educative role of pre-school teachers.

Alternatively, those who saw ECCE as applying solely to junior and senior infants together with those who believed that it applied to pre-school and primary school acknowledged that it encompassed both care and education. One teacher (FG3 JIT) while emphasising the focus on education, stated that “*care and education go hand and hand. School is for more the education side of things but there is certainly both aspects to it.*” Care was primarily about

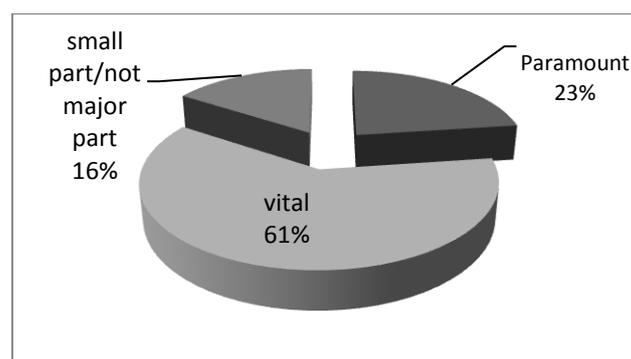
ensuring that children were “safe and their needs are being met from a caring point of view” (JIT 4). If these needs are met, then “education can happen, children will learn”. Therefore, “care is just as important as education in the first years of school” (JIT 3).

In a critique of current teaching practice, and congruent with the OECD (2006a) JIT 4, claimed that “90% of primary teachers do not consider that four and five year olds sitting in front of [them] are part of the early years sector”. This lack of recognition was problematic “because in order that we will actually give children in the four to six age groups the type of education that they are developmentally able for we need to understand that they are part of the early childhood brief” (ibid). Drawing on the ideology of a continuum of care and education that permeates this study, and in keeping with *Síolta* and *Aistear*, as well as a growing body of evidence on the importance of transition (Moreno *et al*, 2006, OECD, 2006a, O’Kane, 2008), JIT 4 stressed the need for both sectors to “work from the same hymn sheet” in terms of what children “need to learn and why” as well as an “agreed approach on how to get them there”.

6.3.5 ECCE as Preparation for School: The Case for Informal Learning

There was overwhelming consensus among managers and staff that ECCE programmes should prepare children for school (Figure 28). This meant “teaching them their letters and numbers” (CB – PST 5).

Figure 28 ECCE managers and staff perspective on ECCE as preparation for school



As Figure 6.3.3 shows, an overall 84% of ECCE managers and staff considered preparation for school as a primary objective of pre-school. A small minority; 15.75% felt that it was a “small part but not a major part” of their role.

Consistent with the accountability discourse introduced in Chapter 1, there was a general belief that there was an increasing “*focus on literacy and numeracy*” in pre-school settings. This was linked to a “*national push for school readiness*”, that is embedded in policy (NVCC 3). Because of the significant investment at macro level over a prolonged period (EOCP2000 – 2006, NCIP 2006 - 2010), the “*government would like to be able to say that every child who has attended an early childhood service is now ready for school*” (ibid). In turn, providers were under pressure to translate this macro objective into practice. NVCC 4 expressed concern that it was being interpreted as “*making sure [children] know their numbers and letters*” which was a “*total misunderstanding of what is meant by school readiness*” (CCC 4).

As discussed in Chapter 1, accountability discourse is fuelled by parents’ expectations for children’s education. Thus, pre-school was seen as a “*very good start to their education*” without which, “*they’ll be at a disadvantage when they go to school*” (NVCC 3). Consequently, the pre-school must “*prove that children know their numbers and letters and can colour between the lines...it’s seen as so much evidence of learning*” (NVCC 4). The difficulty is that there is no way of “*measuring activities like play-dough, sand and water play or painting at the end*” (NVCC 3). Paradoxically, if children were able to “*rattle off their numbers and taking home worksheets*”, it proved that “*learning is happening*” (CCC 2). Such activities were perceived as “*concrete evidence*” of learning where parents see results (ibid). As noted by the OECD (2006a), while positive child outcomes are a major goal for ECCE, they can result in a readiness for school approach that may lead to a focus on the “*assessment content and distract teachers from the intense relational and pedagogical work that young children need*” (pg 127).

Commenting on the propensity for academia in pre-schools, 88.8% of interviewees (HSE, NVCCs, CCCs) described pre-school as “*a scaled down version of school*” (CCC 3). Fuelling this discourse was the experience of B.A (ECCE) graduates, who, based upon their experiences on work placements, claimed that the only discernible difference between the sectors was the absence of a curriculum, “*other than that they do everything else that a primary school teacher would do*” (B.A ECCE (G) 10). There are inherent pitfalls in this approach, for as highlighted by B.A (ECCE) G 1, pre-school teachers were not “*clear about what or why they are teaching anything*”.

NVCC 3 referred to two parallel universes; *“the nice gentle world of pre-school and the harsh reality of school”*. The challenge lay in *“getting the balance right, unfortunately, many of them err on the side of primary school”*. Although modeling practice on the primary school system was deemed inappropriate, there was some justification of such practices within the pre-school sector. CCC 4 argued that *“you couldn’t prepare [children] for the horrible shock that is school unless they do what most of them are doing which is to operate [similar to] infant classes”*.

Congruent with OECD (2006a, 2009a) criticism of infant pedagogy in Ireland, NVCC 3 suggested that in mimicking the primary school system, pre-school settings were implementing *“pedagogy in the most traditional sense...a stand and deliver method; a good control, sit down and be quiet and listen to me approach”*. Both the HSE and NVCC linked this “didactic” approach to insecurity about practice. Effectively, the sector needed to be *“in control all the time, they want activities where they can control the children”* (HSE 3). 44.5 % suggested that there was *“a lot of justifying of harsh or disciplined approaches...children have to learn this, to sit quietly, ciúnas all of that harsh control”* (NVCC 3). Alternatively, when children were *“sitting down; doing work books and joining the dots; they’re quiet and every place is tidy and the adults are happy...the message is that we’re in control”* (ibid). Such sentiments are consistent with the OECD (2006a) concern that programmes and methodologies utilised in a school readiness approach are *“poorly suited to the psychology and natural learning strategies of young children”* (pg.15).

The OECD (2009a) noted that teachers in Ireland use *“structuring teaching practices much more than they do either student-oriented practices and enhanced activities”* (pg 443). Counts of child activity in pre-school settings, revealed that 85.6% were adult initiated, while in infant classes, this figure rose to 94.8%. According to Jalongo *et al* (2004) learning experiences must respect children’s *“natural, playful style of learning, rather than impose rigid and tedious approaches to mastering academic skills”* (pg 145). Furthermore, as noted by Stipek *et al*, (1995), it is important to achieve a balance between a didactic and a child-centred approach so that children experience the success of initiating and completing tasks without pressure to perform. Moreover, as many of these programmes take place in classrooms with high adult/child ratios, the dynamics of the programme may be predominantly teacher directed (OECD, 2006b, 2009a).

While teachers readily accepted that their teaching was adult directed, it must be remembered that teaching occurred in the context of high teacher/child ratios which may result in activities being predominantly teacher led (OECD, 2006b, 2009a). Only three teachers offered an estimate of what they perceived as the current balance between teacher lead and child lead activities. JIT 1 thought that it was “50:50”, JIT 2: “70:30”, while JIT 5 suggested that it was “80: 20; 80% to the children”. Conversely, 85% of pre-school teachers believed that activities were primarily child led, claiming that “*whatever the children decide to do, we follow their lead*”. However, pre-school and infant teachers seldom followed the child’s lead. Rather activities were predominantly adult led (Figure 29, 30).

Figure 29 Social origins of child activity pre-school settings

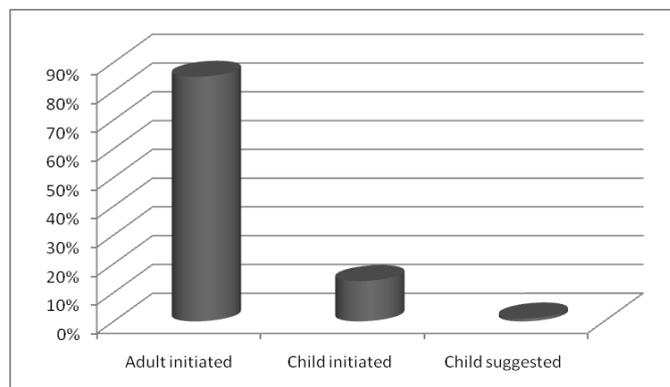
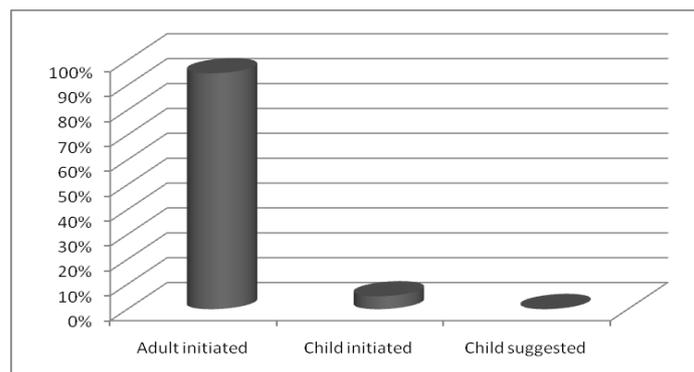


Figure 30 Social origins of child activity infant classes



Overall, those involved in the pre-school sector (HSE, NVCC, CCC, managers, staff, students) were negative about primary school. It was portrayed as “*very stressful*”, a place where children had to “*sit at desks all day*”, are “*confined to one room*” and must “*listen and concentrate all day*”. These attitudes strongly influenced the manner in which pre-school

teachers prepared children for school. PB- PST 5 typifies a widely held belief that the pre-school sector needed to redress shortcomings associated with large class sizes

When they go to primary school they're going to have massive classes and there's only going to be one teacher; we have to give them that head start because they could miss out with the big numbers and one teacher. The more education; numbers, letters and writing they get in pre-school the better.

Lack of communication between pre-school and primary school, identified as a significant issue (Fabian and Dunlop, 2007, Johansson, 2007, Moreno *et al*, 2006, O'Kane, 2008, Pianta and Kraft-Sayre, 2003), was highly evident in this study. Pre-school teachers were critical of the lack of communication between the sectors claiming that it caused uncertainty for them in relation to what they should be focussing on when preparing children for school. This criticism belies more profound issues in the pre-school sector that are associated with the dichotomy between the care and education sectors at the core of which is the low status of the pre-school sector.

CB – PST 3 vividly portrays the gap between the sectors stating that pre-school teachers: “*wouldn't know what [teachers] want because they don't tell us....they don't recognise the work we do...*” Better communication and interaction between pre-schools, primary school and parents would help to facilitate transitions (Fabian and Dunlop, 2007, Johansson, 2007, Moreno *et al*, 2006, O'Kane, 2008, Pianta and Kraft-Sayre, 2003). Moreover, cross sectoral communication is vital so that that a more unified approach to learning can be adopted within pre-school and infant class contexts (EFA, 2007, OECD, 2004b, 2006a).

6.3.6 The Case for Academic Preparation for School

As mentioned, 88% of ECCE managers and staff believed that academic preparation for school was important. Linked to this, was a belief (65% managers and staff) that infant teachers would like children to “*know their letters and numbers*”. Two pre-school teachers in a private setting claimed to “*model our classroom and daily schedule on the infant classroom*”. A minority (31.25%) believed that children should be “*trained to walk in a line, put their finger to their lip and understand what *ciúnas*¹² means*”. These particular aspects were seen as “*part and parcel of school life*”. The more children were “*prepared for this routine the better*” (PM 2). Although only 31.25% mentioned this type of preparation, it was

¹² Quietness

observed in each of the ten participating settings. Commands such as “*méar do bhéal*¹³”, “*get into your line*” and “*show me ciúnas*¹⁴” were frequent. Indeed, children who demonstrated “*ciúnas*” were rewarded with treats and praise while those who did not had activities removed, were denied treats, and subjected to disparaging commentary (Exemplar 4).

Exemplar 4 Show me ciúnas

Context	Observation 4: Community setting 1 There are 15 children and two adults. It is 10.27am. The children are sitting waiting for their morning juice break.
Ciúnas as a bargaining strategy	Group leader: <i>okay everybody listen up</i> The room assistant calls loudly <i>Show me your ciúnas; the two people with the best ciúnas are going to help me with the bags today. Shhh, shhh ciúnas.</i>
	Room Assistant: <i>Isn't this lovely</i> (Whispering) referring to the silence. <i>I'll take Ailbhe and Elke</i> Boy: <i>me too, me too</i> Room assistant: <i>Sit down everybody. Sit down, show me ciúnas</i>
Veiled threat	Ailbhe, Elke and the room assistant bring the children's bags from the adjoining cloak room into the room and place them on a table. Room assistant: <i>Ciúnas, Scott, show me your ciúnas</i> Boy <i>Ciúnas, ciúnas, ciúnas</i> Room assistant: <i>Ciúnas, ciúnas, look at the beautiful sun. Ye know what that means don't ye. If ye show me ciúnas ye can go out.</i>

The overarching objective during this observation was to maintain ciúnas. Following repeated calls to show her ciúnas, the room assistant finally draws the children's attention to the “*beautiful sun*”. She clearly implies that if the children show her ciúnas, they will be able to go outside to play.

Preparation for school had broad connotations and was associated with: “*helping children to build up their concentration levels*”, “*get them used to sitting down like in school*”, “*give them worksheets*”, “*teach them to colour inside the lines*”, “*teach them their numbers and A, B, Cs*”, “*get them used to routines and schedules*”. Pre-school teachers were concerned that if children were not ready for school, it would negatively reflect on the pre-school sector.

¹³ Finger to your lip

¹⁴ Show me silence/quietness

Referring to the importance of permitting children to enjoy the process of learning, CB – PST 8 argued that the “*cruel reality of school is always there and you go with that*”. In addition, as noted by PM 4, “school is all about getting through the curriculum”. Therefore, she claimed that the “*more preparation we have done the better for the teacher and it’s better for the child too. It makes it easier for them to keep up or to adjust in the new school environment*” (Ibid).

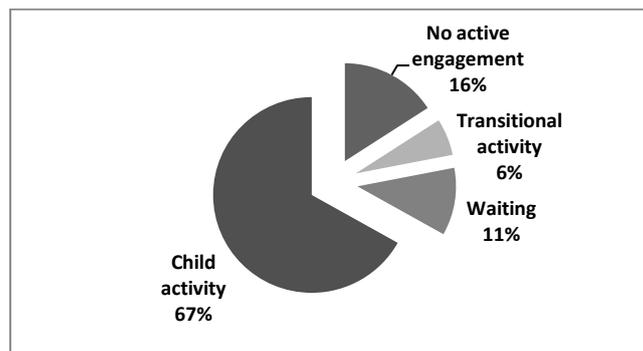
Table 26, based upon counts of child activity, provides an overview of the types and range of activities as well as the specific focus within both contexts. These observations took place in each participating pre-school and infant class. In each, 4 children were randomly selected and observed over two ten-minute periods on each of two non-consecutive days. Observations of each child were recorded every 30 seconds of the four ten-minute periods, yielding 80 observations per child (Table 6.3. N= number of observations).

Table 26 IEA/PPP data - Overview of child activity across sectors

Activity	Pre-school settings	Infant class	Private pre-school settings	Community pre-school settings
	N = 3077	N = 1546	N = 1523	N = 1554
	40 children	20 children	20 children	20 children
	%	%	%	%
Arts and crafts	4.7	5.6	2.3	7.1
Domestic activity	3.4	2.1	4.1	2.7
Dramatic/imaginative play	2.0	0.6	2.4	1.8
Fine motor skills	8.7	2.1	9.5	7.6
Gross motor skills	4.8	0.1	4.7	4.9
Indoor free activity	1.3	1.2	1.1	1.5
Language/storytelling	3.9	4.1	5.6	2.2
Media related activity	0.6	1.2	0.8	0
Music	1.9	4.1	1.1	2.8
No active engagement	15.9	19.6	13.2	18.5
Number/math concept	1.8	12	4.4	0
Personal care	11.4	5.1	13.5	10.4
Physical science/environment	6.1	3	7	5.3
Reading	1.6	10.5	1.4	1.9
Religious activity	0.2	0.6	0	0.3
Social science/environment	1.0	1.4	0.2	1.7
Social skills	5.1	4.3	4.5	6.6
Transitional activity	6.1	3.9	5.9	6.2
Waiting	11.2	10.3	9.6	11.5
Writing	2.1	5	3.5	0

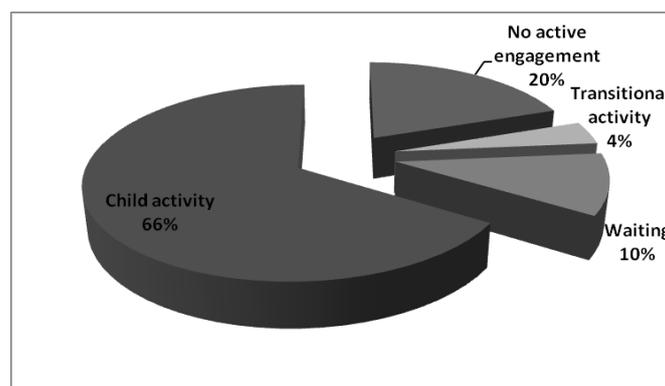
As this table demonstrates, there was considerably more time spent on expressive and social skills activities in community settings. While mixed activities accounted for 14.4% of child activity within the pre-school sector, number/math concepts accounted for 11.4%, reading 5.7% and writing 21.4% of such activity in private settings. In infant classes, where mixed activities accounted for 5.6% of all child activity, there was a pre-dominant focus upon cognitive activity comprising: language/storytelling (14.3%), number/math concept (25%), reading (14.3%) and writing (25%). There was less emphasis on academic activities within community settings where mixed activities comprised domestic activity (20.8%), personal care (29.2%) and physical science/environment (16.7%). Of particular interest are findings relating to the following categories: no active engagement; transitional activity and waiting (Figures 31 and 32).

Figure 31 Pre-school sector: No active engagement



When aggregated; these categories accounted for 33% of children’s activity in pre-school settings. During these observations, children were disinterested in tasks/activities, awaiting adult instruction or transitioning between activities. A similar pattern emerged in the primary school sector (Figure 32).

Figure 32 Primary school sector: No active engagement



Worryingly, within infant classes, teachers did not notice when children were disengaged from activities. As a consequence, 1/5 of children's time was spent looking around, lying across their table, rocking on their chair, staring into space and so on. It could be argued that teachers did not notice children's disengagement from tasks because of disproportionate teacher/child ratios and a predominant focus on ensuring that the curriculum was implemented.

6.3.7 Conflicting Perspectives

Although, 85% claimed that pre-school practice was influenced by primary teacher expectations, there were three notable exceptions. PM 3 stated that classroom practice was not about the child, it was "*about exams and teacher performance*". She claimed that as some teachers would be "*doing exams and expecting a call from the cigire¹⁵*" they would be "*far more interested in what the cigire would expect for the child to know and what she should be teaching them so that her performance shows through the child*". This places "*unreasonable demands on children to learn at a fast rate and to regurgitate*". The pre-school sector should not "*not collude in any way with that system*"

A further alternative perspective was proposed by CBM 4. Having spoken to a number of teachers, she claimed that "*learning letters and all that academic side is not what teachers want at all*". They wanted the "*social side and children being able to put on their coat and open their drink*". While these tasks may appear "*trivial in the overall preparation for school*", in the context of "*thirty odd children in the classroom they are actually vital*". Accordingly, this manager's priority would be that "*children are confident enough to go in and sit down and concentrate*".

According to PM 1 teachers want "*adaptability*" where "*children to take the transition in their stride, move into a new school...and commence work within the first few days*". In this respect, work referred to "*junior infant type work, workbooks, worksheets, numbers and phonics*". Teachers have no "*time for this settling in business, it interferes with their focus; the curriculum*" Once children can adapt to their new environment, teachers can "*proceed with their curriculum and their programme without disruption*" (ibid.).

¹⁵ Inspector

Indicating their low status and self-esteem, these managers believed that teachers did not have “*any regard for the work [they] do*” stating that “*teachers want to educate children themselves*”. As noted by PM 1, there was little point in “*teaching numbers and letters*” when the “*process starts all over again in junior infants*”. Time would be better spent providing “*activities that support language development, social skills and independence*” and “*learning through play*”. In extolling the benefits of learning through play on which the “*pre-school sector was based*”, CB 4 claimed “*we shouldn't lose sight of our values in pre-school*”.

6.3.8 Children Lost in the System

These voices were precluded by the majority viewpoint which pointed to the necessity of academic preparation in the context of large class sizes. As discussed previously, the anomaly of inappropriate adult: child ratios was contentious, serving as an impetus for the pre-school sector to focus on academic preparation. Although, B.A (ECCE) graduates agreed on the “*unnatural numbers in infant classes*”, they stressed the importance of “*teacher quality*” (B.A ECCE (G) 4). B.Ed (G) 3 for instance, explained how in spite of being in a crèche “*where the ratio was one to ten; the quality wasn't good; it is all to do with the quality of the teacher*”. The centrality of teacher/child interactions on children's learning trajectory was emphasised in Chapter 4 and section 2 of the current Chapter. Across both graduate cohorts, there was consensus that irrespective of ratios, in the absence of “*good teachersquality will be affected*” (B.Ed (G) 8).

Embedded in concerns about class sizes, fears were expressed at multiple levels (B.A ECCE graduates, HSE, support agencies) that children become “*anonymous*” within primary school. Hence, 87.5% of ECCE managers and staff concurred with Bennett (2006) in claiming that “*certain children can be lost and ignored within the school system, the very quiet child or the average child*” (PM 8). In their opinion, “*the curriculum definitely dictates and children are just a number*”. Pre-school teachers apply a deficit model to children's care and education in primary school. They therefore, feel responsible for giving children that “*little bit of a step ahead*” in terms of academic preparation and self-confidence (PB – PST 2). However, in the words of Abbott and Moylett (1999) the sector must be careful that pre-school does not become the “*dominant idea, that preparation does not become the watchword, that play does not become denigrated and work elevated in an attempt to make young children more like older ones and therefore more like adults*”(pg 195). Inherent within the school readiness

paradigm is the danger of losing sight of the importance of educating the “whole child” (DHC, 2000, Rinaldi, 2006).

6.3.9 ECCE as Preparation for School: Infant Teacher Perspective

Infant teachers claimed that within a few days of starting school, they

know the children who've been to pre-school....they're more ready; pre-school gives them that awareness of others and sharing; they've been exposed to more structure; they're more ready for everything that's going to happen in the year (JIT 5).

In common with researchers (Elkind, 2003, Fabian, 2002, Moloney, 2010b, O’Kane, 2008), teachers in this study favoured social skills rather than cognitive ability from children upon entry to school. Teachers had various expectations of the pre-school sector in terms of preparing children for school. As indicated previously, they made a clear distinction between the serious business of education and the more menial tasks of pre-school. Thus, from a teacher perspective, school readiness was about children being “*able to process orders or directions, able to understand that you need to sit down, take turns, and understand direct orders ...*” (JIT 2). Teachers should not be “*expected to deal with children going under the table and silly things like that*”, such behaviour “*just can’t work in a classroom situation*” (JIT 1). These capabilities were “*ordinary life skills*” that would be “*expected of any four year old*” and which they could “*learn before they come to school*” (ibid). Clearing delineating their educational role, JIT 2 stated that “*you could spend half the day trying to get them into a line when you are there to educate them*”.

In common with prior negative commentary on the primary school system (NVCC, CCC, HSE, ECCE managers/staff) teachers spoke of the “*shock*” and “*trauma*” of school for children particularly those who had not been to pre-school. One teacher (FG 3 JIT) recounted having to “*hold children back and them screaming for their mother*”. These scenarios were “*heart breaking*” and “*give the wrong impression of school to other children*” (ibid). Another teacher (FG 3 JIT) stated that pre-school helped to prepare children for the “*horrible rigid routine that is school*”. Acknowledging that these were “*very strong words*” she argued that for children “*that’s the reality*”.

Other FG JIT 3 participants agreed with this sentiment but stressed that children “*actually get used to this rigid routine and they just adapt; it normalises them, if you were to introduce them to that in first or second class they’d get an awful shock altogether*”. This commentary is consistent with researchers (Schultz and Heuchert, 1983), who claim that when children

progress to formal education that teachers embark on the inevitable and necessary process of “spirit breaking” (pg 18).

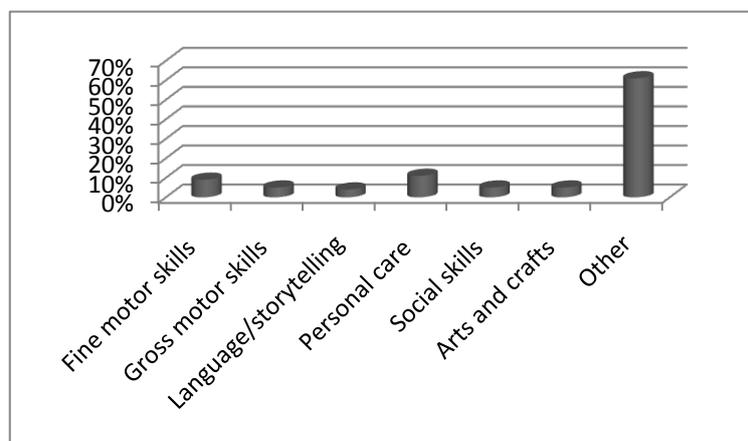
Table 27, provides an overview of teacher expectations of the pre-school sector in terms of preparing children for school.

Table 27 Infant teacher expectations of pre-school in preparing children for school

Developmental area	Prepare children to
Social	Share, play and mix with others, work in groups
Independence	Tie their own shoes, take off and put on their coat, toileting, hand washing, open a school bag and lunch box, divide their lunch, use a scissors, use crayons
Oral language	Listen to stories, songs and rhymes, participate in chatting and listening
Academic	Sort and match, play, do puzzles, develop hand eye hand/eye coordination, work with their hands; thread and bead, colour inside the lines if possible

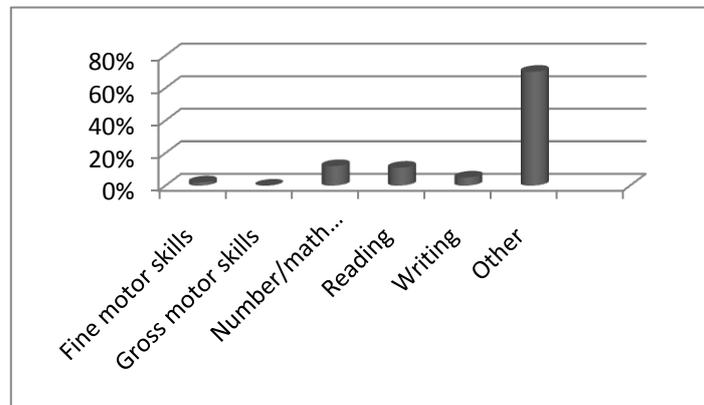
The pre-school sector was acutely aware of the need to focus on the skills outlined. Figure 34 shows that children participated in a broad range of activities considered necessary by infant teachers (Figure 33).

Figure 33 Pre-school activities considered beneficial by infant class teachers



Findings indicate that the cut off point for supporting the development of fine and gross motor skills was pre-school (Figure 34).

Figure 34 Overview of fine and gross motor skill activity in infant classes



The total lack of gross motor activity in infant classes is indicative of the considerable amount of time spent by children in sedentary desk based activities. Indeed, the (OECD, 2004a and 2009a) criticise a predominant focus on table top activities and didactic methodologies in infant classes in Ireland.

The need for oral language and getting the child’s “*ear tuned into all of the rhymes and the sounds of language*”, *lots of songs and stories*” “*talking and listening*” before starting school was considered essential by all ten teachers interviewed. However, JIT 5 described how teachers in general “*expect too much of the pre- school sector*”. She rhetorically asked: “*what do we want them to do? It’s not fair to expect them to tick all the boxes and teach the children to do X, Y or Z*”. Accordingly, teachers should not want or expect children “*to sit down all day and colour or pick up a pen or anything like that*” (ibid). Rather, these skills develop “*bit by bit*” and a “*certain amount of wandering around is inevitable and probably desirable sometimes too in juniors and seniors*” (JIT 5).

With the exception of JIT 5 who argued that the pre-school sector was “*doing a pretty good job*”, the other nine as well as FG 3 JIT disapproved of academic preparation in pre-school, claiming that it was “*superficial*”. While pre-school teachers “*mean really well and they keep the children busy; the academic side; letters, numbers, reading, writing any of that, no, no, no, leave that to us*” (FG (3) JIT). Teachers spoke of “*pre-school people sitting down with children and asking what’s this colour and getting them to fill in worksheets*” all of which was deemed “*inappropriate*” and a “*very bad start to education*”.

Given the many observations in infant classrooms showing that teachers utilised the exact same methodologies, particularly prescribed worksheets and templates, I am perplexed about this bad start to education. Is it confined solely to the pre-school sector and why, given the ages of the children in infant classes (4 – 6 years) is it appropriate in primary school? In this respect, Moyles (2001) contends that children’s thinking is embedded in a context that has meaning for them. Much school activity; work sheets, colouring in and filling the blanks are disembodied, holding no meaning or purpose for the child (ibid). Such activities serve only to make the process of learning more difficult (ibid). It is little wonder, that Claxton (2008) is concerned about introducing children to formal education at a young age. Crucially, he maintains that children may be so turned off education, that they lose their ability to reach their full potential.

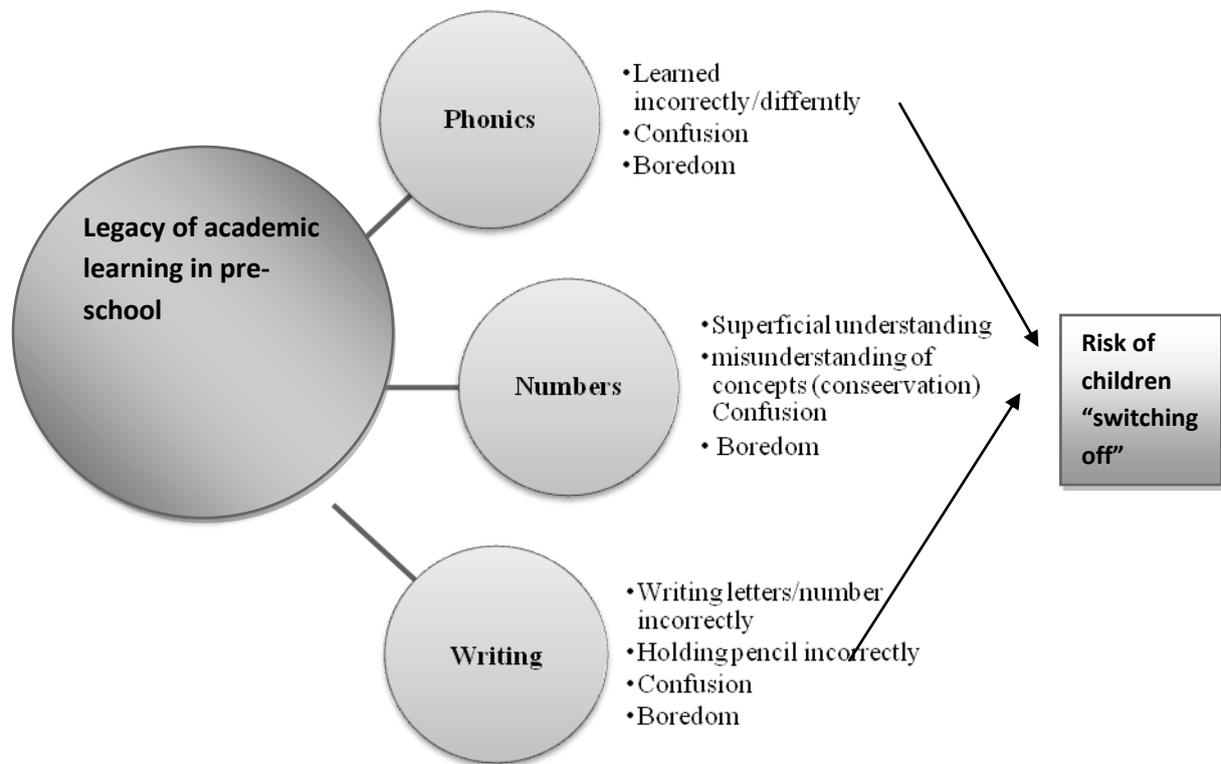
6.3.10 Legacy of Academic Preparation

Teachers highlighted multiple problems resulting from academic preparation in pre-school. At one level, “*bad habits [such as] how [the child] holds a pencil, how it sits, how it reads or writes*” developed in pre-school cannot be changed in school (FG 3 JIT). At another level, children who had already covered academic work in pre-school tended to “*switch off*” during the year. The danger was that they “*get a little lost and don’t really know where to join back in again, leading to irreparable learning difficulties* “all through school” (SIT 4).

B.Ed (G) 3 concurred stating that “*pre-school does cause problems with quality in the classroom because you have children who are sitting there bored and disruptive and that can affect your quality*”. This assertion belies a more fundamental issue within the primary school system where teachers’ lack the “*ability to meet children’s individual needs*” (B.Ed 5). It was suggested that the fault lay in teacher preparation. In the words of B.Ed 3, “*there wasn’t enough attention given to those kinds of issues when we were being trained. It’s not even mentioned, it’s a one size fits all approach*”. According to Gregory and Chapman (2007: 12), “one size doesn’t fit all”, the teacher can no longer teach the lesson, and hope that everyone gets it. There is an onus on teachers to consider each child’s needs, readiness, preferences and interests.

Analysis of teacher interviews (10) and focus group discussion provides insight into the many issues that teachers claimed resulted from academic preparation in pre-school (Figure 35).

Figure 35 Legacy of academic preparation in pre-school on infants



The following FG 3 (JIT) excerpt sheds light on the difficulties experienced

Teacher voice 1: We're starting with our patterns and our writing; we want the child to do this because we taught it the exact right way that it's going to be used all through the school. In pre-school, the teacher taught them their letters in block capitals and no matter what they will write their name in capitals. So I'd prefer if the pre-school stayed away...things like the writing of letters, numbers; leave that to us

Teacher voice 2: Differentiation is one of the main strategies we have but it can become a very big thing to implement if some children have things covered already you're trying to challenge them and you're trying to challenge the ones who haven't it covered.

Teacher voice 3: They know numbers but they don't know the conservation of number; they have no idea of what four means. They don't understand the concepts.

Bennett (2006) advocates for a strong and equal partnership between pre-school and primary school, suggesting that early childhood pedagogy "with its emphasis on the natural learning strategies" of the child should be respected and reflected in infant classes (pg 16). Moreover, he suggests that schools may need to adapt a modified pedagogy (similar to the Nordic countries), in the first years of primary schooling so that the holistic and investigative approaches to learning, characteristic of the young child may be incorporated into junior classes in primary school. A key issue for teachers was the lack of consistency between

sectors. They suggested that it would be “*different if there was a formal year of education*” in pre-school so that all children would “*probably be coming in at pretty much the same level*”. Contrary to Bennett’s proposal that teachers adapt their pedagogy, teachers in this study laid responsibility firmly with the pre-school sector in terms of getting children to the “*same level*” upon entry to school.

Teacher assertions that children did not understand the concept of number or that their learning was superficial is debatable in certain circumstances. There was ample evidence that children’s learning in certain pre-school contexts was at an advanced level and contrary to teacher claims, they had a comprehensive grasp of number concepts and phonic awareness as demonstrated through exemplar 5.

Exemplar 5: I know my phonics

Observation 9: Private setting 5

Context: The child (Sarah) is sitting at a table with the adult who has placed a number of sand paper letters before the girl checking to see if she recognises them and whether she can think of a word that the letters stand for. This is an account of Sarah's responses as the adult shows her each card

Sarah: *wig and watch, A – for apple and ant, u-*

Adult: *Can you remember?*

Sarah: *U for umbrella” She continues “n –for hat. No, nut*

Adult: *Brilliant and where do birdies live?*

Sarah: *Nest and it's for nana, for my nana, e – for Ellie and egg, m – for milk and max, s for snake and sunny, c for car and cat*

Adult: *Excellent work, well done*

Following on from the previous activity, the adult places a moveable alphabet box across two chairs telling Sarah to “match them up there now and I'll be back. We're going to make some words”. She goes to the next table leaving Sarah with the box. When she returns, Sarah has matched all of the sand paper letters with a corresponding letter from the moveable alphabet.

Adult: *Oh wow, well done. Where's “e” for egg? Where's “s” for snake and sausage?*

Sarah: *and me and Shauna*

Adult: *well done. Where's “a” for apple?*

Sarah: *and ant*

Adult: *Where's “u” for umbrella? What's this?*

Sarah: *“f” for frog*

Adult: *and this last one?*

Sarah: *“w”*

Adult: *Well done. What words start with “w”?*

Sarah: *Wig and watch*

Adult: *Well done.*

While teachers acknowledged that the lack of communication between the sectors was problematic, they were reluctant to redress the issue. For example, although JIT 5 expressed concern that as a profession, teachers “*don’t interact with play schools*”, she stated that “*we don’t have the time to do it either and it isn’t our job*”. Indeed, therein lies the conundrum. There is no national policy on transition to school. JIT 5 further suggested that both sectors were a “*bit suspicious of the other*”. It was patently obvious that the issues went much deeper than this and were intertwined in how each sector viewed the other as a profession in its own right.

6.3.11 Pedagogy, Who is He?

Findings support researcher claims (Moss et al, 2002, Blatchford et al, 2002) that for many working in ECCE, pedagogy is little understood and has multiple meanings. This lack of understanding was evident in practice within settings. Gore *et al* (2007), maintain that good teachers must know what good pedagogy is, how to deliver it and recognise the difference it makes to children’s development.

In this study, there was much confusion about the term pedagogy. Overall, 50% of ECCE managers had never heard of it. Of those who had, they associated it with “*a kind of an educational approach*”. Pre- school teachers were equally uncertain. 81.25% had never heard of pedagogy. In two instances, it was associated with the name of a theorist. One asked “*pedagogy, who is he? I never heard of him*” while the other said “*I know Piaget and the other fellow but I don’t know pedagogy*”. The remaining three (18.75%) were unsure of its meaning other than that “*it has to do with educating children*”.

Likewise FETAC Level 5 and 6 students were unable to articulate their understanding of pedagogy and while B.A ECCE graduates suggested that it “*is really difficult to describe*”, they none the less explained that it was “*the sort of method that you’d adopt to teach the children in your care, whether it’s the Montessori method, Steiner, Froebel or whether you adopt a play based method of teaching.... not teaching but facilitating the children’s learning in the early years*” (B.A ECCE (G) 3).

Alexander (2007) notes that failure to engage with pedagogy creates a perilous situation where a plethora of claims about what constitutes best practice in teaching and learning are proposed. This study indicates that a school readiness approach was presented as best practice within pre-school settings.

As discussed in section 1, there was general disquiet about the inappropriateness of HSE inspectorate qualifications. This issue materialised once more in relation to their knowledge and understanding of pedagogy. While the pre-school sector saw pedagogy as territory that is “ostensibly unproblematic”, the HSE inspectorate saw it as territory that was cautiously avoided (Alexander, 2007). From a HSE perspective, it was a term that they would “*never use*” (HSE 4). Differing definitions were proposed including: “*the science of sociology and teaching*”; and “*it’s a South American word used in liberation theology*”. Overall, it “*doesn’t come into our framework at all...it doesn’t mean anything*” (HSE 2).

HSE 4, while describing pedagogy as a “*high – faluting*” term, associated it with “*a whole child approach; getting shared common values and views around children embedded in an approach to learning, development and well – being*”. She stated that the inspectorate “*really don’t understand what it is and they wouldn’t have encountered the term in their training*”. While agreeing that it was not part of HSE lexicon, she expressed concerns about the lack of understanding within the inspectorate. This concern was most acute in relation to inspecting “Article 5”. However, irrespective of misgivings about inspectorate understanding, HSE 4 was adamant that “*we’re actually functional authorised officers of the HSE which has got the legal responsibility for looking at Article 5*”. This begs the question: how an inspectorate that does not know what it is looking for, can determine whether practice is pedagogically appropriate. Regardless of their statutory authorisation this attitude is misguided and warrants attention.

B.Ed graduates described pedagogy as “*a real college term that has to do with the theory and practice of teaching*” (FG 3 JIT). Three infant teachers did not know what pedagogy was. The other seven “*Don’t know it as pedagogy*”, but they have a “*good concept of it*”. Thus, a number of definitions were proposed, each linked to the theory and practice of teaching

JIT 2: I’ve heard the term many a time but my understanding would be the theory... methods and the ideals behind what happens in the classroom.

JIT 5: It’s the theory and practice of teaching; you need to know what teaching is and how to teach and why you teach. All of those things are part of pedagogy

SIT 1: It’s to do with the way you teach things; the way you approach things your methodologies or whatever. It’s the background to the various different areas...the approaches and the philosophy...

In common with Boyd *et al* (2007) infant teachers viewed pedagogy as encompassing knowledge of instructional methods, learning theories, measurement, testing and classroom management. Although teacher training stood teachers in good stead in terms of their knowledge and understanding of pedagogy, the extent to which this understanding shaped their practice was questionable. The remainder of this section examines pre-school and infant teacher priorities for children and looks at the ways in which positive attitudes to learning were encouraged and supported within both contexts.

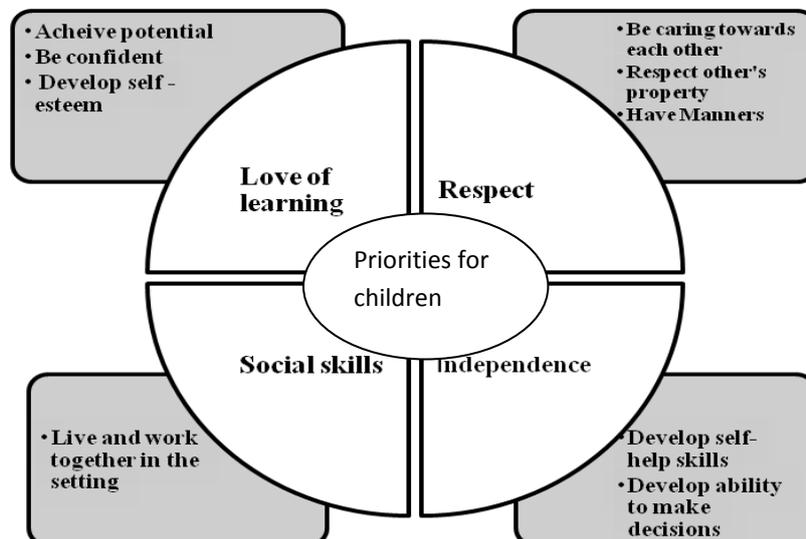
6.3.12 Pre- school and Infant Teacher’s Priorities for Children

Across both sectors, four core priorities were identified. These were to

1. Support the development of social skills
2. Help children to become independent
3. Foster a love of learning
4. Help children to develop a sense of respect for themselves, others and wider society.

Each priority was further divided into a number of sub categories (Figure 36).

Figure 36 Convergence of pre-school and infant teacher priorities for children



The development of social skills was prioritised within both sectors where “settling *in and making friends*” was essential. Social competence influences other areas of development, notably “*confidence, self-esteem and self-image*” (JIT 1).

Both pre-school and infant teachers agreed that a “*love of learning*” was critical to children’s success in school. It was perceived to enhance other aspects of development; especially “*high self-esteem and confidence*”. JIT 5 claimed that if children “*have high self-esteem, they will have positive everything... especially positive learning*”. It is dependent upon “*positive attitudes to learning*”. In this respect, pre-school and infant teachers are central to “*encouraging*” these positive attitudes.

6.3.13 Encouraging Positive Attitudes to Learning

At two ends of a continuum, pre-school teachers saw positive attitudes to learning as “*setting children up for learning in primary school*” (PBM 2) while teachers felt that if positive attitudes were not developed in infant classes, the likelihood was that children would have “*trouble with learning the whole way through school*” (JIT 5). Teachers were particularly aware of their impact on children’s learning trajectory...“*you have such a limited time with any set of children*” during which teachers want to “*instil in [children] that they can be whatever they want to be and go wherever they want to go; to enthuse them and fill them with a positive approach to their education for all life*” (SIT 5).

Right across the spectrum of provision, there was consensus that teachers themselves must be “*positive*” about learning and act as positive role models for children. Therefore, if “*you are positive about everything from the word go, children will automatically start to think positive as well*” (PB – PST 6).

According to 7 (43.75%) pre-school teachers and 3 (30%) infant teachers; learning should be fun. JIT 5 suggested that this was about “*playing to your strengths*”. Drawing on her capacity as a “*natural story teller, [her] lessons revolve around a story that helps children to remember*” (Exemplar 6). In addition to using story telling as a teaching strategy, this teacher further extended children’s learning by introducing flash cards, a phonic book, sounding out and writing phonics on the white board. Children were given prompts and encouraged to help each other throughout the activity.

Exemplar 6 Storytelling as a teaching strategy in an infant classroom

Observation 8	Primary school 3
Context	This is a split junior and senior infant class. There are eight junior infants and nine senior infants. The teacher is introducing the sound “Oi” to the whole class. She decides to tell a story that will introduce the sound “Oi”.
	Teacher: <i>Okay, I’m going to tell you a story now and everybody is going to listen carefully to this story</i>
Introducing Oi	She stands at the top of the class and tells a story about five year old twins who have an interesting uncle working in the navy. The uncle promised the twins a trip on his big, big ship when they were five. So they go on the ship but it develops a big hole in the side and begins to sink quickly. The twin’s uncle radios for help. He tells the twins to stand on deck and when they see anyone coming they must shout “Oi, Oi, ship ahoy”. After a while another ship came along and mended the ship.
Extending the lesson	Holding up a flash card, the teacher says: <i>these are the letters for Oi.</i> She now writes Oi on the white board. Opening a large phonic book, she holds it up so that the children can see “Oi”. Children: <i>Wow</i>
Constructive strategy	Teacher: <i>We’re going to think of a few words that use Oi. I’ll give you a hint; what sound does a pig make?</i> Children: <i>Oink, oink</i> Teacher: <i>Very good; now let’s see can we sound out oink</i> She writes O-I-N-K on the white board Teacher: <i>here’s another hint, if you were going to the shop Maria and your mammy gave you a €1 or €2 what do we call those pieces of money?</i> Jarleth: <i>Coin</i> Teacher: <i>Excellent Jarleth; coins, now can you help me spell coin?</i> Children: <i>C</i>
Team work	Teacher: <i>how do we spell Oi?</i> Jarleth: <i>Oi</i> Teacher: <i>Can anybody help Jarleth with the last letter?</i> Ruby: <i>n</i> Teacher: <i>Very good, coin</i>

In one infant class, I observed the teacher telling the children to “*turn on their engines*” and as children moved from subject to subject, engines were “*wound down and refuelled*”. A “*magic hat*” was used in another classroom from which math, reading, writing were pulled. Puppets, story boards, sand and water and play dough were frequently used in pre-school settings. Exemplar 7 depicts a child’s enjoyment of hand washing.

Exemplar 7: Hand washing: a simple pleasure

Observation 6	Private setting 4
Context	There are fifteen children and three adults. It is 10.30 and children are completing activities in preparation for juice break. Stephanie is sitting alone at a table with a basin of water and soap.
Engaging the senses	<p>She scrubs her nails vigorously with a small brush. Placing the nail brush into a side bowl she picks up a bar of soap and rubs it round and round her hands before letting it slip back into the basin. As it plops she laughs. She twitches the water with the tips of her fingers and then dries her hands carefully with a towel; drying each finger individually. She returns her hands to the water, placing both flat on the base of the basin. She feels the soap, picks it up and rubs it round and round her hands and up her wrists.</p> <p>Picking up the nail brush she repeatedly scrubs her nails. She places her hands into the water again picking up the soap. It slides between her hands into the basin. She laughs loudly, picks up the soap again and rubs her hands over and over.</p>

There were however, numerous instances of negative adult/child interactions, didactic approaches and lack of choice. Exemplars 8/9 provide insight into the many contradictions between what pre-school and infant teachers said and what actually happened in practice. Both exemplars show extremely didactic negative adult/child interaction that precluded the child from engaging in the activity. They are a stark reminder of Rinaldi’s (2006) assertion that the child/teacher/parent is inseparable and integrated, the “malaise of one” is not only “correlated but interdependent” on the other two (ibid: 27).

<p>Exemplar 8: Contradictions in practice</p> <p>Observation 15 Private setting 5</p> <p>What was said?</p> <p><i>“I mean if you’re constantly giving out to a child “why don’t you know this number, you should know it by now” they’re not going to want to learn, they’re going to be afraid to learn. So it’s very important to encourage them and even if you only do 1 and 2 for six months that’s their pace and go and don’t be trying to force them”</i></p>	<p>What happened in practice: A great start to the day</p> <p>Context: There are 15 children and two adults in the room. All children are sitting at tables using an assortment of equipment: peg boards, wooden cylinder blocks, wooden puzzles, pegs and bowls. One of the adults is sitting at a table facing the children at the top of the room. The children are called one by one to the table. Ronan has just been dropped to the crèche by his mom and has been called to the top table.</p> <p>Placing a card in front of Ronan, the adult asks “<i>what colour is this?</i>” He looks around and does not answer.</p> <p>Adult: “<i>Ronan, put your hands on your lap please [sharply], look what I’m doing</i>”</p> <p>She questions him “<i>what colour is this, what colour is this</i>”</p> <p>Ronan: “<i>white</i>” he begins to get up from his seat.</p> <p>Adult: “<i>sit down, we’re going to do them in Irish</i>” Pointing to a card she asks “<i>what colour is this?</i>”</p> <p>Ronan does not answer.</p> <p>Adult: “<i>I asked you what colour it is. You don’t know. Pay attention</i>”</p> <p>Placing a card in front of him she says “<i>this is bán¹⁶, this is dearg¹⁷. Show me bán</i>”. Ronan points to a card on the table.</p> <p>Adult: “<i>show me dearg</i>”. Ronan looks but does not respond.</p> <p>Picking up a card she questions him “<i>what’s this, what’s this?</i>”</p> <p>As Ronan says “<i>dearg</i>”, the adult says “<i>okay, stay where you are now and I’ll do your numbers with you as well</i>”</p> <p>Removing a card from the wooden box, she places it on the table in front of him saying “<i>feel it, what number is it</i>”</p> <p>Ronan uses the tips of his index and next finger to feel the number starting at the top and moving his fingers straight down to the</p>
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¹⁶ White

¹⁷ Red

	<p>bottom. He then says “I”</p> <p>The adult repeats this procedure with the numbers 2, 3, 4, 5, 7 and 6 in that order. He struggles to identify numbers 4 and number 6. The adult isolates these two numbers while replacing the others in the wooden box. Placing number 4 and number 7 on the table she proceeds to give a three point lesson “<i>this is 4, this is 7, show me four, show me 7, what’s this, what’s this</i>. As Ronan says “4” she says “<i>off you go</i>”</p>
<p>Exemplar 9: Contradictions in practice</p> <p>Observation 10: Infant class 3</p> <p>What was said?</p> <p>“A little bit of encouragement goes an awful long way; it’s positive reinforcement all the time because really and truly especially as an infant teacher if you’re negative towards a child they just won’t learn, they won’t engage. As much as you can; you have to be positive”</p>	<p>What happened in practice: I don’t like PE.</p> <p>Context: There are twenty children and one teacher in the school gym. The teacher tells the children that they are going to play the same game that they played last week “<i>Green means you can run or move quickly, orange means moves slowly and red means stop</i>”.</p> <p>Blowing the whistle she shouts “<i>Green</i>”. The children run around the gym until the teacher blows the whistle and shouts “<i>red</i>”. The children stop and stand still. When the teacher blows the whistle she again shouts “<i>green</i>” and the children run again. The teacher blows the whistle again and shouts “<i>red</i>”. Some of the children wobble and sway and the teacher says “<i>Are you all stopped?</i>”</p> <p>The teacher and children now engage in a series of stretching exercises in preparation for a game of “<i>sticky bees</i>”.</p> <p>One of the boys walks repeatedly to the bench by the wall. Each time he does the teacher brings him back onto the floor of the gym. As he attempts to sit down again she says “<i>Stephen, you are not sitting down, I’m not having it</i>”. Stephen stands still.</p> <p>Teacher “<i>Two hands and I leg. Well done. Now are we ready for sticky bees? Move like bunny rabbits</i>”. The children crouch and hop until the teacher calls “<i>stick bees, shoes</i>”. The children run into groups, each touching the side of their shoe to somebody else.</p> <p>Stephen tries to side step the teacher and return to the bench. Teacher “<i>Stop it, you’re not sitting down</i>”</p> <p>Teacher “<i>Sticky bees, foreheads</i>”. Running into groups the children touch foreheads. Turning to Stephen she says “<i>This is a ridiculous carry on, you are not sitting down, so stop it now</i>”. He stands still hands in pockets. Teacher “<i>long narrow shapes</i>” The children stretch their bodies as before and move slowly around the room.</p> <p>Teacher “<i>Elbows</i>” as she walks towards the children. She looks directly at Stephen saying” <i>you are not sitting down, you’re not</i>”. He stands looking at her with his hands in his pockets.</p> <p>Teacher “<i>Make a nice big circle in the centre please. Stephen into the circle</i>”. He does not move but stands head down hands in his pockets. Teacher “<i>Stephen, you stay where I put you. That’s ridiculous</i>” [pushing him into the circle]</p>

Tharpe *et al* (1998) holds that although the attention span of a five year old may be in the ZPD, so that the child is capable of attending to teacher instruction, it can happen only when a “rich diet of teacher praise is available” (pg 47). The teacher’s praise assists the child’s attendance to a task through a process of queuing and reinforcement. Pre-school and infant teachers cited praise and encouragement as the most significant tools in fostering positive attitudes to learning...“You have to praise them all the time even if it’s a feeble effort” (FG 3 JIT). Notwithstanding assertions about the frequency with which praise and encouragement were used; practice indicated otherwise as the following counts of adult behaviour (AB) demonstrates.

The AB observation tool was designed to record the behaviour of the key adult in the setting and the nature of his/her involvement with the children. AB was recorded by observing the adult for two ten-minute periods each morning for two non-consecutive days. AB observations were recorded every 30 seconds of these ten-minute periods. In total, 80 observations per adult were made.

Table 28 Overview of adult behaviour relating to encouraging positive attitudes to learning

Behaviour	Pre-school teachers	Infant teachers
	N = 777	N = 400
	%	%
Calling for attention	0.5	0.5
Eliciting an action or behaviour	5.1	1.3
Encouraging activity	3.5	7.3
Engaging in affectionate/friendly behaviour	8.2	3.5
Establishing/reminding children of rules	8.0	8.3
Giving an order	1.5	5.8
Giving negative feedback comments indicating criticism/disapproval of child's behaviour	4.5	2.3
Giving negative feedback indicating criticism/disapproval of task performance	0.3	0.8
Giving positive feedback indicating praise or approval of behaviour	0.3	8.0
Giving reassurance and support	3.9	0.5
Offering choices	0.8	1.3
Participation/shared activity	5.1	4.0
Problem solving/conflict resolution	0.3	0
Providing assistance or clarification, and/or suggesting solutions	1.7	5.00

As this table demonstrates, encouraging activity accounted for 3.5% of pre-school teacher and 7.3% of infant teacher observations, giving positive feedback indicating praise or approval of behaviour accounted for 0.3% of pre-school and 8.00% of infant teacher observations. On the other hand, establishing/reminding children of rules accounted for 8.00% of pre-school and 8.3% of infant teacher observations, giving negative feedback indicating criticism/disapproval of child behaviour or task performance accounted for 4.8% of pre-school and 3.1% of infant teacher observations. Exemplars 10 – 13 provide examples of both negative and positive feedback in pre-school and infant contexts.

<p>Exemplar 10: Pre- school setting: Negative feedback indicating disapproval of behaviour</p> <p>Context: At the end of circle time, which has lasted for 45 minutes, two boys have decided to lie on the couch during a relaxation exercise. They have repeatedly told the adult that they are tired.</p> <p>Seventeen children and two adults are lying on the floor. Michael and John get up and sit on the couch. They watch the other children lying on the floor with their eyes closed breathing deeply. Michael returns to the floor and lies down. One adult immediately intervenes saying “No, Michael, you wanted to sit on the couch. Now sit”</p> <p>She gets up approaches him and physically lifts him back to the couch saying “now stay there, you made your choice</p>	<p>Exemplar 11: Infant class: Negative feedback indicating disapproval of behaviour.</p> <p>Context: the teacher has placed a series of phonic cards face down on the floor. She picks 7 other children “<i>off you go and find a sound on the floor. Can you all say the sound that you have? Let’s see can we get 7 out of 7.</i></p> <p>The children call out their words “J”, “M”, “L”, “M, A child prompts the next child Teacher: “<i>Shauna, you weren’t asked. I’d much prefer if you weren’t telling him. I need to see if he knows it himself</i>” Teacher: “<i>Clara, what’s your sound? Look at it. What’s the sound?</i> Another child prompts. Teacher: “<i>Stop! Don’t tell her. What’s the sound?</i></p>
<p>Exemplar 12: Pre-school setting: Positive feedback indicating approval of behaviour</p> <p>Context: There are fifteen children and two adults. It is the end of lunch time and the adults are asking the children to tidy up for circle time. Adult: “<i>tidy up the books</i>” [books are scattered around the floor]. Five children immediately begin to pick the books off the floor singing “<i>Tidy up, tidy up</i>” Adult 2: “<i>Make sure all the lunch boxes are put away</i>”. Each child places their lunch box into their bag and returns it to an appointed cubby hole. Adult: “<i>well done, great tidying, well done guys</i>”</p>	<p>Exemplar 13: Infant class: Positive feedback indicating approval of behaviour</p> <p>Context: There are fifteen children and one teacher. The children are learning about opposites; tall/taller. They are now colouring their workbooks as the teacher moves between groups. .</p> <p>The teacher questions and reinforces. “<i>Brian, show me the tall house. Can you show me the tall house? The tall one? Show me. Well done, good boy</i>”</p> <p>A girl approaches the teacher to show her work, the teacher says “<i>well done</i>” Teacher: “<i>great work. I am delighted with ye, well done, great work</i>”</p>

The use of rewards was particularly prevalent in infant classes with 90% of teachers using such a system. Rewards took the form of stickers and smiley faces. These were given for “good work”, good behaviour in their group”, and “presentation of work”.

JIT 3 criticised a “*system that strives constantly towards perfection*”. Children should “*know that it’s okay to make a mistake, that mistakes are important and to learn we need to make mistakes*” (ibid). Equally, children should be encouraged to be “*curious*” and “*not afraid to question*”. She portrayed a dismal picture of how the school system alters children...“*they go into school as this lovely, curious little character and within two years they are cloned into what the system wants*”. This is indeed a damning indictment of the primary school system and is congruent with the concept of control discussed in Chapter 3 where Saracho *et al* (1993) argue that children give up the natural rhythm of their daily activities upon entry to school; adapting their behaviours to what the school considers appropriate. The solution lies in circumstances where both teachers and children share common standards, values and beliefs where children have already been socialised into acceptable forms of behaviour prior to school entry (Woods, 1979). In common with Woods, findings suggest that in the absence of these conditions, teachers endeavour to socialise children into tolerable forms of behaviour.

6.3.14 Conclusion

This section indicates that there is no clear concept of early education in Ireland. Therefore, it is not surprising that the concept of ECCE is beset by ambiguity. Understandings are blurred and directly impact practices within children’s micro environments.

Furthermore, the concept of pedagogy is little understood and has multiple meanings. This finding is problematic and manifests itself in practice within settings. Due to their misunderstandings about the purpose of ECCE, together with an overall lack of knowledge about pedagogy, pre-school teachers are in a difficult position. On the one hand, they are accountable to parents, government and the HSE; on the other, they genuinely care for children and want to their best for them. In the absence of knowledge or guidance; they prioritise cognitive development which they justify under the guise of preparation for school.

Unlike the social pedagogy approach common to Nordic countries; the education system in Ireland at pre-school and infant level is concerned with the pursuit of academic attainment rather than broad holistic aims. Consequently, while recognising the inseparable nature of

care and education, infant teachers are primarily focussed on “educating” children. In this construct, the teacher’s job is to fill the child with knowledge in preparation for adult life. This study demonstrates that teacher-led didactic methodologies prevailed within both sectors.

This section draws attention to the skills that teachers expect children to have developed prior to commencing school. Crucially, cognitive development is seen as the specific remit of primary school. Infant teachers wish children to have good social skills, the ability to listen, follow instructions, stand in line, to take turns and so on. This is critical information that should be communicated to pre-school teachers so that pre-school does not become a “scaled down version of school”. Overall, both sectors view each other negatively. These findings highlight the need for discussion around shared values, principles and approaches to teaching and learning in both sectors.

Section 4 Pre-school and Infant Classrooms as a Crucible of Learning and Development

6.4.1 Introduction

This section begins by exploring the teaching and learning strategies used by pre-school and infant teachers. Pre-school teachers found it difficult to articulate the strategies employed to support children's learning. Conversely, infant teachers had no such difficulty citing a broad range of teaching strategies that underpin teaching in infant classrooms.

This section explores the extent to which children are at the centre of practice in individual micro contexts. While pre-school teachers were not aware that children's agency was denied within pre-school contexts, findings highlight a considerable contradiction between what pre-school teachers believed and what actually happened in practice.

6.4.2 Teaching and Learning Strategies: Pre-school Sector

In their study of effective pedagogy in early learning, Moyles *et al.*, (2002) indicate that practitioners were unable to articulate their own professional knowledge or skills. Such inability may put a significant constraint upon pedagogical practices (ibid). In this study, those working in the pre-school sector found it difficult to articulate the teaching strategies used in everyday practice. Hedegaard, 2005, holds that the ZPD is crucial for identifying each child's readiness to benefit from instruction. Its application to classroom practice calls for awareness of child development and an ability to plan for "qualitative changes in the teaching toward a certain goal" (ibid: 247). In this respect, Rogoff (1990) describes interactions in the ZPD as the crucible of learning and development in that they allow children to participate in activities that they would be unable to do alone.

In this regard, there was a total absence of awareness of the ZPD by pre-school teachers. Although four pre-school teachers and three ECCE managers had heard the term, they "[didn't] have a clue what it's about" (PB – PST 4). Equally, there was minimal awareness of the concept of scaffolding. The metaphor of the "scaffold" (Wood, Bruner and Ross, 1976) is used to describe the "process that enables a child or novice to solve a problem, carry out a task or achieve a goal which would be beyond his unassisted efforts" (pg 90). Thus, the concept of scaffolding refers to the nature and quality of instruction or assistance. Only two pre-school teachers offered a definition of scaffolding. PB – PST 4 described it as "*a type of support*" while PB – PST 2 explained it in terms of "*starting off at a certain level and getting*

more and more progressive". Notwithstanding their attempts to define scaffolding, these pre-school teachers were unable to describe the types of supports or to provide examples of how they might have scaffolded children's learning within pre-school contexts.

Circle time was cited as the most prevalent teaching strategy utilised in the pre-school sector. It encompassed a wide range of activities including "*reading a story to learning Irish words to asking each child a question and taking turns*" (PB – PST, 1). In keeping with the school readiness approach discussed in section 6.3, circle time helped to "*reinforce [children's] work, letters, numbers, colours...*" Furthermore, it was a "*tool for [children] to listen to others, to take turns, think before they speak and not to shout out an answer*" (CB – PST 5). In this sense, one assumes that circle time is characterised by interactive pedagogy where the child develops through active involvement with the environment and others by exploring, questioning and probing (Moss, et al, 1996, Sylva et al, 2002, Ying Li, 2006) while also serving as a crucible for learning and development. Unlike Rogoff's ideology however, exemplar 14 shows, that circle time far from being a crucible for learning and development was in fact an ordeal for the children involved.

Other than circle time pre-school teachers found it difficult to articulate specific teaching methodologies. They referred to the need for "*repetition*" where children need to "*do things over and over again to reinforce learning*" (PB – PST 4). A number of pre-school teachers (7) cited the need to "*make connections; make learning meaningful*" which involved "*chatting about what [children] saw coming to school in the car whether it's a hedgehog on the road, or a badger that's been knocked down*" (PB – PST 9). Thus circle time was seen to "extend children's learning" through the interactive process between the teacher, the learner and the learning environment including the concrete learning environment of family and community (Sylva et al, 2002).

Exemplar 14 depicts circle time in a private setting. The topic was "squirrels". Circle time continued for a period of fifty five minutes during which children were expected to follow instructions, sit quietly, listen and learn without interruption. The adult leading circle time in this exemplar claimed that it was "*very important to encourage [children] to learn, that we respect them and we don't make them learn at that young age that [learning] is an enjoyable experience for them*". Moyles et al (2002) hold that pedagogy "operates from a shared frame of reference (a mutual learning encounter) between the practitioner, the young child and his/her family (pg. 5). Contrary to this ideology, exemplar 14 is underpinned by didactic

methodology, negative adult/child interaction and a distinct lack of child agency. Even though the adult introduced the concept of “*sharp*” and used descriptive language i.e., “*nice juicy fleshy bits*” her didactic approach to working with children reduced the learning opportunities presented into a predominantly negative experience for the children involved. Such didactic methodology is far from the ideology espoused by Jalongo *et al* (2004) where learning experiences respect children’s “natural, playful style of learning, rather than impose rigid and tedious approaches to mastering academic skills” (pg 145).

Exemplar 14: private setting 4. Circle time – negative learning experience

<p>Context</p>	<p>There are 17 children and two adults. Seven children are sitting on a couch, while five are seated on chairs, 2 on the left and 3 on the right hand side of the couches. The room leader is sitting on a chair facing the children. The second adult is sitting to the right of the children. The room leader is holding a picture of a squirrel and is questioning them about what the squirrel eats.</p>
<p>Children’s recall</p>	<p>Adult: <i>“What’s he eating”</i> Child: <i>“A nut”</i> Adult: <i>“No, it’s not a nut”</i> Child: <i>“An acorn”</i></p> <p>Child 2: <i>“What is it”</i> Adult: <i>“You tell me. What is he eating?”</i> Child: <i>“A cone”</i></p> <p>Adult: <i>“Yes, he’s eating a pine cone like this one here”</i> She picks up a pine cone from the floor beside her chair and passing it to the boy on the end of the line to her right she tells him to pass it around.</p> <p>Adult: <i>“What does he need to crack that cone”</i> Children <i>“Sharp teeth”</i> Adult: <i>“Yes, to get all the nice juicy fleshy bits out. Where would you find a squirrel?”</i></p>
<p>Didactic methodology Children under pressure</p>	<p>When the children do not answer, the adult asks a series of questions</p> <p><i>“Would you find them in the forest (YES) in the woods (YES), in the garden (NO)”well maybe! “What else do they like to eat besides pine cones”</i>. Again she asks a series of questions</p> <p><i>“Do they like to eat nuts (YES), acorns (YES), ice-cream (NO), cheese (NO), berries (YES)</i></p> <p>Adult: <i>“Are ye sure?”</i> Children <i>“Yes”</i> Adult: <i>“Tell me again, what they like to eat”</i>.</p> <p>The Children begin to chatter and talk among themselves. Adult: <i>“you’re not listening. I’ve just told you what they like to eat; I want you to tell it back to me”</i>.</p> <p>As a girl answers <i>“nuts”</i>, the adult raises her voice saying <i>“Excuse me, I’ve given you a list, tell me one thing they like to eat”</i></p>

6.4.3 Children at the Centre of Practice: Pre-school Settings

The UNCRC (1989) advocates for three major concepts in services for children: protection, provision and participation. This study indicates that while the concepts of provision and protection are manifest in practice in both pre-school and infant contexts, participation is severely restricted.

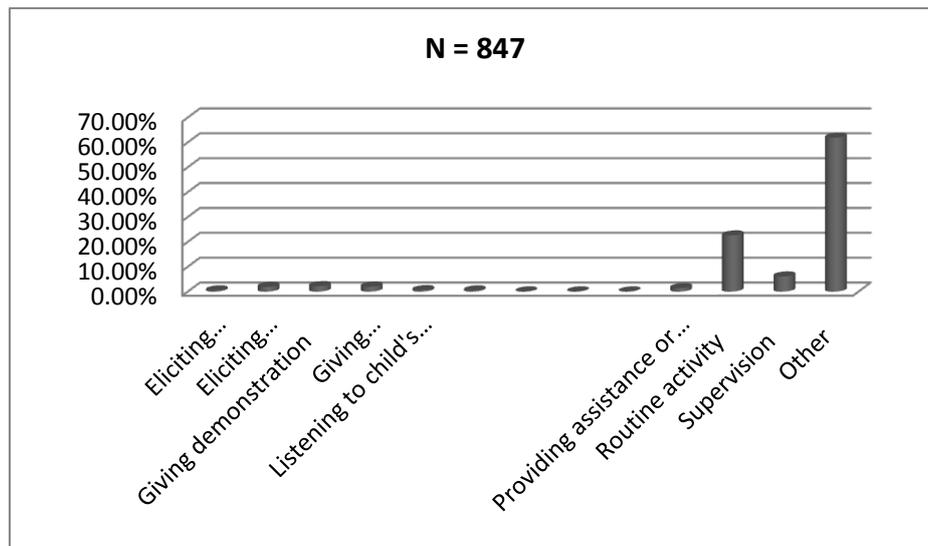
ECCE managers and staff were emphatic that children were at the centre of practice in pre-school settings. They did not countenance the notion that children were not actively involved in their learning. Mirroring findings (Lobman *et al*, 2007), the majority of ECCE managers and staff (20) suggested that knowledge of how children learn and develop ensured that they “*knew how to work with children and that everything revolves around them*” (PB_PST 8). Such knowledge was seen as synonymous with child centred practice.

You really need to know where [children] are coming from, you know their ages and stages of development....that dictates what you do in the classroom, what equipment you use and that it suits their age and the stage and the stage of development they're at. That for me means that children are at the centre of our work (PB – PST 8)

The concept of child centeredness as depicted by pre-school teachers is aligned to DAP. It therefore infers that activities, opportunities and experiences are inherently centred on the child with the child's best interests at the core of practice. However, Figure 6.4.1 based upon management of time observations supports Bennett's (2004) claim that while some pedagogues consider themselves to be child-focused; they actually avoid programming, relying instead on routines.

As shown, routine activities accounted for 22.6% of observations with supervision accounting for 6.1%. Teacher demonstration accounted for 2.2%, giving knowledge/information intended to teach 2%, providing assistance or clarification 0.10% and providing assistance or clarification, and/or suggesting solutions accounted for 1.4% of observations. The category other (61.9%) accounted for a broad range of activities such as eliciting an action or behaviour, reminding children of rules, providing feedback on activities and/or behaviour, personal activity, transitional activity, giving permission and so on.

Figure 37 Management of time in pre-school settings



According to CBM 5, knowledge of how children learn and develop enabled pre-school teachers to “*let children have a say in the place they come to everyday*”. Of sixteen pre-school teachers, less than half, 7 cited the importance of not “*constantly telling [children] that this is what we’re going to do today, we give them choice and freedom*” (CB – PST 4). Choice was associated with allowing children to “*pick what they want to work with*” and to “*make certain decisions*”. The following excerpts indicate the level of choice within settings

CB – PST 5: Let’s say we were doing a colouring activity. We’d always say to the kids “well what would you like, markers or crayons” that way we’d get the colouring activity done but they’d get to choose what they wanted; crayons or markers.

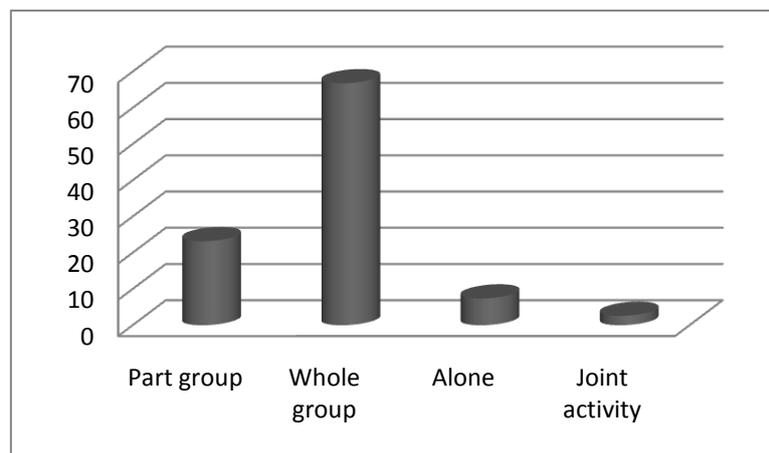
PB – PST 1: I tell them that they can decide to sit at the blue table or the red table or the yellow table and there are activities set up for them on the tables. So wherever they decide to sit they do those activities...that gives them choice and they make decisions about what work they want to do.

Hence, children had controlled choice because “*you couldn’t just give them free choice; they’re too young and it wouldn’t work*” (PB – PST 1).

The National Children’s Strategy (DHC, 2000) proposes that children should have a voice and be listened to. Highlighting the importance of listening to children and taking their views into account, CB – PST 3 explained how she consulted with children...“*every now and again, maybe one day a week*”. Paradoxically, the rationale for consulting with children was “*because teachers can only come up with so much*”. Even though there was a realisation that children should have choice in order to “*feel more involved and that they’re not just the child and [we’re] the teacher[s]*”, commonly within this setting, it was taken for granted that the children “*want to do what we decide*”.

Indeed, children were frequently expected to do what was decided by the pre-school teachers who generally chose activities for them. Within this frame, children generally worked in groups of four to six with limited opportunity to work alone or with the pre-school teacher/peer in joint activity (Figure 38).

Figure 38 Group structure within pre-school settings



A number of pre-school teachers (9) claimed that for children to be truly at the centre of practice “*they should have lots of opportunity for free play*” (PB – PST 4). Indeed, Vygotsky (1987) saw play as a unique, broadly influential ZPD.

In play the child is always behaving beyond his age, above his usual everyday behaviour, in play he is, as it were, a head above himself... The relation of play to development should be compared to the relation between instruction and development... Play is a source of development and creates the zone of proximal development (pg 102).

In common with NVCC perspectives in section 2, 9 pre-school teachers claimed that children’s play was misunderstood by parents who “*wouldn’t fully understand the benefits*” (PB-PST 4). They therefore, used their knowledge of child development to explain to parents “*what children are doing and the learning that is happening in play*” (CB-PST 1). She claimed that “*parents prefer structure, so that’s what drives what we do*”. Building on the school readiness discourse introduced in Chapter 3 and discussed in this Chapter (section 6.3), CB – PST 5 stated that “*even though [children are] learning we have to pull them back and get them to focus on their work; their table top activities and their numbers*”. Lobman *et al* (2007) also found that pre-school teachers used developmental theory to combat parents who wanted their children to be engaged in more traditional academic work, and who were concerned that all their children were doing was playing.

Although 19 (73%) of ECCE managers and staff agreed that activities need to be structured, they acknowledged that this impacted on children's choice and freedom. Settings commonly allocated "formal learning time" dedicated to "what we want them to learn; we take the lead getting them to colour in or learn their numbers and shapes" (CB – PST 1). There was a belief that "you have to direct a lot of what they do, otherwise they won't learn", "things would be chaotic", "and you wouldn't be able to control them" (PB – PST 4). Exemplar 15 contradicts this assertion.

Exemplar 15: Chaos; what chaos?

Context: A boy and a girl are playing during scheduled play time in private setting 3. They are building with 3 dimensional foam blocks on the floor. They have built a large square and are busily constructing a smaller square shape on the outer upper right hand corner.

Girl: "Let's build a bigger door". Boy: "No, that's a tunnel; we have to go through it."

Girl calls to the room leader "Eileen, we made a big house". R/L: "A big house, brilliant"

Boy: "Look that's a chimney (pointing to a triangular shape that he has placed on top of the door/tunnel) To the girl "Change the door, we can't get in"

Picking up two cylinders, he stands them upright in the open space in the centre of the square. Turning to the girl he says "Leave them there". She removes one cylinder replacing it with a rectangle which she stands in an upright position in place of the original cylinder. The boy removes the rectangle, replacing it with the cylinder saying "Leave it there. I told you. We have to get through"

Girl: "We'll make a table" Boy: "No, it's a tunnel", as he places her rectangular shape across the two cylinders. "Look we can get through" He wiggles his index and middle fingers (right hand) through the space between the cylinders. A second boy wanders over and sits on the floor beside the first boy. He looks at the building and says "Will we make it higher? While the girl ignores him, the first boy says "Yea, we'll make it higher"

They both start to build up the sides of the square adding layers of square and rectangular shapes. Some of the shapes fall off. Boy 2: "We need some sticks to hold it up" Boy 1: "Some sticks? Why"

Boy 2 "Yea, sticks, you know to hold it up, like real builders" He puts both his legs over the back wall and places his feet flat in the centre of the building.

Girl: "Stop Tom, get out of the house" Boy 1: "Get out. We built it ourselves". Boy 2: "let's build a different house". As the two boys begin to build the girl moves away and starts to build in the corner with her back to the boys.

Crucially, during this observation, the learning environment was typified by activity and noise, children playing and most importantly conversing (Massey, 2004). Clearly, when children are removed from the adult gaze (Rinaldi, 2006), they create spaces where they have opportunities for excitement, wonder and the unexpected, places of emancipation, enabling

them to become critical thinkers, where they are less governed by power (Moss and Petrie, 2002).

6.4.4 Teaching and Learning Strategies: Infant Classrooms

Infant teachers claimed that teaching strategies were a “*taken for granted part of [their] work*”. Teachers frequently broke tasks “*into bite sized chunks*” that were specifically directed towards “*bringing things to the child’s level so that they experience a sense of achievement*” (JIT 3). In this respect, Galloway and Edwards (1991) contend that new information/skills must be organised by teachers into manageable, relevant and carefully sequenced experiences for the child.

“*Motivational tactics*” were common and involved the teacher going around to each child when “*they’re on a task and pinpointing children who won’t be on task*” (SIT 2). When “*discovered*”, the teacher offered support and encouragement, providing “*clues and steps....Then if [children] try they might get a gold star*” (JIT 3).

Children’s cognitive development cannot be separated from their social milieu. From infancy children are building on the skills and perspectives of their society with the aid and support of others (Rogoff, 1990). Likewise, Gandini (1993) explains how social exchange is the paramount learning medium characterised by “*shared activity, communication, cooperation, and even conflict, children co-construct their knowledge of the world, using one child’s ideas to develop another’s or to explore a path yet unexplored*” (pg 141- 142). Teachers subscribed to the concept of “*making learning relevant, making connections...linking and reminding and prompting*” (JIT 5). Exemplar 16 demonstrates how JIT 5 effectively integrated children’s knowledge into a math lesson while simultaneously linking and extending their knowledge of math, oral language, reading, writing and social skills. She effectively guided their participation (Rogoff, 1990) by giving due recognition to their active participation while bridging their current understanding and skills to reach new understanding and skills, arranging and structuring their participation throughout the lesson.

Exemplar 16 Infant class 5: Math in the restaurant

Context: It is 11.50. There are seventeen children; comprising 7 junior and 10 senior infants. There is one teacher. They have just completed an Irish lesson. The teacher pulls a table to the right hand side at the top of the classroom telling the children that she is making a restaurant.

Teacher: *“I’m going to get my waitress from junior infants this time. Katie, what about you? Katie joins the teacher at the top of the classroom.*

Teacher: *“now we have a table so what else do we need for our restaurant? Child: “people”*

Teacher a little uncertainly *“yes, people would be nice but what else do we need before we get people for the restaurant? Children: Chairs.*

Teacher: *Yes we need chairs. I think four chairs would fit nicely around our table.*

She invites four of the junior infants to bring their chairs to the table. Seeing that there are just two junior infants left, she invites them to the restaurant as well. Addressing the entire class she says *“these people have been out all day and they’re very, very hungry and thirsty. So what is the first thing they do when they come into the restaurant?”*

Jack: *“you look at what you want to eat” Teacher:” and where would you see that?*

Jack: *“In the book of the restaurant”. Chris: “In a menu”.*

The teacher explains that sometimes the restaurant doesn’t have a

Teacher: *“Now we have four things on our menu. We need drinks”.*

Shane: *“Coca cola”, Gerald: “7-Up”, Jack: “ Hot chocolate”*

Teacher: *Lilly, what drink do you want to put on the menu?*

Lilly: *“Lucozade” Teacher: “Okay we have enough drinks now”.*

The teacher shows Katie how to be a waitress advising her to ask the guests what they would like to eat.

Katie: *“Can I get you something? Edel:” Hot chocolate and a cup of tea”*

Teacher: *“That’s two drinks; do you want something to eat?”*

Edel: *“ Hot chocolate and a milk shake” Teacher: “Well we have no milk shakes”*

Edel: *“Actually just hot chocolate” Sean: “Hot chocolate”*

Jack: *“A hamburger” Teacher: “Do you want a drink with it?”*

Jack: *“ A hamburger and 7-Up”*

Teacher: *“Now let’s check with the waitress; does she remember? Sometimes waitresses are very good, they don’t write anything down; but I think Katie might need help. Lilly come up here, you’re going to be on the register, so when they order something you press the button.*

<p>menu on the table but that they might have one written on a board.</p> <p>She decides that they will write a menu on the white board.</p> <p>Teacher: <i>“let’s write four or five things on the menu so that they have a choice”</i>.</p> <p>Child 1: <i>“chips and sausages”</i>. Teacher: <i>“how much would that be?”</i></p> <p>The children shout €100, €50</p> <p>Teacher: <i>“I don’t know where ye go for sausages and chips. Give me a price that is less than €10”</i>. Shane: <i>“€1”</i></p> <p>Teacher: <i>“Shane is going to have very good value in his restaurant”</i>.</p> <p>Hazel: <i>“chicken nuggets and burgers”</i></p> <p>Teacher: <i>“would you have the two of them together? Choose one of them”</i></p> <p>Hazel: <i>“chicken nuggets”</i>. Teacher: <i>“How much?”</i> Hazel: <i>“€2”</i></p> <p>Teacher: <i>“Very good value too”</i> Gerald: <i>“Cheese burger”</i> Teacher: <i>“How much?”</i> Dillon: <i>“€3”</i> Teacher: <i>“we’re getting dearer”</i> Somebody calls <i>“hamburger for €4”</i></p>	<p>She asks the class <i>“can boys be waitresses?”</i> Children: <i>Yea</i></p> <p>Teacher smiles and shakes her head <i>“No, boys are called waiters. They do the same work but they are called waiters but I’m actually going to let Hazel be the second waitress. Hazel, I want you do take the order for these three [children] here.”</i></p> <p>Hazel asks the children what they want to order.</p> <p>Teacher: <i>“Katie, tell Lilly what your group ordered”</i></p> <p>Lilly is busy pressing buttons on the register.</p> <p>Teacher: <i>“Lilly are you enjoying yourself?”</i> Lilly: <i>“we have no fake money”</i>.</p> <p>Katie, Hazel and the teacher give cups and saucers to the guests in the restaurant. They pretend to eat and drink.</p> <p>It is 12.15pm.</p> <p>Teacher: <i>“Waitresses tidy up please. The waitresses will clean up and the boys and girls will pay the lady. Okay everybody back to your places.”</i></p> <p>On the way back to her table Lilly gives the teacher a hug</p>
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Unlike the pre-school sector, scaffolding children's learning was a core aspect of teacher practice. As explained by Griffin and Cole (1984) changes in teacher support can be qualitatively different, where the adult may direct attention, hold information in memory or offer simple encouragement to the child in the accomplishment of a task. Writing was cited by 6 teachers as an activity where scaffolding was vital. FG 3 JIT describes the process of scaffolding.

I have one or two children who have a lot of difficulty with actual letter formation; so first, you might do hand over hand, then air tracing and tracing in sand ; then maybe give them a prompt verbally the next time, so they've had practice with hand over hand, practice of making the shape and they've had the feel of it through sand and being directed and then they have to trace it and eventually you're leading to them doing it independently

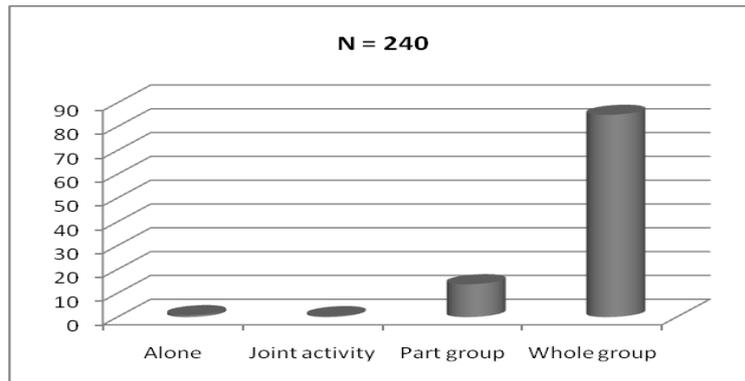
This explanation is consistent with Wertsch (1979, 1981 and 1985) who suggests that over time, the child comes to understand, the complexity, and the ways in which the different parts of the task relate to each other.

Likewise, peer scaffolding through "*pair work and group work*" was a significant element of practice where children make discoveries and "*learn something from each other*" (JIT 3). Such peer interaction was "*essential*" and more beneficial than the teacher "*having a go and pointing out their mistakes all the time*" (SIT 5).

While teachers may well consider their classrooms as crucibles of learning and development with regard to the range of teaching and learning strategies utilised, particularly scaffolding, observations indicate that they seldom promoted learning through social interaction involving negotiation of content and, with notable exceptions (e.g., exemplar 16) showed limited awareness of children's needs. Contrary to teacher assertions, findings indicate that peer scaffolding within infant classes was the exception rather than the rule. Children were frequently called upon to provide an answer that another child was unable or slow to give.

Management of time observations show that, it was common practice for children to work in groups (39). Whole group activity accounted for 85% of observations and, in common with the pre-school sector; there were minimal opportunities for children to work alone (0.8%) and/or with teacher/peer (0.4%).

Figure 39 Group structure infant classrooms



6. 4.5 Children at the Centre of Practice: Infant Teacher Perspectives

The primary school curriculum aims to cater for the child’s “needs and potential as they evolve day by day” (DES, 1999b:6). It is based upon a philosophy of teaching and learning that accords equal importance to what the child learns and to the process by which s/he learns. Teachers were unanimous in their agreement that the “*revised curriculum has moved a long way since 1971, it is absolutely child centered*” (JIT 5). The “*whole school day revolves around the child and is centred on the child*” (SIT 1). Contrary to this assertion, observations indicate that the concept of child agency was considerably compromised by restrictive teacher practices.

Indeed, working in silence was endemic in infant classrooms where children were repeatedly told to “*work quietly*”. They were constantly admonished for talking and whispering while they attended to tasks. Exemplar 18 illustrates the practice of working in silence and didactic teacher methodology. As evidenced through the teacher commentary “*if you are not finished [colouring] it’s alright, so long as you have your circle around number 1*”, the overall focus was on the end product.

Exemplar 17: Process versus product – infant class 2

Context	There are twenty children organised into two groups of 10 [table 1 and table 2]. They are learning about number 1 and preparing to complete an exercise in their workbooks. The teacher is explaining what to do
Giving instructions	Teacher: <i>“Pencils down – put your finger on the dinosaur please. What do we have to do? Sean, will you tell us what we have to do?”</i> Sean: <i>“Put a circle around the things that have 1. We join them to number 1”</i> Teacher <i>“Will be put our circle around the sweets? Children “No”</i> Teacher <i>“Why not?”</i> Children <i>“Because we are doing number 1”</i> Teacher: <i>“What about the fish? Children “No”</i> Teacher: <i>“because we have three fish. The bell is going to go now and then you can do your work. Then, put your pencils away and do your colouring. Okay, pick up your pencil and circle the ones that have one of them”</i>
More instructions	The teacher moves between groups checking the work, asking: <i>“is everybody working? Children: “Yes teacher”</i> Teacher: <i>“Now put your pencils away and do your colouring. Colour everything that has 1. Help me out here”</i> Teacher and children recite <i>“I snail, I dinosaur, I butterfly, I tortoise and I bun”</i> . Teacher <i>“Molly, shhh, do it without talking. Sean, work please”</i>
Teacher sarcasm	At table 1, the children at table are whispering to each other. Teacher: <i>“Table 1, a little bit too much talking. What’s our number for today?”</i> Children: <i>“Number 1”</i> Teacher <i>“Imagine that and your table is number 1. A little bit too much talking”</i>
Focus on finished product	Teacher: <i>“Anybody who is finished, up to teacher’s table. Walking, walking. No accidents”</i> The children line up as the teacher takes their workbooks one by one. She comments on their work before signing and dating it <i>“Lovely neat colouring, super, good girl, lovely John, good girl”</i> Teacher: <i>“Everybody else; finish up now please and join the line”</i> . A number of children are still colouring Teacher: <i>“Come on, if you are not finished it’s alright, so long as you have your circle around number 1. You really need to tidy up now and finish it at home. We need to get our songs done before lunch”</i> At 10.20am she rings the bell saying <i>“work books away, colours away. Table 1 get the mats for me, quickly now. Table two bring up your chairs”</i> The children are chatting to each other as they collect the floor mats. The teacher claps her hands saying <i>“shhh, no talking”</i>

Notwithstanding many such observations, teachers claimed that child centred practice was reflected in the *“structure of the lessons and the activities”*, *“getting the kids involved in the process of learning”*, *“through teacher instruction”*, *“hands on activities and discovery”*,

“pitching the curriculum at different levels”. The overarching aim is to teach a *“lesson that’s truly child centred in that you get [children] involved in the learning process”* (JIT 5).

JIT 3 claimed that teachers plan what they want children to learn, rather than *“what we want to teach”*. The focus was on *“discovery learning”* where in a math lesson for instance, a teacher may want children to learn about adding that *“one and two make three”* (FG 3 JIT). The other part of the equation is the *“process to get them there; to use beads and counters”* (ibid). Thus, children learn for themselves through interaction with the materials. Building on the discourse of discovery learning, JIT 2 explained how children may be given a *“pack of materials to sort”*.

You could have the one property where they sort according to colour where it’s basic or the two property collection where they sort according to colour or shape; they organise how they’re going to sort it; they are leading the learning, discovery learning (JIT 2).

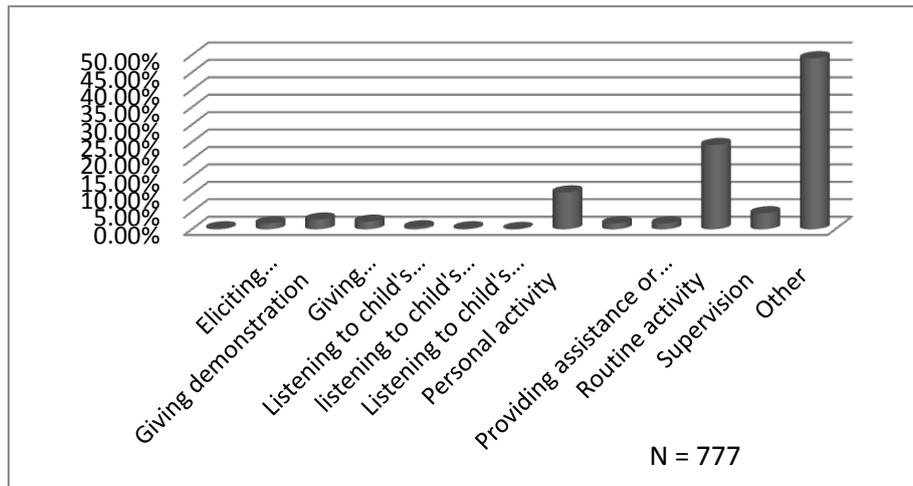
While pre-school teachers may not be familiar with the terminology - *“discovery learning”*, children in pre-school settings frequently used concrete learning materials to count, differentiate, add, and to learn about colours and shapes. Teachers appeared not to recognise that *“discovery learning”* occurs in multiple learning environments including home and pre-school.

JIT 3 was critical of what she perceived as a *“huge focus on concrete materials and constructivism”* arguing that it...

Sets the child up for this concrete way of thinking where they don’t move away into any kind of abstract thought and so much learning is involved in the abstract bit and all the higher order thinking skills.

Accordingly, while concrete materials *“have their place in education”* they render *“questions, stories and dialogue immaterial”*. Although there is merit in this argument, it overlooks the centrality of the teacher’s role as a *“caring facilitator and guide who interprets the child’s learning needs and responds to them”* (DES, 1999a: 20). Figure 40 provides an overview of teachers’ management of time in infant classrooms.

Figure 40 Management of time in infant classrooms



As shown, teachers provided assistance, clarification and/or suggested solutions for a total of 3.4% of observations, giving demonstrations accounted for 2.8%, eliciting knowledge related to learned concepts or to child’s own thoughts/ideas 2%, and giving knowledge intended to teach 2.2%. Significantly, routine activity accounted for 24.2% of time which may be accounted for by the fact that teachers undertook responsibility for disseminating workbooks, copy books, pencils, crayons, art paper and so on. Children were seldom involved in such tasks within infant classrooms.

Differentiation is critical to children’s learning and development. It is the “bridge between the individual and the interpersonal“, which recognises the role of the teacher in introducing the developing child to new concepts (Haste, 1999: 183). In terms of infant classrooms being a crucible of learning and development, teachers must distinguish between the child’s proximal and actual zone of development and match their level of support to the child’s actual level of development (Tharpe and Gallimore, 1988). The need for differentiation was cited by 7 (70%) of teachers in order to ensure that each child’s needs were met and to provide opportunities for children to “*be as involved in their learning to the fullest extent possible*” (JIT 5). JIT 4 claimed that “*you get nowhere with them unless you can adapt your lesson plan to their level and interests*”. It was imperative to change direction “*if something happens that takes their interest away even momentarily*” (Ibid.).

On one occasion, I observed JIT 5’s spontaneity in responding to children’s natural curiosity when the school caretaker began to cut the grass during a math lesson. She had not planned for this intrusion into the normal classroom routine, but recognising it as an impromptu

learning opportunity; she skilfully incorporated it into her schedule. By the time the observation was complete, the children had opened the windows to savour the sweet smell of cut grass, had discussed power mowers, push mowers and drive on mowers, they had written the word in their copy books and drawn a lawnmower. Some children had even decided that they wanted to be “*the lawn cutter man*” when they grew up.

Overall, however, differentiation was associated with having “*two or three different levels of worksheets*” for different levels of ability. This study shows that even at such a basic level, differentiation was an infrequent occurrence. Each lesson was accompanied by a standard 5 – 7 minute explanation during which children often lost interest. In one classroom, I observed a boy complete his math work during the explanation. Having completed the work he proceeded to doodle on the four corners of the page for 4½ minutes before the teacher noticed his inattention. She scolded him for completing his work during the instruction period. Going to his desk she rubbed out his work. He spent the next 1½ minutes looking around and sucking the top of his pencil as the teacher continued to issue instructions. He completed the work a second time and coloured the accompanying pictures. When the teacher finally gave permission for the whole class to commence work she admonished him again for completing his work too soon. Contrary to teacher claims of having additional worksheets ready, this child was not given any such differentiated work sheet, nor was he given permission to undertake another activity. Rather, he was asked to sit quietly until his peers were finished.

This approach is contrary to Vygotskian theory which proposes that the “only good learning is that which is in advance of development” (1978: 89). Such learning is dependent upon positive teacher interaction that directs instruction towards the ZPD. In so doing, instruction precedes and facilitates learning, preventing instruction from lagging behind the development of the child. When teachers fail to differentiate the curriculum, instruction merely utilises what has already matured in the developmental process, ignoring that development as a source of development in itself (Vygotsky, 1987). Moreover, Rushton and Larkin (2001) hold that not teaching children when they are ready may result in boredom or lack of interest.

6.4.6 Barriers to Children’s Agency in Infant Classrooms

Although positively disposed towards the curriculum, teachers agreed that the process of learning does become compromised. Teachers “*can get to a place where what we are doing is more important than who we are doing it with*” (JIT 3). While the “aims and objectives” might be to facilitate and support active learning, teachers acknowledged that this did not

always happen in practice. They identified a number of factors that precluded children's agency within the classroom: large class sizes, teacher attitude, split classes and time constraints associated with a *"packed curriculum"*.

Time constraints were a significant barrier as the number of curricular subjects (7) placed teachers under *"enormous pressure"*. Effectively, there was little time for *"children to engage in the whole process"* of learning. Even though teachers integrated different subject areas, the only way to get through the curriculum was to *"break it into twenty minute or twenty five minute slots"*. Consequently, *"there is no process there, there's very little learning, it's just reinforcement but that is all that can be done"* (JIT 2). While JIT 3 was pro-process and child-lead activities, the need to implement the curriculum meant that she opted for the most efficient methods. Therefore,

If an activity is going to take an hour where the children are leading it or it's going to take half an hour with me leading it and I think it's going to be pretty much the same outcome I'd be inclined to go for the half hour with me leading it (JIT 3).

Concurring with this perspective, SIT 4 said that *"when you're expected to deliver on the curriculum objectives, you have to compromise, unfortunately, nine times out of ten it's the children that are compromised"*. Farquhar (2003) suggests that it is not what teachers know, their years of experience, their level of teacher education or their professional development that make a difference in building strong early foundations for children's learning. It is how this in turn influences their practice. In this regard, both JIT 3/JIT 5 stressed that *"young children need time and space to learn"*. This attitude was shaped by their collective thirty nine years of teaching experience. As commented by JIT 5, *"you learn through your mistakes"*. They agreed that it *"takes time to stand back and consider why a child doesn't understand or can't grasp a concept"* (JIT 3). It was crucial to invest time in children; therefore, *"you spend as much time as necessary on an area until you're satisfied they understand it. Once children fully understand the concept you'll fly through the work so you get the curriculum covered anyway"* (JIT 5).

The other significant factor that precluded child agency in infant classrooms was class size. Teachers argued that the *"large numbers impede, you don't get best practice"*. The current teacher/child ratios prevented teachers from spending time with any individual child. Accordingly, there is minimal contact time because *"you're constantly trying to do so much. There are children that can work away fine but others want loads of attention and they constantly interrupt everything but you simply haven't the time to give to them"* (FG 3 JIT).

B.Ed graduates agreed that class sizes impeded children's learning. In common with infant teachers they stated that *"it's unfortunate but if something has to be compromised it is the children"*. (B.Ed (G) 7). Faced with being *"alone behind a closed door with twenty or thirty infants"*, there was *"no way"* that teachers could *"facilitate the process the way [they're] meant to"*. In the interests of expediency, and to get through the curriculum, activities have to be *"teacher led"*. This is counter productive and taken in the context of the significant level /amount? (85%) of teacher led activities in pre-school settings, belies the potential for pre-school and infant classrooms to be a crucible for children's learning and development.

Ideally, teachers would like to see class sizes limited to 20 children. In the words of JIT 2 who had 34 children in her class; *"every single child over [20] becomes more of a burden" not just for the teacher but for the children as well....it adds to the noise level and takes from the time that any child will get from me"*. In the context of class sizes in Ireland, where teachers find themselves alone in classes of 25 - 30 children (OECD, 2004a, 2006a, 2009a, 2009b), there is every reason to be concerned that the *"wishes and fears of individual children may not be taken into account in large classrooms focussed not on the individual child or the child's agency but on reaching early learning standards"* (Bennett, 2006: 16).

Building upon discourse regarding the relationship between teachers and children, three teachers and five B.Ed graduates were adamant that the most important factor in facilitating the learning process was *"teacher quality which is all about attitude"*. In the words of B.Ed (G) 8 children did not *"respond well to being treated like robots with their hands up and their fingers on their lips which is what a lot of teachers want out of children"*.

Exemplar 18 depicts the positive interaction between JIT 2 and the children in her infant class. It is interesting to note that this teacher, who normally had thirty four children in her class, had *"only twenty nine children"* on the day of this observation. Regardless of the large numbers of children, her rapport with and enjoyment of the children was evident. The teacher's relationship with the children, her ability to facilitate their social interaction and her pacing of the lesson lie in stark contrast to exemplar 17, where the teacher had twenty children in her classroom and yet was preoccupied with didactic methodology and the end product of the lesson.

Exemplar 18: Positive teacher/child interaction – infant class

<p>Observation 1: Infant class 3. Context</p>	<p>It is 9.30am on Monday morning. There are twenty nine children. The teacher is beginning a pre-reading activity</p>
<p>Acknowledging children’s feelings</p>	<p>Teacher: <i>“boys and girls we are going to get out word ladder first of all”</i> As the children continue to chat among themselves, the teacher reminds them that <i>“it is time for our word ladder. Isn’t it hard to work on a Monday morning?”</i> Boy: <i>“yea, because you’re very tired”</i></p>
<p>Positive interaction</p>	<p>Pointing to a word on the word ladder she asks a boy (Colin) what it is. Colin: <i>Pots</i> Girl: <i>Pot not pots</i> Teacher: <i>Did he say pots? Somebody is listening very well this morning. Now, the very tip-top word, Sally?</i> A boy calls <i>spot</i> Teacher laughing: <i>Somebody up here thinks their name is Sally.</i></p>

Lobman and Ryan (2008) highlight the need for those tasked with training teachers to upgrade their knowledge of ECCE without which the gap between what teachers are trained to do and what they are able to do will grow. Teacher educators must place priority on preparing teachers who can deliver high quality pedagogy and provide students with quality learning experiences (Gore *et al*, 2007). In fact, Gore *et al* (2007) claim that teacher education is not yet consistently producing teachers who deliver such quality.

Thus, in the context of this study, teachers lay the blame for didactic teaching within the *“didactic approach in college”* (JIT 3). Teachers and B.Ed graduates described how the lecturer will *“stand at the top of the room and you’re given the information and it becomes set in people’s minds that this is how you teach”* (FG 3 JIT). Thus, classroom practice becomes a continuation of that model as teachers draw on what they are familiar with and in *“most cases it’s that didactic model”* (ibid). These graduates claimed to have been *“totally turned off”* teaching because of this attitude, suggesting that it was *“not the kind of teacher [they] want to be, it’s not [their] idea of teaching”* (B.Ed (G) 4). B.Ed (G) 8 claimed that infant teachers must be *“proactive. There’s a different level required; she has to be buzzing for students”*. Above all, the infant teacher has to be *“playful and fun because that’s what children to relate to...”*

The ability to facilitate the learning process was further compounded in circumstances where teachers had split junior and senior infant classes. One teacher (FG 3 JIT) who teaches a mixed class of twenty seven children described his frustration saying that

You're jumping from Billy to Paul all day and trying to keep one group quiet; it's just ridiculous. You're trying to concentrate on seniors and asking juniors to stay quiet; it's just a no-go. I come home and I feel like I've been with seniors all day – just trying to get letters and rhymes done with juniors and get them used to the actual day in school. Whereas seniors; I'm trying to get them ready for first class.

Two other teachers also teaching split classes (FG 3 JIT) agreed that they were under “*huge pressure*”. They were anxious to prepare the infants for seniors; but explained how “*there's a first class teacher asking - have you anything done with these*”. Consequently, you were trying to “*keep up with yourself all the time*”. All of these issues prevented teachers from being the teacher “*that we know we can be*”. Not only is children’s learning compromised but teachers also “*compromise [their] values*”. While this was regrettable, teachers stated there was “*only so much we can do*”. At the end of the day, the system should be “*overhauled*”. At a minimum there should be a “*second adult, not necessarily a teacher; a second pair of hands*” in each infant classroom.

6.4.7 Conclusion

This Chapter section provides compelling evidence regarding the gap between policy and practice within both pre-school and infant classrooms which precludes the potential of pre-school and infant classrooms to serve as crucibles of learning and development. In practice, children’s agency is significantly compromised within both domains. Clearly, pre-school teachers were unable to link practice to theory in any coherent manner. Moreover, observations of practice demonstrate that contrary to the UNCRC (1989), the National Children’s Strategy (DHC, 2000) and the primary school curriculum, children seldom had a voice and were seldom listened to. This Chapter supports the assertion in section 1 that there is a capacity issue within the pre-school sector that affects pre-school teacher ability to translate policy into practice.

By contrast, infant teachers were acutely aware of the concept of child agency. They were equally knowledgeable about teaching strategies and clearly linked theory to practice. This was evident for example in how teachers described the process of scaffolding in the development of writing skill. Regardless of teachers’ best intentions, children’s agency is bounded by school culture. Thus, the supremacy of the curriculum becomes a central focus

within infant classrooms serving to push children's agency to the periphery of practice. The process of learning, a central aspect of agency is compromised by expediency.

Both sectors were characterised by rigid schedules, long periods of sedentary activity, confined spaces and intense academic pressures. For the most part, learning experiences do not reflect the child's natural, playful style of learning. Such an approach to teaching is anathema to infant teachers who are compelled to adhere to a prescriptive plan for instructional activities; namely the primary school curriculum. In general, pressure to implement the curriculum, coupled with large class sizes results in a one size fits all approach to teaching.

Section 5 Training, Development and Professional Identity

6.5.1 Introduction

This section is concerned with attitudes towards training and continual professional development. It shows that there is increasing recognition of the complexity of working in ECCE and explores the construct of professional identity within pre-school and infant contexts. It presents empirical evidence on the attitudes of pre-school and infant teachers towards their professional identity and their aspirations for the future. Findings indicate that professional identity was contentious and problematic in both domains.

6.5.2 Women Who Love and Care for Children

A report of the National Forum for Early Childhood Education (1998) upholds the notion that teacher competence is crucial in the early years and that the training and education of teachers is the first assurance of quality. In 2001, the OECD posits that quality practice is dependent upon “strong staff training and fair working conditions across the sector” (pg 11). Findings highlight considerable differences in both respects between pre-school and infant teachers.

In relation to the pre-school sector, policy makers acknowledged that “*we have huge challenges in relation to the workforce and where they’re at*” (PM 4). Congruent with many researchers (Melhuish *et al*, 2002, Moyles *et al*, 2002, Sylva *et al*, 2003, 2004, Swick, 1985) policy makers agreed that the quality of ECCE was “*hugely variable. To a large extent that’s to do with how well qualified people are*” (ibid.).

With the exception of policy makers who focussed on knowledge and skills as the determinants of quality, other stakeholders (support agencies, HSE, ECCE managers and staff), while pointing to the necessity for core knowledge and skills, highlighted the need for “*women to have a love for and a genuine interest in working with children*” (CCC 4). These stakeholders agreed that that being interested in working with children was “*vital*” serving as a spring board for “*good practice*” and for “*getting qualifications*”.

Jalongo *et al* (2004) posit that young children’s care has been treated as a “natural outgrowth of maternal instincts, a role for which the rewards are intrinsic rather than material” (pg 146). Findings indicate that this perception has survived into the 21st century. Other than policy makers, NVCC s and B.A (ECCE) graduates, there was a belief that training was not the “*the*

be all and end all of working with children". As noted by HSE 4 *"I agree in principle that people should be qualified but in practice some of the unqualified people can be as good as the qualified"*.

Managers in particular, believed that *"you can employ people with no qualifications and they could be brilliant"*. In the context of community provision, CBM 4 explained the dichotomy between employing trained and untrained staff.

Some of Community Employment staff would be absolutely fantastic and would have come here with no training. They mightn't know why they're doing things for the children but they are meeting the children's needs. They have children of their own...Some people are trained and they have no communication with the children.

Likewise, PBM 3 explained how she employed *"a few mothers and older women and you can't beat that"*. Concurring with this viewpoint, HSE 3 and PBM 5 stated that *"more mature women that stayed out of work outside the home love children, they're child – centred and nurturing"*.

The ability to love and care for children is no longer sufficient when the weight of evidence points to the connection between child development gains and teacher education (Bowman *et al*, 2001, Brooks-Gunn *et al*, 1994, Brooks-Gunn *et al*, 2002, Campbell *et al*, 2002, Melhuish *et al*, 2002, NESF, 2005, Ramey *et al*, 1998, Schweinhart *et al*, 1993, Sylva *et al*, 2003, Sylva *et al*, 2004, Schweinhart, 2004). In this regard, CBM 5 argued that *"people are inclined to say sure I reared five kids but that's not training"*. Although agreeing with the HSE perspective, that these *"women have something to offer"* she argued that if they *"haven't an interest in training or up-skilling; then it's just a job"*. Ultimately, *"people who're interested get trained"*.

6.5.3 ECCE: an Easy Option

Right across the sector, commencing at policy level, there was a perception that *"Ireland has a tradition of putting more vulnerable people into work in the childcare sector"* (PM 5). B.A ECCE graduates were angry that ECCE was portrayed as an *"easy"* option that was particularly suited to...

People who do not perform well in mainstream education, you're not very good at anything but you have a kind heart; childcare would be ideal for you. That's an example of who gets into childcare; the person who didn't get through the school system very well" (B.A ECCE (G) 2).

This approach has far reaching consequences for the sector. Commenting on the *“laissez faire”* approach in relation to those who are *“allowed to work with young children”* graduates felt that it *“devalues the person and the work”* (B.A ECCE (G) 8).

Adding to this debate was a suggestion that the B.A ECCE was a possible route into primary school teaching. Graduates spoke of *“people on our course that didn’t get the points for teaching and chose the early childhood degree instead”* (B.A ECCE (G) 6). Of the ten graduates, four admitted that they *“wanted to do teaching but didn’t get the points”*. Likewise, within the B.A (ECCE) focus group, students explained how having failed to *“get into teaching, this degree was the next best thing...”* Similarly, the NVCCs and CCCs described the B.A ECCE as the *“back door into primary school”* while ECCE managers and staff described graduates as *“wanabee teachers ...they’ll just move on as quickly as they can”*.

Coupled with this dialogue was widespread acknowledgement of the complexity of working with children. In relation to *Síolta, Aistear*, the revised Childcare (pre-school services) regulations and the free pre- school year in ECCE, support agencies claimed that *“so much is expected of providers”* (NVCC 3). It was acknowledge that working with children was increasingly demanding.

6.5.4 The Case for Pre-service Training

Although managers admitted to employing untrained staff there was growing recognition that the childcare landscape was changing. Contingent on the increasing complexity and demands of the work *“you need an awful lot more now to work in a crèche, the days of just sitting [children] in front of the television or giving them crayons is long gone”* (CBM 4). At macro level, the complexity of the work was reflected in *“important knowledge and skills”* including *“an in-depth understanding of child development”* and *“knowledge of how children learn; interactions and behaviour management”* (PM5). Policy makers outlined a set of core competencies that would enable pre-school teachers to *“work effectively”*. These core competencies, delineated from policy maker interviews are presented in table 29.

Table 29 Core competencies of an effective pre-school teacher: policy maker perspective

Knowing how the setting recognises and integrates with the wider experiences that children have

Knowing how to interact with parents and how to involve and respond to parents

Understanding how the setting sits within the community and how it prepares children to move from one part of their environment to another.

Having the ability to become self-aware, to be critical of their practice, to reflect and think about what they're doing and why they're doing it.

Being able to think on their feet and responsive to situations

Having an ability to integrate new knowledge quickly

Policy makers recognised that this was a “*huge ask*” from the sector. There was consensus that in the future, “*everybody coming into the sector should be expected to have a minimum standard of training*” (PM 4). Equally, support agencies and BA (ECCE) graduates stated that training was the “*the only way to achieve higher standards of practice*”. FG FETAC 5 shows how training had “*opened*” students’ eyes to the child’s learning potential

Student voice 1: I know a whole lot more about the whole area of childcare and how children develop and how they learn; it’s amazing...

Student voice 2: It’s interesting; all the different things that you need to know about to help children to learn, the books, the puzzles and all the toys and stuff; I never really thought about that before

Student voice 3: This training helps you to know what helps the children to learn and what you can do to help them do that; to let them do things for themselves not to always expect them to do it your way

In terms of what was essential knowledge for working in ECCE, B.A (ECCE) graduates prioritised child development, pedagogical knowledge, curriculum and play. Of these four areas; “*child development is core; it informs everything else*” (B.A ECCE (G) 3). However, as articulated by B.A ECCE (G) 8 a “*surface knowledge*” of child development was not enough. Not alone do you need child development but also a knowledge of how children learn

They learn by being active, they have to be doing, moving from the concrete to the abstract. There’s a whole process; it’s about knowing and understanding the process of how a child learns (B.A.ECCE (G) 8).

In common with NVCCs and Policy makers, graduates identified a lacuna in terms of translating theory into practice asking: *“What good is knowledge of Bruner, Vygotsky, and Piaget if you can’t actually translate that into practice?”* B.A ECCE (G) 3 explained how in depth knowledge of child development was about knowing that children *“need the support of adults”*; *providing them with the “steps that allow them to learn and build on their learning”* Graduates spoke of being able to *“scaffold”* learning. Consistent with Rogoff *et al* (1984) B.A ECCE (G) 6 explained how teachers do not solve the problem for the child, rather, s/he *“offer(s) enough support to show them or to help them to figure out the way themselves”*.

Both Policy makers and NVCCs suggested that lack of basic training placed children and teachers at a disadvantage. It comprised the ability of pre-school teachers to *“engage in meaningful ways”* with children (PM 5). Similarly, NVCC 4 explained how *“adults are disadvantaged because they don’t have the language or the ability to engage in conversations with children, the art of communication is lost”*. Thus in terms of language, both children and pre-school teachers are at a disadvantage. Observations of practice demonstrate that pre-school teachers were limited in their capacity to engage in sustained shared thinking, where two or more individuals work together in an intellectual way (Siraj- Blatchford *et al*, 2002). As evident from exemplar 19, dialogue was typified by mono syllabic adult responses such as *“wow”*, *“cool”*, and *“brilliant”*, *“really”*, *“okay”*. Pre-school teachers generally struggled to sustain ongoing meaningful conversation with children.

Exemplar 19 Dressing up for Halloween

Context Observation 8 Community setting 1	Community based setting - there are fifteen children and two adults sitting around two tables. It is a week before Halloween and the adults are asking the children to describe what they are going to be for Halloween
Mono-syllabic interaction	Adult: <i>"Molly what are you going to be"</i> Molly: <i>"A witch"</i> Adult: <i>"good stuff. What about you Lewis?"</i> Lewis: <i>"A spider"</i> Adult: <i>"Cool, wow – Hannah?"</i> Hannah: <i>"A witch"</i> Adult: <i>"wow – Robert?"</i> Robert: <i>"A spider"</i> Adult: <i>"Cool, Jane what about you?"</i> Jane: <i>"A witch"</i> Adult: <i>"Cool"</i> A child blurts: <i>"I'm going to be a frog"</i> Adult: <i>"Wow. What about you Josh?"</i> Josh: <i>"A spider"</i>
Missed opportunities for sustained shared thinking	Adult: <i>"Tadhg what about you?"</i> Tadhg: <i>"Incy, Wincy spider climbed up the water spout"</i> Adult: <i>"What are you dressing up as?"</i> Tadhg: <i>"I didn't bring my clothes to school"</i> Adult: <i>"But you're dressing up clothes? What have you at home?"</i> Tadhg: <i>"My spider suit"</i> Adult: <i>"wow, cool"</i> A boy shouts <i>"I want to be a bat for Halloween"</i> Adult: <i>"My, how cool would that be?"</i>

There were many such exemplars in pre-school settings where "conversations with adults were mainly restricted to answering questions rather than asking them, or taking part in minimal exchanges" (Tizard *et al*, 1984: 9).

Importantly, in common with the concept of sustained shared thinking (Sylva *et al*, 2002), Rogoff recognises the importance of reciprocal attention between social partners – teacher and child. This has implications for all those tasked with facilitating and supporting children's development. It implies a proactive teacher role surpassing that of instruction and includes the use of and interpretation of non verbal cues such as eye contact, modelling or verbal instructions. This broad view of communication would see the realisation of children's agency in pre-school and infant contexts.

6.5.5 A Decade Later: No Mandatory Training Requirement

There was considerable discrepancy between views at macro, meso and micro levels regarding efforts to support training and development within the sector. Policy makers and support agencies expressed their belief that an “awful lot of work has been done” as reflected in the Model framework for Education, Training and Professional Development which went a “long way towards identifying the different levels that you might expect to work at as a child care practitioner” (PM 5), and the Workforce Development Plan (DES, 2009) which “looked at what might be the appropriate qualification levels for somebody who is working in a pre-school service” (PM 4).

A different picture emerged at micro level where ECCE managers, staff and students were cynical of the work undertaken at policy level. It was described as little more than “book keeping”, “a tick box exercise”, and “books on shelves”. Practice frameworks (*Aistear*, *Síolta*) were described as being “dead in the water; there’s no implementation” (B.A ECCE (G) 6). In a critique of the absence of a training requirement for the pre-school sector, many interviewees (65) including the HSE expressed concern that “anybody can open a childcare service; there’s nothing to stop them”.

There was immense frustration at both meso and micro levels, that the revised Childcare (pre-school services) Regulations, 2006 “missed the boat” in terms of introducing a mandatory training requirement. PB- PST 4 explained how when she undertook training in 1996, there was an expectation “even at that stage” that there would be a training requirement in the Childcare Regulations, 1996. It was inconceivable, that a decade later “there is still no requirement for a minimum qualification”.

In this respect, there was a polarity of opinions. At one level, there was a continued acceptance of women who love and care for children; while at another, there was increasing recognition of the direct link between staff training, qualifications, and continual professional development in the provision of quality ECCE. At practice level, there was confusion about the lack of a mandatory training requirement as “most [staff] have FETAC 5 anyway” (CBM 4). In fact, there was widespread belief that those working in the sector had self-selected. NVCC 4 commented that “people who are serious about working with children have gone away and done their FETAC Level 5”. In this respect, 33% of staff in Ireland held a third level qualification (DES, 2007). In the context of NVCC 4s claim, the DES study (2007)

shows the most frequent childcare specific qualification for both full-time and part-time staff was FETAC Level 5 accredited (41%).

Indicative of significant underlying issues in the sector, there was a belief at practice level, that failure to introduce a mandatory requirement was part of a strategy by government to prevent the professionalization of the sector. PB-PST 5 claimed that the government was aware of the “*appalling salaries. God forbid we’d get trained because we might make demands for decent pay. We might even want to be recognised*”. Likewise, CCC 3 and HSE 4 felt that the absence of a training requirement reflected a lack of government commitment to “*training for fear there could be demands for the professionalization of the sector*”. Indeed, CCC 3 associated the lack of a training requirement with “*controlling the sector so that it doesn’t become too strong as a profession and it’s driving the sector down*”.

Again, signifying the dissonance between the HSE and the sector, CB-PST 3 suggested that the “*HSE wouldn’t want us to know too much*”. Currently, pre-school teachers are not “*allowed to question because [the HSE] are the experts but if we were trained we might know more than them and show them up. That’s why there’s no training requirement*” (ibid).

Policy makers and the NVCCs proposed an alternative benign perspective linking the absence of a training requirement with concern for the sector. According to PM 4 “*you couldn’t just introduce a blanket requirement for a minimum qualification. In the first instance, practitioners have to be supported to up-skill if that is what is required. That’s not something that can happen overnight*”. Furthermore, “*on a pragmatic level*”, it would have been irresponsible to regulate for minimum qualifications as “*you would arguably have closed down the majority of services*” (ibid).

In fact, the introduction of the free pre-school year in ECCE necessitated the drafting of interim measures to enable pre-school teachers to “*acquire a minimum qualification at Level 5 by 2012*” (PM 5). There was acceptance that “*you have to give people support if you’re going to require qualifications*” (NVCC 4).

Although training was linked to the free pre-school year in ECCE, the NVCCs and CCCs continued to be perturbed that “*it’s not a statutory requirement and it’s not stitched into the regulations*” (CCC 6). PM 4 explained that as “*the sector is not remunerated very well*”, mandatory training would result in an “*immediate demand for salaries, better conditions of pay and employment possibly commensurate with those in the primary school sector*”.

Critically, in the current economic climate it is *“unlikely that it will happen anytime soon”* (ibid).

CB-PST 4 was relieved by the absence of a mandatory training requirement. Of twenty eight staff in her setting; nine were full- time of whom eight were trained. The remainder were CE workers. In acknowledging that this setting did not meet the 50% recommendation in the guidelines to the Childcare regulations, she claimed that *“community services would fall apart if all staff had to be trained”*. Conversely, three community managers thought that a *“50% requirement was not sufficient; there is a real need to increase the number of qualified staff in the community sector”* (CBM 4). Aligning her argument to accountability discourse, CBM 1 stated that everybody should be trained because *“parents are looking for more and more...how can we justify saying that we’re offering a quality service if the staff aren’t even trained.”*

Equally problematic was the requirement regarding a *“competent adult”*. The sector was puzzled about the meaning of the term. HSE 4 would expect a *“suitable and competent adult to have adequate experience and adequate qualifications”*. In terms of adequate qualifications, while 3 of the 4 HSE interviewees suggested a *“Level 5 qualification”*, the 4th *“wouldn’t necessarily”* be looking for accredited training. She spoke of *“lots of people who are untrained but they’ve done lots of little workshops; they may not have an accredited course, they have a gift for it and a good way with children”*.

ECCE graduates were scathing in their criticism of the regulations claiming that the term competent adult was *“a total cop out”*. If you *“don’t define competent, you don’t have to do anything about standards”* (B.A ECCE (G) 2). Furthermore, competent can be translated as *“minimal and it does nothing to put the sector on a professional footing”* (ibid).

6.5.6 A Soul Destroying Experience

At macro and meso levels, there was agreement that pre- service training should include a *“strong practicum”* component. Researchers (Odell *et al*, 2000: xv, Blatchford *et al*, 2002), hold that professional practice occurs in the context of teaching whenever an *“experienced teacher supports challenges and guides novice teachers in their teaching practice”*. In fact, Jacobs (2001) supports the concept of scaffolding as an appropriate mechanism in the preparation of teachers suggesting that novice teachers can learn from more experienced teachers within their ZPD. This presents a considerable conundrum for the pre-school sector

where, although “*practitioners seem to genuinely love the children they simply don’t know how to work with them in any meaningful way*” (B.A ECCE (G) 1).

In the main, students at all levels were critical of their experience while on work placement, describing it as “*terrible*”, “*shocking*”, “*distressing*”, “*horrible*”, “*didactic*”, and “*controlling*”. Such criticism applied equally to pre-school and infant class placements. Describing her placement as the “*most soul destroying part of my four years*” B.A ECCE (G) 4 claimed that because of its prevalence “*bad practice gets embedded within you and it’s very hard to shake that off no matter what theory and books you read*”. B.A ECCE (G) 6 said that her illusions had been shattered...”*what you learn in college is all magical and you go on placement and it’s so different and depressing*”. All graduates claimed that placement taught them “*what not to do*” as evidenced through the following testimonials

B.A ECCE voice 1: *It was so shocking, we spent maybe ten weeks learning about children and how they learn....what I saw was disrespect, shouting and sort of disabling or unplugging or something children’s interests, their confidence and their self-esteem. It was terrible.*

B.A ECCE voice 2: *One of the core aspects of being sent on placements is to observe good practice; did it live up to expectations in terms of viewing good practice – NO (graduate emphasis).*

B.A ECCE voice 3: *I was in a school and it was shocking. One little lad spent a huge amount of time being told off and put in time out to correct his behaviour, because when he wasn’t sitting down doing what they told him which was basically to sit down and be quiet and get on with some boring exercise, he was rooting in boxes and on shelves for something interesting to do. They kept trying to make him conform and it just was not going to happen; not at four years of age.*

Graduates described practice in infant classrooms as “*static*”, “*driven by routine*”, it “*revolves totally around the curriculum*”, and it’s “*so didactic*”. They highlighted a significant difference between their training and that of teachers where they were “*taught something completely different, for us it’s definitely about being warm and caring, for them it’s about control and power*” (B.A ECCE (G) 7).

FETAC Level 5 students were equally discerning about poor practice. There was a pervading sense that the “*reality out there is so different to what we’re learning in class*”.

Student voice 1: *There is no freedom of choice it is all adult driven, when the children want to play with the kitchen they’re not allowed, when they want to take out books they’re not allowed because it’s not book time and even the puzzles were given out by the adults so everybody is doing the same thing at the same time.*

Student voice 2: *The infant class I was in ...it was a nightmare for me to be there, it’s a one size fits all and that’s hard for children. They don’t seem to realise that they’re little four year olds or five year olds so all day long it’s a litany of ...you’re not listening, you’re not paying attention,*

you're not this, and you're not that. Those poor children just want to explore and discover and they want them to sit down and learn numbers and letters.

Across all levels of training, there was consensus that students are “*much disempowered*” when on placement. They are “*there as a guest*”. Consequently, even in circumstances where students witnessed poor practices, they “*couldn't say anything*” and were not in a position to effect change within the setting. As discussed in Chapter 5, those who are able to challenge the established order of practice, to question, to consider new and better ways of doing things, look beyond the “*strait jacket of constraints*” (OECD, 2006b:3) have a sense of how things are done and understood, and importantly, a vision of how things could be done differently. Ultimately, they are confident and assertive enough to reflect upon, propose alternatives and follow through on possibilities even when faced with challenge and adversity. Hence, it is the assertive, self assured and wise ECCE professional who challenges the status quo, low pay, poor working conditions who “*can muddy the water and offer the chance of a reconfigured professional identity and counter discourse*” (Osgood, 2006: 12).

6.5.7 The Lowest Common Denominator

Commenting on the lack of a mandatory training requirement and the prevalence of FETAC Level 5 training in the sector, B.A ECCE (G) 4 asked

Why are we as a country going to the lowest common denominator? We're making the standard so low and so many people are staying down there that we will find it hard to move up to quality and to having a profession that's good for the children and good for society....

Even though she held a B.A (ECCE) degree, this graduate felt that she “*still*” had a “*lot to learn*”. Commenting on FETAC training she stated that it was not enough to “*just do six months or a year no matter what practical experience you have*”.

There was consensus among support agencies that the broad spectrum of the eight modules in FETAC Level 5 “*would be a minimum standard, a starting point; and then Level 6 for anybody who's in a supervisory role*” (NVCC 4). Moreover, NVCC 3 was emphatic that “*it's not enough to say 50%, 60% or 90% at FETAC Level 5 but actually all staff interacting with the children should have that level*”. Additionally, “*50% of staff should have a degree*” (Ibid.).

Generally, FETAC Level 5 students agreed that anybody wishing to work with children should be “*interested enough to get trained*”. There was consensus among these students that FETAC Level 5 was “*all you needed, it's enough to get involved in pre-school because we're going to have work experience as well; that's enough*” (FGD 1). Once more, the issue of

salaries was highlighted. FETAC Level 5 students claimed that poor salaries within the sector was a disincentive to further training: *“what’s the point in doing more training because you won’t get any more money for being more educated or qualified?”*.

However, at the level of policy, support and practice, FETAC Level 5 was described as *“foundation training”*. Those studying at FETAC Level 6 also described FETAC Level 5 as *“basic training; it gives you an over view; the ground work for working with children but it isn’t enough”* (FGD 2). However, a number of focus group participants said that it *“depends on what you want to do”*. If you *“just want to work on the floor with the children, Level 5 is fine”* (FGD 1). Further illuminating the perception that the role of the pre-school teacher is uncomplicated, this student asked: *“how much you need to know to work with young children”*. However, *“if you want to become a manager you need level 6”* (Ibid.).

HSE 4 claimed that the *“baseline is way too low; practice on the ground tells a story”*. All four HSE participants stated that both FETAC Level 5 and level 6 *“is very limited”*. This issue was highlighted throughout the sector from macro to micro with an overarching consensus that it *“has to be the right kind of training”* (NVCC 4). Ideally, training should *“integrate theory and practice”* (Ibid.) and any accredited professional qualification needs to be related to a *“curriculum”*. In the context of FETAC Level 5 *“there is a huge gap there; there is no expectation around students developing a curriculum”* (CCC 5).

There was broad agreement that the quality of training was directly related to the quality of the trainer. As commented by HSE 4 *“nobody will bite the bullet about the fact of who is the trainer? In the words of CCC 5*

There are an awful lot of tutors regularly going into the colleges to deliver a three hour lesson on curriculum for example and they’ll hold their hands up and admit that they have never done childcare before and they haven’t a clue.

Similarly, policy makers acknowledged that the *“actual training people are getting isn’t exactly world class”* (PM 5). There was a need to *“raise the standard for training providers because they will have to provide courses that meet the needs and will have to be validated against these particular competencies that have been identified”* (ibid). Currently, there is no requirement for training providers to do this. Accordingly, HSE 4 suggested that the *“whole system is flawed”*. It was imperative to resolve this issue *“because they’re now benchmarking funding around levels of training”*. However, it must be acknowledged that

ongoing work in relation to the workforce development plan will redress these anomalies in terms of standardised training standards within the sector.

6.5.8 B.A (ECCE) Graduate Perspective

Within the preserve of formal and informal settings, Beyer and Bloch (1999) argue that both theory and practice are essential, creating a cycle of shaping and reshaping, through which theory informs practice and practice informs and reshapes theory. It is this combination of theoretical knowledge and understanding, embedded in everyday practice that defines pedagogy within the learning environments where young children participate.

Graduates agreed on the importance of pre-service training especially at degree level where they acquired theoretical knowledge and understanding. Admitting that they were “*biased*” they nonetheless stated that “*if you want quality education and care then the degree is needed*”. B.A ECCE (G) 3 stated that if parents wanted the best possible environment for their child “*physically and emotionally there needs to be a degree*”. A degree programme “*provides a more widespread knowledge base*” and was better suited to the “*diversity of challenges*” encountered within ECCE (FG ECCE 1).

According to Bertram *et al* (2002b), staff qualifications, training and professional development enable pre-school teachers to develop a rationale for their practice and “locate the evidence and conceptualisations which underpin it” (pg 37). Darling-Hammond (2002) articulates the need for teachers to acquire deep and flexible knowledge of subject matter, understand how to represent ideas in powerful ways, organise a productive learning process for students who start out with different levels and kinds of prior knowledge, assess how and what students are learning, and adapt instruction accordingly.

A 4 year degree enabled graduates to build on knowledge incrementally “*from the first to the second to the third to the fourth year*” (B.A ECCE (G) 5. That “*process*” made “*all the difference*” (Ibid.). Although anyone can learn “*the teaching strategies or tools*”; in the absence of a knowledge base; “*you have nothing*” (B.A ECCE (G) 4. It enables you to “*see why, to see the reasons behind practice...you can't expect to achieve that standard in a short period of time*” (ibid). As a result of spending 4 years studying ECCE, graduates had a body of knowledge, an understanding of theory and policy that “*you would never get in a year*”.

Graduates were “*angry*” and “*saddened*” by attitudes towards their training. They were perceived as being “*overqualified*” and “*unemployable*” within the sector. They asked: “*how*

can you be over qualified to teach a child? How can you say that you know too much?" (B.A ECCE 3). They saw their role as critical to children's' learning trajectory ... *"We are laying the foundations for their future and they are entitled to the best"* (ibid).

Regardless of their knowledge base, graduates agreed that they needed experience in the sector. While they had some exposure to practice during their training, they did not feel *"confident enough"* about their own practice. A number claimed to be *"nervous"* and acknowledged that were they to work in the sector, that they would be *"learning all over again"*. They further stated that irrespective of their training levels, *"practitioners should continue to engage in regular professional development"*. Multiple reasons were cited for continuous professional development (CPD); *"new research"*, *"new policy like Síolta"*, *"opportunities to up-skill"*, *"it helps people to share knowledge"*, *"it improves confidence and practice"*. Without CPD it would not be possible to *"provide the service that children need"*.

6.5.9 Attitudes Towards Continuous Professional Development

At practice level, managers were committed to CPD and to facilitating staff to undertake as much training as possible. The difficulty was that the *"commitment isn't there with the staff"* (PBM 1). This was less of a difficulty within the community sector where a range of supports were in place to enable staff to access training opportunities including time in lieu, payment of course fees and additional annual leave. Conversely, in the private sector, with the exception of two settings that *"try to pay for courses"*, staff paid for training themselves. There was no additional annual leave or time in lieu. Thus, as noted by PM 6 while some staff willingly engaged in training, others did not and *"there's nothing you can do about that"*.

Both the community and private sectors outlined a range of training that was driven by the childcare regulations; manual handling, first aid, child protection and hazard analysis critical control point (HACCP) training. According to PM 1 it was virtually impossible to motivate staff to engage in any training beyond the training outlined. *"These courses have to be done, the HSE require it, they're seen as mandatory really"* (ibid).

The CCCs claimed that the courses outlined would be *"booked out"* as soon as they were advertised. Likewise, *"anything to do with arts and crafts or behaviour management the sector will be beating down the door for that"* (CCC 3). Attendance at more *"complex*

training” was abysmal. NVCC 4 felt that this was reflective of where “*practitioners are at; it shows the level they’re at, their current needs are still very, very basic*”. Issues associated with engaging in CPD are complex. CCC 9 articulates the challenges for the sector

They can’t access training during the working day; that causes all sorts of problems; compliance with the regulations is an issue and none of them have money to pay for staff cover, so that’s an issue. The other thing is that the cost of training is often prohibitive and most of them are expected to pay for training themselves...

Because adult/child ratios need to be maintained at all times, training was generally undertaken at night or during weekends. This was seen as particularly “*hard for staff....they’ve been on the floor all day with kids sometimes from 7.00am to five or six*” (PBM 2). Likewise CBM 4 was critical of any pre-school teacher having to pay for training from their “*own pocket because the salaries are so poor, that really isn’t an option and they shouldn’t be expected to do it either*”. All of these issues are embedded in discourse on professional identity. Undoubtedly, training is a key issue in terms of exploring the identity of both pre-school and infant teachers. The remainder of this section is concerned with the identities of both sectors. It commences by looking at the qualification levels of research participants.

6.5.10 Qualification Levels of ECCE Managers and Staff

Unlike teaching which is a graduate led profession, the pre-school sector is typified by a mix of trained (various levels), semi trained and untrained staff. In this study, ECCE managers and staff held diverse qualifications (Table 10.2). These qualifications were attained through full-time attendance at university or colleges of further education ranging from one to two years’ duration. Thus, 6 managers held a FETAC Level 5 qualification, 1 held a FETAC Level 6 qualification, and 2 held a Montessori teaching Diploma with one having a degree in an unrelated discipline. 6 managers held the same basic qualification (FETAC Level 5) as their staff members. In terms of staff, 9 were trained to FETAC Level 5, while the remaining 7 held a Montessori teaching Diploma. Of these 7, four undertook Montessori training through a correspondence course. Osgood *et al* (2002), claim that such diversity in provision encourages staff to behave in isolated and defensive ways. As a result, they lack a unified identity or a shared belief in themselves as a professional group (ibid).

Table 30 Overview of ECCE manager and staff qualifications

Manager	FETAC Level 5	FETAC Level 6	Montessori teaching diploma	B.A ECCE	3rd level degree (unrelated discipline)	Number of years experience
1	√					30
2	√					17
3			√			10
4		√				8
5	√					3
6					√	5
7			√			6
8	√					10
9	√					8
10	√					4
ECCE Staff						
1	√					4
2	√					2
3			√			10
4			√			7
5			√			5
6	√					4
7	√					5
8			√			5
9			√			15
10	√					14
11	√					5
12			√			6
13			√			10
14	√					15
15	√					10
16	√					10

6.5.11 Diverse Terminology

To me your professional identity is almost as important as your personal identity; I mean you spend how long every day working? You should have some sort of pride in what you do. But here in Ireland, we don't even have a name for what we do

This is the opinion of B.A ECCE (G) 2 whose sentiments were compounded by the diverse terminology used to describe those working in the sector. These terms indicate the level of uncertainty, ambiguity, and change that permeates the sector. PB –PST 3 described herself as being “a bit of everything really” while CB-PST 1 said “I don't know; I just work with children”.

Table 31 Overview of terminology within the ECCE sector

Terminology

Practitioner, Nursery Assistant, Childcare assistant, Childcare worker, Early years worker, Crèche worker, Crèche assistant, Educarer, Key worker, Childcare staff, Pre-school assistant, Pre-school tutor, Pre-school worker, Pre-school leader, Nursery worker, Playgroup worker, Playgroup leader, Teacher, Montessori teacher and Montessori assistant.

In common with Adams (2005), multiple job titles were delineated. In total, 20 different terms were used, of which the most frequently used was “*practitioner*”. Even though 3 interviewees identified themselves as “*teachers*”, there was general agreement that those working within ECCE “*are definitely not teachers*”. FETAC Level 5 and 6 students suggested that although “*we teach them their A, B, Cs and everything we’re not the same as teachers*”. While it may be an issue of semantics, the diverse terminology with which the sector is characterised raises important questions about the training and educational qualifications of the professionals and paraprofessionals who operate them (BERA, 2001, David, 2003, Swick, 1985).

6.5.12 Perceptions of Professional Identity

Researchers (Day *et al*, 2006, Flores *et al*, 2006, Tucker, 2004) agree that the performance of professionals who work with young children is shaped by two things: “their education and training background, and the ‘perceptions they have developed of themselves in relation to their societal value and their importance to young children and families’ (Swick, 1985: 73).

Irrespective of their levels of training, those working outside the primary sector did not believe that they had a professional identity. This finding was influenced by misunderstandings about the purpose of ECCE that are determined by societal values and priorities, the absence of a clearly understood defining terminology, and inadequate training requirements. B.A ECCE (G) 4 used colour as a metaphor to describe her feelings about the identity of the sector.

Professional identity; I don’t know ...if I had to say a colour, maybe gray because it is a gray area. Its low regard, low pay, low esteem, low professionalism, high turnover... They’re very bad characteristics of a professional sector (B.A ECCE (G) 4).

Managers claimed that the identity of the sector had “*improved a lot from what it was ten or 15 years ago*”. In addition, the free pre-school year in ECCE “*gives us more visibility, that we are educating [children]*” (PBM 5). While agreeing that their role was “*more recognised*

now” managers agreed that “*there is a long way to go*”. Policy initiatives had created expectations of the sector to “*act and behave as professionals towards each other, the children and families, other agencies and professionals*” (NVCC 5).

Because ECCE is a misunderstood concept, pre-school teachers claimed that it was difficult to “*convey the identity of an early year worker or childcare worker ...it can send different connotations to people; there can be an underestimation of the work...the image is that we play all day*” (PB-PST 4). There was a pervading sense within both pre-school and primary school that work undertaken in pre-school settings was perceived primarily in terms of “*childminding*” or “*baby sitting*”. This lack of recognition was perceived to be a societal issue, where ECCE managers and staff believed that parents perceived their role to be that of “*just minding*”.

Referring to the traditional perception that education commences on starting primary school, PB-PST 2 commented “*it wasn't like it was educating them or anything; it was always about parents having to go to work and [needing] somebody to mind [their] child so it's looked at as a babysitting service*. B.A ECCE (G) 9 claimed that while on work placements “*some parents did not recognize us as future professionals and although expecting professional behaviour, still had the opinion that anybody could work with children*”. Indicating their lack of belief in a national vision for the sector, it was felt that the low status of the sector as well as parental perceptions had been fuelled by “*Government policies that were more concerned with getting women out to work than making sure children had good care*” (CCC 10).

Signifying the complexity of working with young children, Bertram *et al* (2002) note that to have an “*understanding of developmental psychology, to be able to respond to the exploratory young mind, to make these responses accessible while structuring and extending the next stage of development takes extraordinary talent*” (pg 38). In attempting to convey the complexity of their role, CB- PST 1 stated that “*we're educating [children], we're protecting them, and we're caring for them*”. *The work is “more challenging than people realise...”* However, there was agreement (managers, staff, graduates, students) that there was a societal belief that children’s education only commences on entry to primary school. Consequently, the sector would “*never have status or the recognition that it deserves*” (PBM 5).

6.5.13 Infant Teacher Identity

While infant teachers and B.Ed students acknowledged that they have a professional identity, and that their work was valued by society in general, they were less confident about the value placed on their work by Government. This was linked to “*recent stringent cutbacks*” that *have seen significant cuts in teacher pay as well as “persistent failure to address class sizes”* (JIT 2). As evidenced by a proposal to allow unqualified teachers legal entitlement to teach (draft Education (Amendment) Bill 2010), teacher issues increasingly appear on policy agendas as their role and status undergoes considerable change (OECD 2006b; Sachs 2001, 2003; Woods and Jeffrey 2002).

Consistent with the OECD (2006b), teachers stated that their identity and status were being diminished. JIT 5 stated that “*when [she] taught first over thirty years ago, things were far clearer, [there was] a delineation of roles, it’s not as clear anymore*”. As discussed in Chapters 1 and 3, the demands on teachers are increasingly complex, and are interwoven with the concept of accountability which is increasingly to the forefront of discussion and debate concerning teacher practice. Thus, as they endeavour to become more responsive to external demands and judgements, teacher professional identity becomes less clearly defined. This was particularly the case in terms of their relationship with parents where there was “*less respect and cooperation*” (JIT 5) than in the past.

Teachers and B.Ed graduates agreed that there was a perception of teaching as an “*easy job*”. B.Ed graduates were especially conscious of this factor, stating that, peers pursuing other disciplines saw teaching as a “*cushy number*”. However, JIT 2 argued that you “*earn your professional identity, you’re a teacher ... you went to college, but it’s how you relate to children, how you deal with situations, who you are as a teacher over time*”. Moreover, as you grow in confidence, you develop a professional identity and in turn “*you get respect*” from parents. In the words of JIT 5 “*it’s important that we as a profession ourselves believe in ourselves as professionals*”.

Sachs (2001, 2003) holds that being accepted by peers, feeling that you belong and are valued within the workplace are significant affective aspects of professional identity. Such aspects can have “*a profound impact on teachers’ lives both in terms of their classroom practice and how they construct their professional identities*” (Sachs 2003: 133). Although infant teachers held the same qualification as every other teacher, they voiced disquiet about how colleagues perceived them. There was a “*hierarchy*” within the school system where infant teachers did

not “*command the same respect as other teachers*” (FG JIT 3). Two infant teachers described how their peers saw them as teachers who “*just do art, music, fun and games....as if there were no math, no phonics to be done*”. In general, teachers agreed that “*moving up a class is like getting a promotion*” (JIT 5). This perception was driven by a belief that infant classes were similar to “*play school, we’re only minding them until they’re ready for real learning*” (FG JIT 3).

Consistent with Sachs (2001, 2003) community ECCE managers and staff argued that their professional identity was strong because it was rooted in their being valued within the community.

In our community here....the parents know that we are professional, they appreciate what we are doing with the kids. So, here in the community, I do feel we have a strong professional identity (CBM 4).

By contrast, the views of those working in the private sector were predominantly negative. When asked to describe their identity, participants invariably replied “*non – existent*” and “*what identity*”. PB-PST 3 said “*we’re considered babysitters with no training and no qualifications and we’re just there to mind children*”. They spoke of a patronizing attitude towards their work where they were perceived as “*the girls who couldn’t do anything else*” (PB-PST 5).

6.5.14 Factors that Shape Professional Identity

Pre-school and infant teachers were aware of a broad range of factors that shape their professional identity; feelings of belonging, being valued by peers, parents and wider society and effective policy. In terms of policy, there was widespread dissatisfaction among ECCE managers and staff with implementation. CBM 4 stated that “*it all looks good on paper, there’s lots of policy but it fails miserably in practice*”.

40% of teachers referred to a link between tradition and identity. This was “*an Irish thing, it stems from tradition going back over fifty years, and teachers have always been looked up to*” (JIT 1). Mirroring this viewpoint, JIT 3 said that her parents refer to her as “*our daughter the teacher*”. Because of their pride in her profession, she felt proud to be a teacher and part of the teaching profession. As a profession “*teaching, the guards and nursing are still up there*” (SIT 4).

However, from an infant teacher perspective, the most significant aspect of professional identity was qualifications. The fact that teachers “*go to college, we train to be teachers*” (SIT 4) marked them as professionals “*people know that we are trained, they accept that we know what we’re doing*” (Ibid.). While acknowledging that their identity was undergoing change they were confident that they were “*still very much seen as professionals by the majority*” (JIT 5). This commentary raises a number of questions in relation to the pre-school sector, where, notwithstanding the availability of a B.A ECCE degree in many parts of Ireland, graduates do not command the same respect or status as teachers. Likewise, while teachers are trusted to get on with their work, the pre-school sector is subjected to a didactic, top down inspection system.

Those working in the pre-school sector were disillusioned about their identity, laying the blame firmly on the lack of a mandatory training requirement. Managers condemned the short sightedness of the regulations claiming that “*it sends out the wrong message*”. CBM 5 argued that “*we are attracting the wrong type of people into the sector; we should be very fussy about who we let onto training courses and who we let work with children....our work is just too important*”. The lack of a training requirement was seriously undermining their practice and their identity. PBM 5 argued that “*if we want to be professional we must be trained. We won’t be taken seriously unless everybody who works with a child is trained*”. B.A (ECCE) Graduates vehemently criticised the lack of a training requirement. B.A ECCE (G) 7 stated that “*all professions are characterised by their training - nurses, doctors, teachers....the ECCE sector seems to be the only area where there is no mandatory requirement*”. Researchers (Barnett *et al*, 2005, Bennett *et al*, 2004, Saracho *et al*, 2003) posit that improving the levels of professionalism within ECCE requires that standards be raised in relation to levels of preparation, credentialing and certification.

6.5.15 Attitudes Towards Terms and Conditions of Employment

Teachers outside of the school system have considerably less status, lower salaries and are required to have less preparation than teachers (OECD, 2001, 2006b, Saracho *et al*, 2003). Crucially, a career in ECCE should be satisfying, respected and financially viable (OECD, 2006b). In this study, professionalism was considered to be synonymous with remuneration. The value of one’s work should be reflected in the salary attached to it.

Overall, infant teachers were satisfied with terms and conditions of employment. They have “*regular hours of work, reasonable terms and conditions, decent enough salaries and good*

holidays” (SIT 4). Reflecting their changing status within society, they tempered these comments by emphasising that “*our work is challenging, trying; very difficult and the holidays are absolutely essential*” (JIT 2). Accordingly, while there was a perception that teaching was an easy job, teachers argued that their work “*is never done*”.

There were varying opinions on teacher salaries. On the one hand, JIT 5 felt that teachers “*are doing extremely well and the investment in education has benefitted all of us salary wise*”. While the salary “*isn’t astronomic you can have a good living; a nice lifestyle but you’ll never be a millionaire*” (FG JIT 3). Two teachers expressed dissatisfaction with remuneration stating that “*for the work we do, it’s certainly not reflected in our salaries*”. However, all teachers agreed that salaries were becoming “*more and more of an issue because of the economy*”.

The disparity in pay, as well as terms and conditions of employment between pre- school and primary sectors was considerable. Describing the work as “*stringent*” CB – PST 3 said that it was “*depressing doing it for what you’re actually paid and the conditions.... like why bother, it’s that bad*”. In common with Barry and Sherlock (2008), pre-school teachers claimed that they work for “*little more than minimum wage*” (PB-PST 5). This was demoralising for staff who suggested that “*you can earn as much even more, stocking shelves in a shop or selling burgers and you have no responsibilities*” (CB-PST 3).

The poor salaries were an indication of the low status and lack of identity within the sector generally. There was consensus that if “they [government] treated teachers the same way there would be a revolution. It shows how far down the list we are” (CB-PST 3).

Teachers (FG 3 JIT) empathised with the pre-school sector suggesting that “they don’t get paid to reflect the work they do...they certainly do not have the status, the professional status that a teacher has”. They agreed that pre-school was not valued within society largely because the “government doesn’t value it either”.

6.5.16 Perceptions of Each Other’s Professional Identity

ECCE managers, staff and students agreed that teachers have a strong professional identity. This assertion was based on a belief that teachers were valued within society. PBM 5 described the disparity between their role and the teacher’s role.

Teachers have a professional identity, they teach the children. We don’t do anything, we just play with them but they do the real work. Children don’t learn anything before they go to school. Look at the way they are paid and the holidays they get....we’re only minding them that’s why we get peanuts (PBM 5).

Teachers argued that the pre- school sector was “*poorly trained and unprofessional*” and therefore it could not have a professional identity. One teacher (FG 3 JIT) highlighted the anomaly created by the lack of qualifications “*we need a B.Ed to teach whereas they don’t have to have a qualification. So Mary, from down the road can decide to turn her hand to running a crèche*”. Ultimately, those working in the pre-school sector cannot “*expect to be seen as professional as long as they remain untrained*” (ibid). Teachers were sympathetic towards BA ECCE graduates suggesting that they would be “*better off forgetting about the pre-school sector. It’s a waste of their education...they will never have the recognition they deserve*” (JIT 3). Referring to altering teacher identity, one teacher (FG 3 JIT) claimed that “*whatever way the public or anyone sees primary school teachers; I would say pre-school teachers are well below that*”.

6.5.17 Aspirations for the Future

All ten B.Ed graduates were confident about the future; looking forward to teaching and aspiring to “*having my own class*”. Their priority after graduating was to “*get experience and hopefully a permanent job*”. Referring to the current economic climate, they claimed that while permanent teaching posts may be more limited “*there is always a need for subbing and resource teaching*”. They were equally enthusiastic about pursuing postgraduate training. 50% of those interviewed were pursuing post graduate studies at Masters Level, which, they felt would help them “*in the long term with our teaching*”.

The future was not as promising for B.A (ECCE) graduates. While all ten agreed that it was essential to “*get experience in the field*”, they did not intend to work in the sector indefinitely. Unlike B.Ed students, getting experience was seen as a means to an end, after which graduates hope to “*work in the policy area maybe but definitely not in pre-school settings*”. The primary reasons related to the lack of a professional identity, meagre pay, and poor terms and conditions of employment. B.A ECCE (G) 4 typifies graduates’ responses.

I can’t ever see myself working on a day to day basis directly with children without being depressed, unmotivated, unenthused... I can’t. At the end of the day you can’t keep doing something for years with absolutely no recognition for it. As a person you can’t. It sounds like an awful selfish thing to say as well but pay scales.....I didn’t do four years in college to earn the minimum wage and that’s the reality. I want to work in New Zealand...I want to experience what it feels like to work in a country where you’re valued for working in the early years. I want to experience that, to feel valued (B.A ECCE (G) 4).

Stating that “*there are no real opportunities out there for us*” and confirming a belief within the sector that the B.A ECCE provides a doorway into teaching, five of the graduates spoke of the possibility of “*converting to primary school teaching*”.

Given the current acceptance of poorly trained and untrained ECCE staff, graduates reluctantly accepted that they were “*over qualified*” to work in crèches and pre-schools. As a result, their primary focus was to get some experience in the field before moving onto an area where they feel valued. In this respect, Early *et al* (2001), highlight the wide discrepancy between what research says about the important role of early educators and the set of existing policies and practices that do “not support an adequately compensated professional workforce” (pg 286). Findings in this study are consistent with claims by researchers (Bogard *et al*, 2008, Jalongo *et al*, 2004,) that when salaries are low, opportunities for advancement are limited causing those who are trained to leave the field for employment elsewhere.

6.5.18 Conclusion

This section shows a clear link between qualifications and professional identity. Indeed, qualifications are a critical variable in professional identity discourse. There is compelling evidence that highly trained and skilled BA (ECCE) graduates are being lost to the sector. There was considerable disquiet with terms and conditions of employment which have a significant negative impact on the affective components of identity, particularly in relation to professional confidence, self esteem and job satisfaction within the pre-school sector.

While tradition serves the primary school sector well in terms of teacher professional identity, it appears to diminish the identity of those working with young children outside of primary school, perpetuating a long held belief that “anyone” can mind children. Teachers *per se* enjoy a relatively high social status; yet, their professional identity as infant teachers is compromised within individual school settings. They believe that this is related to a perception that the infant class is akin to play school; similar to a waiting room for children before they move onto the higher classes where their real learning occurs. Within the pre-school sector, managerial discourse, characterised by authority, accountability and effectiveness is prevalent, while democratic discourse remains peripheral to practice and consequently to professional identity.

Lack of recognition regarding the complexity of working with young children at societal level, together with Government inaction on a minimum training requirement has a cascading

effect on the sector. Consequently, the pre-school workforce is characterised by a marked absence of professional identity. Yet, when the values, principles and assumptions on which ECCE policy is based are examined, a very different picture emerges. Training and continual development are recognised in policy as inextricable elements in professional practice. In the absence of these fundamental tenets, the workforce cannot grow, flourish or stand proud as a profession with its own strong unique identity.

7. Conclusions and Recommendations

7.1 Introduction

This study; “*Locating quality in Early Childhood Care and Education discourse in Ireland: pre-school and infant classrooms as a crucible for learning and development*” was guided by the following core question: how does national and international early childhood policy become embedded as an everyday phenomenon in pre-school and primary contexts? It sought to examine, how policy impacted upon the quality of ECCE provision in Ireland. It therefore, examined closely the values, principles and assumptions that underpin practice in pre-school and infant contexts.

Findings point to a considerable gap between policy and practice in both contexts that is rooted in legislative and structural deficiencies. Strongly influenced by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, initiatives such as the National Children’s Strategy, *Aistear*, *Síolta* and the primary school curriculum portray the child as an active agent in his/her learning. These documents/initiatives/guidelines accord equal importance to what the child learns and to the process of learning. Children are seen as developing within a social context including home, pre-school, school and the wider community, as meaning makers, as co- constructors rather than reproducers of knowledge.

Findings show that pre-school and infant teachers genuinely cared for young children and had their best interests at heart. For the most part, children’s care and education occurred in the context of warm caring relationships. Although pre-school and infant teachers strive to create, and indeed believe that their classroom is a crucible of learning and development, this study indicates that in many instances, these micro environments were far removed from this ideology. In the domain of both pre-school and infant classrooms, quality practice was sporadic rather than consistent. This is indicative of an abject failure by government to address the issues endemic in both sectors that seriously undermine quality within individual contexts.

Specifically, in relation to the pre-school sector, the most pertinent issues are the absence of a mandatory training requirement, inappropriate pre-school inspectorate qualifications, policing of the sector by the Health Services Executive, a predominant focus on school readiness and weak policy implementation. Thus, while the seminal National Quality Framework *Síolta*, and the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework *Aistear*, have the potential to transform

practice within the pre-school sector, their impact is limited primarily because of the absence of a comprehensive national implementation plan.

Likewise infant teacher practice was bounded by school culture. As a result of large class sizes, disproportionate pupil/teacher ratios and a prescriptive curriculum covering seven curricular areas, teachers are pressured to implement it in a didactic manner. Thus, the supremacy of the curriculum pushes children's agency to the periphery of practice. The process of learning, a central aspect of agency is compromised by expediency. In this construct, rather than being active learners children are at risk of "receiving an education as a passive receptor or an inert vessel" (Ayers, 2005: 234).

Notwithstanding that teaching is a graduate led profession, there is evidence that teacher training may not be suited to the natural learning styles of young children. Jalongo *et al* (2004) decry the practice of rigid scheduling, long periods of sedentary activity, confined spaces and intense academic pressures. In this study, both sectors were guilty to a varying degree on all counts. Moreover, while *Síolta* and *Aistear* traverse infant classes, limited teacher awareness and lack of interest means that they will not affect the quality of children's experiences in primary school.

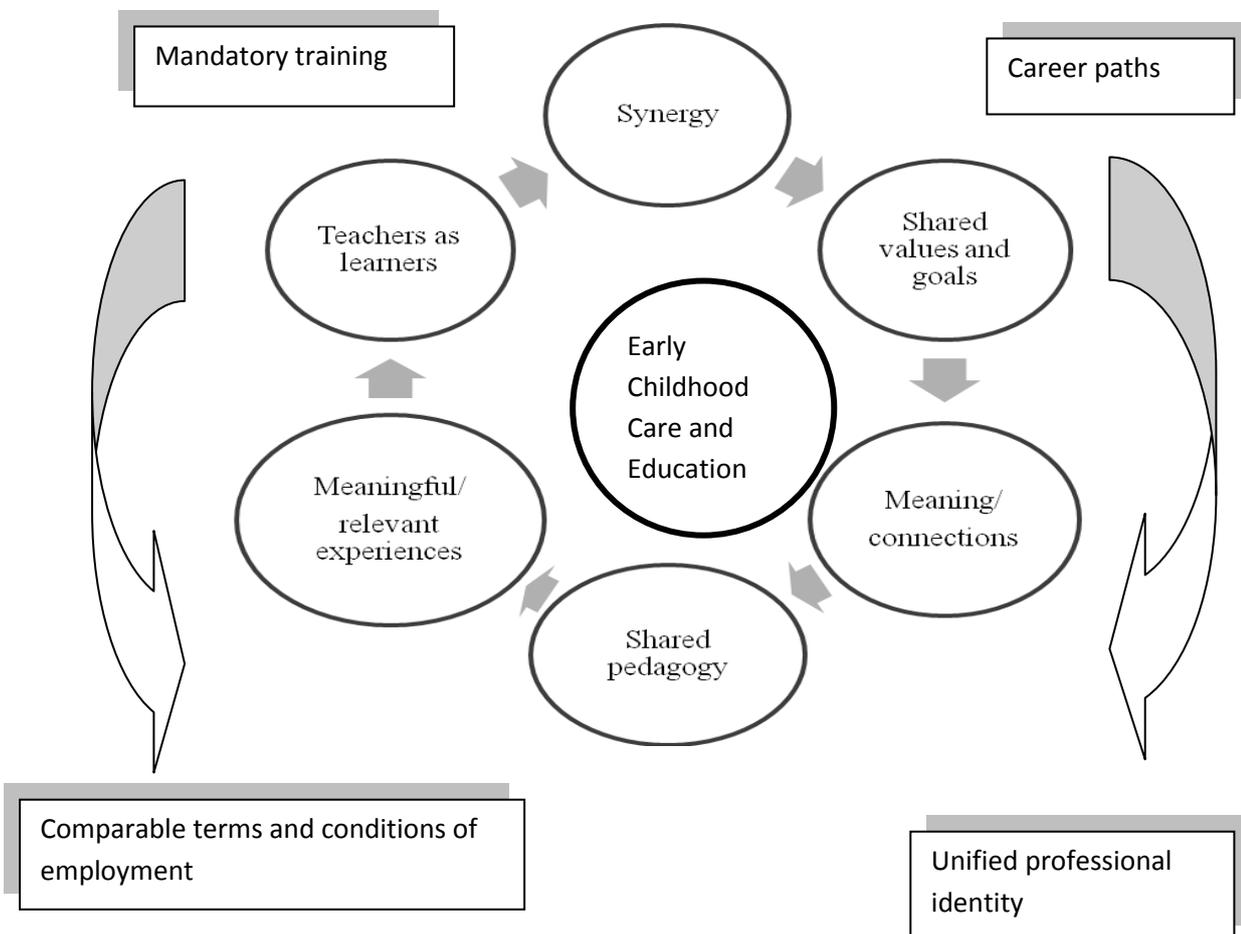
Critically, a dearth of communication between both sectors is problematic, resulting in significant misunderstandings of each other's role in relation to children's care and education. There was ambiguity about the purpose of Early Childhood Care and Education. Moreover, poor understanding of pedagogy adversely affects pre-school teacher ability to articulate how they support children's learning. *Aistear* makes explicit the need for pre-school teachers to understand what it is they want for children and how these objectives can be achieved. They must plan for children's learning so that their strengths as well as their needs shape their experiences (NCCA, 2004, 2009). Clearly, in this study, pre-school teachers were unable to link practice to theory in any coherent manner.

Alexander (2007) suggests that failure to engage with pedagogy creates a vacuum into which are "sucked a plethora of claims about what constitutes best practice in teaching and learning" (pg 2). Thus, a predominant focus on school readiness, primarily seen in terms of academic preparation prevailed in the pre-school sector. This academic focus was perceived as a compensatory measure to redress issues of large class sizes in infant classes so that children would have a head start on entry to school. Pre-school teachers were unaware that

infant teachers disapproved of this type of preparation. Such disapproval was influenced by negative teacher perceptions of the pre-school sector together with lack of understanding of education in its broadest sense. The legacy of academic preparation in pre-school is problematic for infant teachers who find it difficult to support the individual and diverse needs of children on entry to school. However, rather than altering their practice, they hold the pre-school sector responsible for rectifying this problem.

In the context of this study, the factors that permeate discourse on quality Early Childhood Care and Education in Ireland are depicted in figure 7.1. In Ireland, the approach to affecting change within the pre-school sector is typified by a top down macro approach at the centre of which is the power and legitimacy of the Health Services Executive. Similarly, the Department of Education and Skills determine practice within primary school. Fullan (2001) contends that the key to successful change lies in improving relationships between all involved. Thus, change is not about the imposition of top down reform (ibid). The emphasis must be based on creating the conditions to develop the capacity of organisations and individuals to learn (Fullan, 2001). Key concepts for realising change in Early Childhood Care and Education in Ireland include synergy, meaning making, connectedness, shared values, training, identity and capacity for continual improvement (Ibid.).

Figure 41 Quality Early Childhood Care and Education discourse in Ireland



Findings demonstrate that a myriad of policy documents, frameworks, initiatives and commentary at national and international level, directed at enhancing and supporting quality provision and at narrowing the traditional dichotomy between care and education have had minimal impact. Consequently, children’s agency, which is synonymous with the concept of democracy, is considerably undermined in both pre-school and infant class contexts. Ultimately, the micro environments where children live and learn are miniature democracies where children have a voice and are listened to.

Using the analogy of the spider’s web, (diagrams 42, 43) provide an overview of the many issues that preclude child agency in pre-school and infant class contexts. Such are the complexities surrounding the child within individual micro environments that the tenuous strands holding the web together allow the child to slip through the centre. As indicated in

diagrams 42 and 43 the Early Childhood Care and Education sector is characterised by multiple tensions. At pre-school level, there is tension between the Health Services Executive and pre-school settings, within and between pre-school teachers, between ECCE students and current pre-school teachers. Additionally, there are considerable tensions in relation to how the sector is perceived at macro (societal), meso (parental) and micro (primary school level), as well as tensions with regard to the affective aspects of professional identity including self-esteem, self-belief, job satisfaction and belonging.

In the domain of infant classrooms, there is tension with regard to implementing a prescriptive, subject laden infant curriculum. Further tension abounds with respect to large class sizes, and disproportionately high teacher/pupil ratios. As with the pre-school sector, there are further tensions about how infant teachers are perceived at macro, meso and, micro levels as outlined. They believe that this is related to a perception that the infant class is akin to playschool; similar to a waiting room for children before they move onto the higher classes, where their real learning occurs.

Within both sectors, managerial discourse, characterised by authority, accountability and effectiveness is prevalent, while democratic discourse remains peripheral to practice and consequently to professional identity. In the midst of these tensions, there is little room for children's agency within the Early Childhood Care and Education sector. Reform, indeed transformation of practice is urgently required. Until this happens children will frantically cling to the outer edges of practice.

Figure 42 Overview of issues that preclude child agency in the pre-school sector

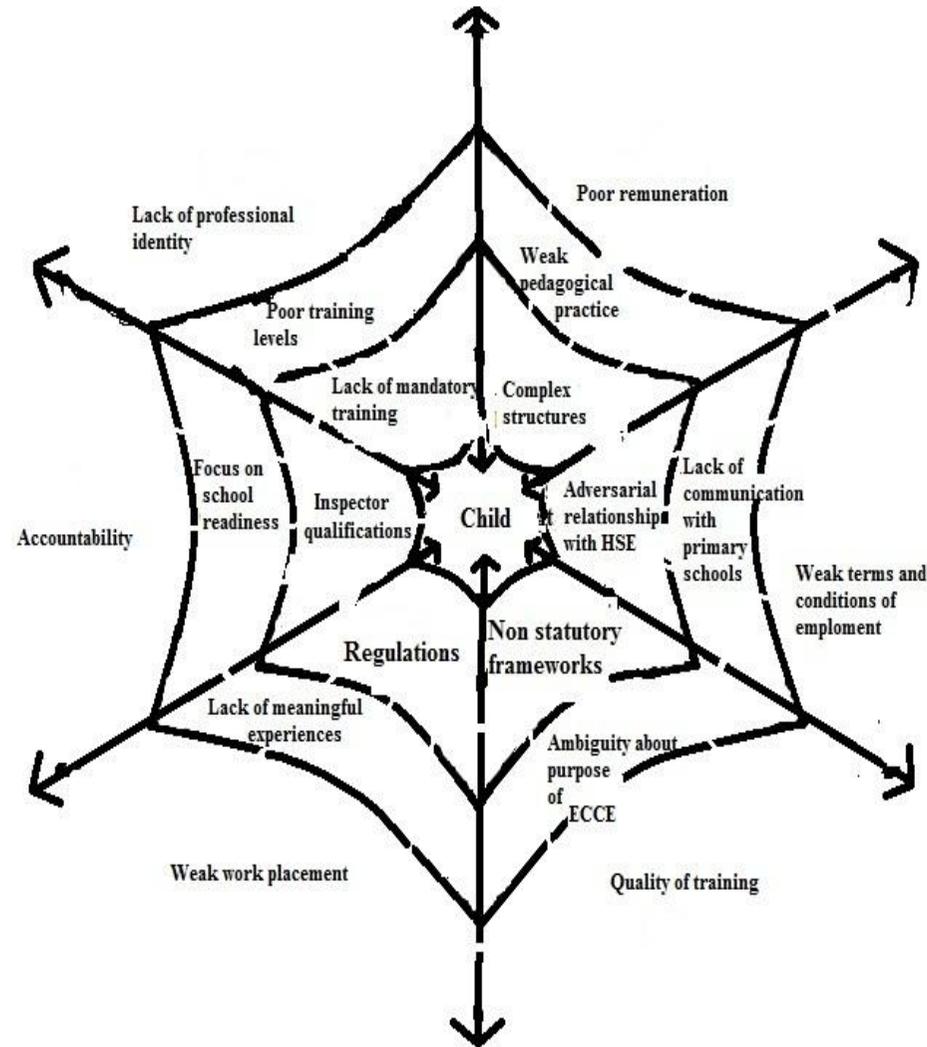
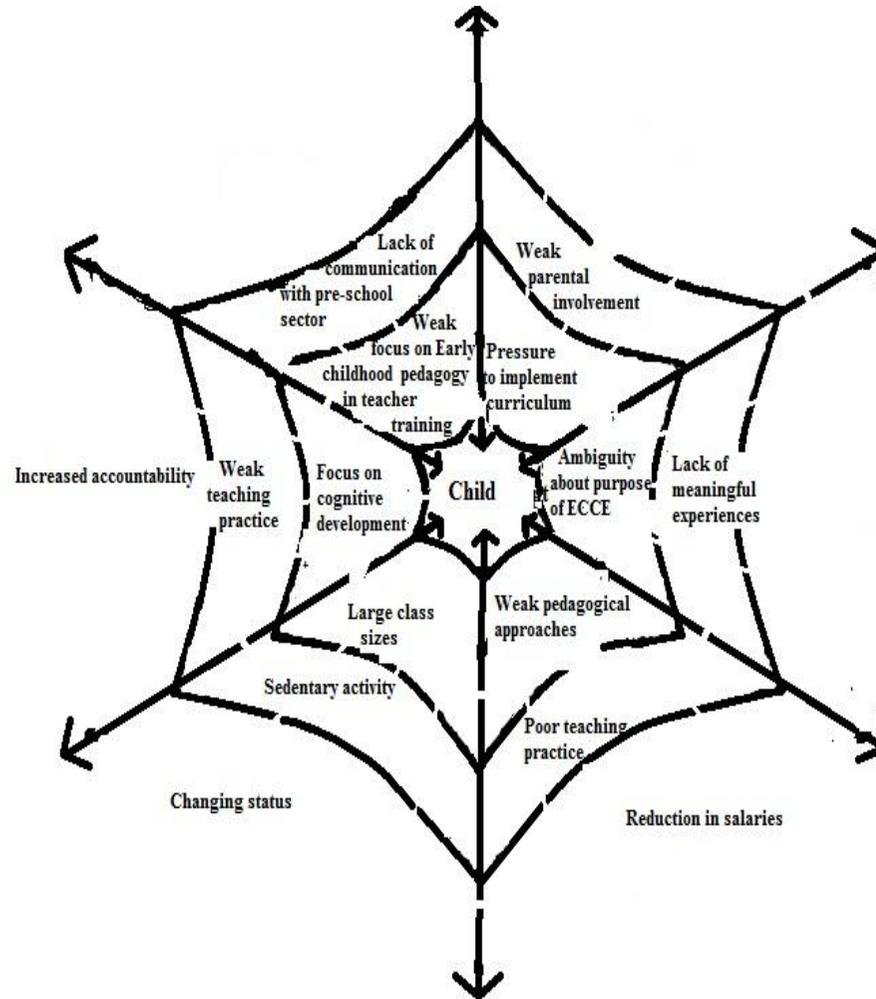


Figure 43 Overview of issues that preclude child agency in infant classrooms



Quality is indeed the universal focus of ECCE provision in pre-school and infant class contexts. The issues outlined in this study are the result of prolonged government inaction. The time for action is now. Recommendations in this Chapter are interrelated and action based. They relate to the following core areas:

Table 32 Key recommendations

Area for recommendation	Ecological context
HSE pre-school inspectorate	meso and micro
Structural mechanisms	macro, meso and micro
Mandatory training	macro and micro
Practice frameworks	macro and micro
Teaching practice/work placements	meso and micro
Communication between sectors	meso and micro
Class sizes	macro and micro
Further research	macro and micro

The recommendations set out in this Chapter are intended to clarify the vision for the sector that lies at the heart of policy and to redress the ambiguity about the purpose of ECCE. Ultimately, they are directed towards supporting the development of a professional identity for the ECCE sector as a whole.

7.2 Recommendations for the HSE Pre-school Inspectorate

The issue of inspectorate qualifications requires immediate attention. Notwithstanding that Article 5 of the revised Childcare (pre-school services) Regulations, 2006 requires more in terms of inspectorate knowledge and skill than heretofore; it is inconceivable that with the exception of static structural aspects, those tasked with ensuring quality standards, do not know what they are looking for. The recommendations in relation to the pre-school inspectorate are twofold. The objective is to strengthen the inspection teams in terms of their pedagogical knowledge and understanding and to redress the unhealthy dissonance between the HSE and those working in the pre-school sector. The current inspection system is perceived as being intrinsically unfair. Hence, the sector believes that:

- a) The HSE apply a narrow set of criteria that is subject to the whim of individual inspection teams
- b) The inspection process does not fairly reflect their work.

Thus, for the most part, the process of inspection has a negative impact on pre-school teachers, their work and their image of themselves. The researcher believes that, if the inspection teams were confident in their pedagogical knowledge, these issues could be addressed. It is recommended that the following steps be taken in relation to the implementation of Article 5 of the Childcare (pre-school services) Regulations, 2006:

1. Cease inspection of Article 5 until such time as the HSE inspectorate has been appropriately strengthened to enable it to adequately assess the manner in which children's educational/developmental needs are being met within pre-school settings
2. Strengthen the composition of the inspection teams to include personnel trained specifically in early childhood pedagogy. This is essential to ensure that the focus on child development; a key aspect of Article 5 can be implemented
3. Develop and implement a comprehensive training programme for the pre-school inspectorate that would have a strong focus on the theory and practice of Early Childhood Education.

7.3 Recommendations in Relation to Pre-school Structural Mechanisms

Irrespective of the establishment of a lead government department, ECCE policy continues to be mediated through a multitude of departments and agencies. It is recommended that the current structural mechanisms be reviewed with a view to streamlining the supports available to the ECCE sector. Neither the NVCCs nor the CCCs should remain in perpetuity. Presently, there are 33 CCCs and 7 NVCCs across the country, each of which is funded through the NCIP. While the CCCs were established to prioritise EOCP/NCIP funding at local level, it is widely acknowledged that the development of the physical ECCE infrastructure is now complete. A fundamental question now is: what is their role at local level? Do they provide a specialised service that could not be provided by anybody else? Indeed, similar questions can be asked of the NVCCs. It is recommended that:

1. The EYEP/DES undertakes a national consultation with the pre-school sector to determine the relevance of the CCCs and the NVCCs.

2. Following such a consultation, that these organisations should be streamlined or disbanded. At a minimum there should be a clear delineation of roles and responsibilities.
3. That the role of Pobal in administering NCIP funding be discontinued. Their role which creates a bureaucratic layer is superfluous in the current economic climate.
4. That savings resulting from these 3 recommendations should be utilised to strengthen both the EYEPU and the pre-school inspection teams as previously outlined. This would ensure a more straightforward support structure for the ECCE sector and would be cost effective.
5. Based on strengthening the EYEPU, that a staff member would be located in each of the DES regional offices throughout the country. This would provide a direct line of appropriate support for those working in the pre-school sector.

7.4 Recommendations in Relation to Mandatory Training

This study endorses the view that the most critical variable in the provision of quality is highly trained staff. Ireland does not have a mandatory training requirement for those working in the pre-school sector. This anomaly perpetuates a perception that anybody can ‘mind a child’. It undervalues/devalues the complexity of working with young children as well as the considerable responsibility involved. Furthermore, it conjures negativity towards the sector at multiple levels including within the primary school sector. Fundamentally, it demeans the value and contribution of highly trained B.A (ECCE) graduates who are central to the future professional development of the sector.

Indeed, it appears that the government misread the need for a mandatory training requirement when reviewing the Childcare (pre-school services) Regulations, 1996. This is evident in the broad welcome among research participants for a minimum training requirement. The following recommendations should be considered in the context of the ongoing development of a workforce development plan by the DES. These recommendations are directed towards redressing the lack of a mandatory training requirement as well as providing for progression routes within the sector. Crucially, these recommendations are intended to create a system of scaffolding where professional practice can occur in the context of a more knowledgeable/skilled pre-school teacher challenging and guiding the apprentice in his/her practice.

It is recommended that:

1. All new entrants to the pre-school sector should be required to have a minimum qualification at FETAC Level 5.
2. The interim measures of the free pre-school year in ECCE scheme, 2010, be extended to all those working or intending to work with pre-school children. At a minimum, all current pre-school teachers, whether participating in the free pre-school year in ECCE or not, be given a period of two years to attain this basic level of training.
3. Those in supervisory, team leader positions should be required to have a minimum qualification at FETAC Level 6.
4. Over a five year period at least 50% of EYTs would be required to have B.A (ECCE) degree level training.
5. The EYEP/DES work with training providers to develop a comprehensive programme of in-service training for the pre-school sector similar to that which prevails in the primary school sector.
6. A minimum of 3 in-service training days be agreed at the beginning of each year. Such in-service training should be offered on a regional basis enabling clusters of settings to come together for training. Where possible, these dates should coincide with primary school training days to minimise disruption to parent schedules.
7. That the government ring-fence a specific training budget to support the implementation of these recommendations.

Given the abysmal remuneration levels, claimed to be little more than minimum wage (Barry and Sherlock, 2008) within the pre-school sector, it is incomprehensible that pre-school teachers must attend training in their own time and pay from personal resources. This approach is unjust and does little to motivate the sector to avail of much needed training. The ultimate losers in the current system are the children whose experiences would be greatly enhanced as a result of a strategic approach to training within the pre-school sector.

7.5 Recommendations in Relation to Practice Frameworks

With the exception of the revised Childcare (pre-school services) Regulations, 2006, all other policy relating specifically to the pre-school sector is premised on voluntary sectoral engagement. *Síolta* and *Aistear* are significant milestones in the development of early childhood care and education in Ireland. They focus on children aged birth to six years and have the potential to transform practice within the sector, helping pre-school teachers to

create a true crucible of learning and development. Critically, these frameworks are the antithesis of the traditional construct of school readiness that is prevalent within the pre-school sector. They are therefore, fundamental to shaping appropriate pedagogical understandings and practices within both sectors. As outlined in Chapters 3 and 5, although the Government have plans to implement *Síolta* there is no comprehensive strategic implementation plan. In order to ensure that these frameworks become embedded in everyday practice, it is recommended that they:

1. Become a central element of mandatory training in the pre-school sector. This would ensure continual exposure to the frameworks over the life time of training programmes. As a result, they would be ingrained on student psyche and become normal practice.
2. Are embedded within B.Ed training in order to redress the current deficit in early childhood pedagogy in teacher training.
3. Inform the development of in-service training programmes for both the pre-school and primary school sectors

7.6 Recommendations in Relation to Teaching Practice and Work Placements

Findings indicate that teaching practice and work placements were particularly problematic. A basic problem with field experience is that the onus is on the setting to provide the optimal experience for the student. The student should assume a level of responsibility him/herself to create positive experiences while on teaching practice/work placement. It is recommended that:

1. All colleges of education, whether concerned with the training of pre-school or primary school teachers, review their approach to and their expectations of field experience.
2. An alternative approach to teaching practice/work placements be designed such that:

Trainee teachers, in addition to practical teaching experience, must also undertake an action research project while on teaching practice. Trainee pre-school teachers should also be mandated to undertake a similar project while on work placement. An action research project could be based upon an issue/challenge identified jointly by the trainee and the teacher. Both parties would then work together in agreeing the solution, devising an action plan to be implemented by the trainee while on teaching practice/work placement. This approach would be mutually beneficial to children, trainee and existing teachers leading to a sharing of knowledge, pedagogical approaches and a greater understanding of each other's perspectives.

3. B.A (ECCE) students, from the 2nd year of their training, should be allowed to assume full responsibility for a “class” of pre-school children while on work placement. Similar to B.Ed students they should prepare and implement comprehensive lesson plans based on *Aistear*, to be implemented by them within the setting. This would result in these students shaping and learning from their own experiences. It would have the added advantage of freeing up pre-school teachers to engage in curriculum planning, evaluation and reflective practice.

7.7 Recommendations in Relation to Communication Between the Sectors

The dearth of information sharing between the sectors is not surprising as, traditionally, they operated from diverse paradigms. The need for a continuum of care and education for the young child is strong in policy rhetoric but remarkably absent in practice. There is no doubt that both sectors view each other with suspicion and pessimism. As a result, there is an overall lack of congruence in terms of approaches to learning resulting in a strong emphasis on school readiness within the pre-school sector. Previous recommendations outlined in relation to embedding *Síolta* and *Aistear* within pre-service training for both pre-school and infant teachers would certainly help to redress misunderstandings between the sectors.

Infant teachers outlined a broad range of skills considered essential for the child on entry to school. It is vital that this information is shared to prevent pre-schools becoming a “scaled down version of school”. In order to enhance communication and understandings between the sectors, it is recommended that:

1. The EYEP/DES draws up a comprehensive list of school readiness indicators that are not premised solely on cognitive development.
2. The EYEP/DES facilitates a series of joint seminar targeted at pre-school and infant teachers as a forum for the sharing of ideas, perspectives, pedagogical approaches and joint learning. This would be instrumental in addressing the barriers that exist between both sectors while also exalting the position of the pre-school sector.

A mechanism be developed and implemented for joint in-service training. Again, as with the DES/EYEP seminar, the objective would be to provide an opportunity to share pedagogical practice, and to network in the interests of creating positive synergies between the sectors.

7.8 Recommendations in Relation to Class Size

This study found that numerous factors preclude the realisation of child agency within the infant classroom. While class size is only one such factor, it is nonetheless important. The most logical recommendation is to immediately decrease class sizes to bring them in line with the European average of 21:1 (OECD, 2009a). It is unlikely that this will happen in the current economic climate. However; if the implementation of *Aistear* was supported as outlined, together with shared understandings between the pre-school and primary school sectors, many of the present challenges would be reduced considerably. Previous recommendations would establish clear roles and responsibilities within each domain. Early childhood pedagogy would become the norm. Consequently, children's experiences would be meaningful and relevant in both contexts. Through natural progression, a continuum of care and education would be created.

In relation to infant classes in general, the researcher contends that B.A (ECCE) graduates should be considered for infant teaching positions in primary schools. Their speciality is Early Childhood Education. They are, therefore, more suited to teach infant classes than the present teacher cohort, who, while trained to degree level, lack a focus on early childhood pedagogy. The transferral of skills is an important element in the knowledge economy as discussed in Chapter 3. B.A (ECCE) graduates are well placed to positively impact upon young children's experiences within infant class contexts.

7.9 Recommendations in Relation to Further Research

As highlighted in Chapter 1, there has been little research in the area of quality, both in relation to quality indicators or the evaluation of the more intangible aspects of quality. Research begets research. This study illuminates the context and content of pedagogical quality in pre-school and infant classes. While extensive consultation was undertaken with a broad range of stakeholders in Ireland including policy makers, the Health Services Executive, National Voluntary Childcare Collaborative and the City and County Childcare Committees, the research sites were confined to a specific geographical location.

It is recommended that:

1. A further study is undertaken into pedagogical practices in pre-school and infant classes on a nationwide basis. This would build upon this research as well as providing a comprehensive overview of children's experiences in a broader context. It would help to

determine the impact of a mandatory training requirement on the pre-school sector as well other recommendations in this thesis.

2. Research is undertaken on the long term impact of the Childcare (pre-school services) Regulations, 2006. In many respects, research of this nature is dependent upon a shared collaborative approach between the HSE and the pre-school sector. Consequently it is suggested that:
3. Research is undertaken on multidisciplinary team work particularly in relation to how it would impact both the pre-school and primary school sectors. This would be especially salient in terms of establishing a unitary inspection system as proposed in Ready to Learn (DES, 1999a).

Finally, in the context of the low status and morale of the sector together with the lack of a unified professional identity, it is recommended that:

4. National research is undertaken into the terms and conditions of employment of those working within the pre-school sector.

The development of policy alone is insufficient in terms of impacting the quality of Early Childhood Care and Education provision. Doubtless, *Síolta*, *Aistear* and the Childcare regulations have the potential to positively influence quality and professionalism within ECCE, creating crucibles of learning and development within pre-school and infant contexts. They must also, however, be accompanied by improved and comparable terms and conditions of employment, professional status and identity. In effect, this entails significant fiscal investment and innovative responses at Government level in supporting the establishment and ongoing development of a professional ECCE workforce both at pre-school and infant class level in primary school. Put simply, as a society, we must heed calls to develop a coherent, graduate led, recognisable body of professional practice. In light of findings within this study; can we afford not to?

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Appendix A. 1: Description of the IEA/PPP Observation System tools

The Management of Time (MOT) Observation System

This tool provides a complete picture of how the adult organises the children's time during a 3.5 hour session. The International Co-ordinating Committee (ICC) of the IEA Project recommended that the observer conduct the MOT observation (1) simultaneously with Child Activities, Adult Behaviour and during breaks between each instrument, (2) for two days, and (3) for a maximum of three and a half hours per day if possible (Hayes, O'Flaherty, Kernan, 1997:63). The Multiple Perspectives Research Team adhered to these recommendations to maximise the quality of data. The focus of the observation is the adult's organisation of children's time. Each activity proposed by the adult was noted, as well as the type of child involvement proposed and the time of each change of activity. The group structure for each activity was also recorded i.e. whether the adult proposed the activity for the entire group, part of the group, the child alone, or the adult and child together.

Management of Time Categories with Examples

Category	Example
Physical	
Gross motor	Running, climbing
Fine motor	Puzzles, building with small blocks
Expressive	
Dramatic play	Role plays, moving like animals
Arts and crafts	Painting, cutting/gluing materials
Music	Singing, playing instruments
Storytelling/language	
Listening	Listening to stories, rhymes
Pre-academic	
Reading	Reading letters, independent reading
Writing	Writing letters, practice with pencils
Numbers/maths	Counting, adding/subtracting
Physical science	Planting seeds, weather lessons
Social science	Visiting local fire-stations
Other	Calendar time, memory games
Religious	Praying, attending services
Media related	Watching film strips or television
Personal/social	

Personal care	Washing hands, eating snacks
Social	Show and tell, sharing materials
Discipline	Sitting in time out', discussing misbehaviour
Domestic/economic	
Domestic	Set-up/clean-up of materials
Economic	Farming, selling produce
Transitional	Lining up, moving between activities
Waiting	Waiting in line, waiting for materials
Free Activities	No specific activities proposed
Mixed Activities	Two or more activities at the same time

The group structure, for which the adult proposed activities was also recorded and categorized as follows:

(a) Whole Group Activity (WG): The adult proposed an activity for the entire group of children.

(a) Partial Group Activity (PG): An activity was proposed for only part of the group of children. This activity included a minimum of three children.

(b) Joint Activity (JA): Such a proposal included the participation of the child in an activity with one other person, either adult or child.

(c) Alone Activity (A): The activity proposed by the adult was proposed for one sole child.

Appendix A.2: IEA MANAGEMENT OF TIME CATEGORIES

IEA Management of Time Category	Description
Action/movement	This includes the participation of children in active movements or activities which involve coordination. Such may include the participation in sporting activities e.g. cycling, jumping, running and building with big blocks etc. (gross motor neuron), as well as playing with elemental props e.g. sand, water, clay, stringing beads and building with Lego blocks (fine motor neuron).
Expressive activities	The participation or watching of activities encouraging self-expression and invention. For example, pretend-play (mimicking a member of society e.g. a builder), playing with puppets and role-playing (dramatic/imaginative play), painting, colouring and collage (arts and crafts), and singing, dancing and playing instruments (music).
Storytelling/Language	This includes the listening to, telling of and non-musical rhyming of nursery rhymes.
Pre-academic Activities	This category involved the listening to, learning of and participation in learning and pre-academic activities. Examples include (a) reading books, listening to a story whilst following the words in a book and forming letters with mala/play-dough (reading), (b) writing one's own name, learning to write with pencils and crayons and writing letters and numbers (writing), (c) learning, repeating and recognising numbers and geometric shapes (numbers and mathematical concepts), (d) exploration of objects and materials of the physical environment, including planting flowers, learning about the weather, animals and carrying out simple elemental 'science' experiments (social and environmental science), and finally (e) memory games and colours.
Religion/Ethics	The participation in, listening to or learning of religious, traditional, ethical and moral values and beliefs.
Media related activities	The participation in, listening to or watching of media related concepts e.g. television, radio, videos, slides and computer games.
Personal and social skills	Includes the participation in, listening to or watching of activities relating to the children's physical and emotional health and well-being. This involved paying attention to bodily and physical needs e.g. toileting, washing, eating and sleeping (personal care),

	<p>conflict resolution, sharing and borrowing of resources, learning about manners and feelings (social skills), and participating in disciplinary activities e.g. ‘time out’, sitting quietly to reflect on behaviour and discussing behaviour with an adult.</p>
Domestic/Economic activities	<p>This category includes preparation for activities, cleaning/tidying up and preparing for meals (domestic) and participating in any activities which contribute to the income of the setting e.g. gardening and tending to animals (economic).</p>
Transitional Activities	<p>Includes the movement towards a new activity or place e.g. queuing.</p>
Waiting	<p>The “waiting” category is different from the above activity in that it involves the child sitting/standing and waiting for something to happen e.g. roll-call.</p>
Free activities	<p>This category involves the children’s participation in undesignated, unorganised activities. The child chooses his/her own activity e.g. indoor free activities or outdoor free activities.</p>
Mixed Activities	<p>The participation in a number of simultaneous activities. This may include the adult proposing a number of organised activities from which the child can choose to participate in and the organisation of a number of activities which the children must rotate amongst themselves. This category differs from the ‘free activities’ category above in that the adult decides on the activities within which the child must participate.</p>

Appendix A.3: The Child Activities Observations (CA)

The children’s activities were recorded over three days for periods of ten minutes at a time (maximum of 40 minutes). The ten-minute periods were conducted at different times of the child’s day to ensure the researcher experienced a variation of activities and experiences. The CA was conducted simultaneously with the MOT system. The activities of the target child were the focus of the observation and were recorded at thirty second intervals. The CA tool specifically produces data relating to the amount of time spent on particular activities e.g. content activities, routine activities or free activities. It also produces information outlining the percentage of time the observed child spends interacting with other children and/or adults. The main activities which the children participated in are coded as per 1-7 in management of time above. However, the following additional codes were also assigned to the child activity observation tool:

Child Activity Categories with Examples

Physical	
Gross Motor	Cycling, Jumping, Running and Building with Big Blocks
Fine Motor	Stringing Beads, Building Lego Blocks
Expressive	Play-acting, Dressing-up
Dramatic/Imaginative	
Arts and Crafts	Using Creative Materials, Painting.
Music	Singing, Dancing, Playing Instruments
Language/Storytelling	Listening to/Reading Stories
Pre-academic	
Reading	Sounding out words, Learning to Read
Writing	Practicing Pencil-holding, Writing Letters
Number/Maths	Counting, Learning Sizes/Shapes
Physical Science/Environment	Using Microscopes, Planting Seeds
Social Science/Environment	Visiting a Fire Station
Others	Memory Games, Calendar Reading
Religious	Singing Hymns, Praying
Media Related	Watching Television, Using Computers
Personal/Social	
Personal Care	Toileting, Washing Hands
Social Activities	Show and Tell, Reporting News
Discipline	‘Time Out’
Expressions of Emotions	
Positive Emotions	Hugging, Kissing, Seeking Comfort
Negative Emotions	Screaming, Fighting, Crying
Child Helper Activities	

Domestic	Meal Preparation, Clean-up
Economic	Farming, Selling Produce
Transitional	Moving Towards New Activity/Place
Accidents	Unintentional Tripping, Falling
Waiting	Uninvolved in any Activity

The social context of the child's participation in activities as well as the presence or absence of verbalisations was recorded for the observed child. Children were observed under the following interactive structures:

- a) With one child (WC): Interaction with one other child
- b) In a small group (SG): Interaction in a small group of 2-6 children
- c) In a large group (LG): Interaction in a large group of seven or more children
- d) With one or more adult (s) (WA): Interaction with one or more adults
- e) Group response (GR): Child responds as part of a group
- f) Verbalisation (T): The frequency of the observed child's verbalisations.

Appendix A. 4: IEA CHILD ACTIVITY CATEGORIES

Categories 1 to 5

As outlined in previous MOT description Appendix A.1.

Expressions of emotion

The participation of the child in, or the listening or watching of the child of physical and/or verbal communication of attitudes and/or feelings. Such includes hugging, cuddling, kissing, being kind, laughing and sympathizing (positive), as well as screaming, crying, slapping, being angry and hurting others intentionally (negative).

Child helper activities

The child participates in, watches or listens to instructions for carrying out tasks related to the maintenance of the setting, routine of the centre, as well as the performance of domestic and economic related activities. Examples include cleaning/tidying up and preparing for meals (domestic) and participating in any activities which contribute to the income of the setting e.g. gardening and tending to animals (economic).

Transitional activities

The child is actively involved in purposeful movement towards an activity or place, purposefully searching for an activity or person, looking for a toy or lining up to go somewhere.

Accidents

An unintentional activity e.g. falling, spilling something, dropping something or knocking something over

Waiting/no active engagement

The child is not participating in a specific activity, and is uninvolved in an activity. Such includes inactively waiting for someone or something e.g. sitting at a table waiting for the next activity, waiting for his/her name to be called during role call (waiting), as well as wandering aimlessly about with no goal or aim, staring in to space and picking at nails/fingers.

Appendix A. 5: The Adult Behaviour Observations (AB)

The AB Observations recorded the behaviour of the main adult per setting over three days, for two thirty-minute periods of observation. This data was collected simultaneously with the MOT system. All activities of the primary adult in the setting were the focus of the observation behaviour regardless of whether or not their behaviour directly involved the children. The tool allows for data collection on the general behaviours of the teachers/caregiver, the specific behaviours directed towards each target child, and the nature of the adult's general involvement with children. The main categories within the Adult Behaviour tool are:

- a) Informational/Facilitative Teaching
- b) Participation and/or Shared Activities
- c) Nurturance/Expressions of Affection
- d) Child Management
- e) Supervision
- f) Transitional Activities
- g) Routine Activities
- h) Personal Activities

Observations were conducted over three separate days to encapsulate the variation of the programme. Although used for research purposes in the current project, the data produced from the observations can also be used in reflective early childhood care and education practice by practitioners and management to assess the amount of time spent on activities and the amount of time spent interacting.

Appendix A. 6: IEA ADULT BEHAVIOUR CATEGORIES

Category	Example
Information/Facilitative Teaching Strategies	
Giving Knowledge/Information	Teaching Facts, Explanations
Listening to Questions Related to Teaching	Listening to factual questions
Giving Knowledge/Information	Giving Practical Information
Listening to Questions Unrelated to Teaching	Listening to Practical Questions
Giving Demonstrations	Demonstration of Task or Skill
Listening to Child's Request for a Demonstration	Listening to Request for a Demonstration or a Skill
Eliciting Information/Knowledge	Asking Questions, Knowledge Related
Eliciting Information/Knowledge on ideas	Encouraging Questions on thoughts/ideas
Listening to the Child's Responses on ideas	Listening to Responses on thoughts/ideas
Eliciting an Action or Behaviour	Requests the Demonstration of an Improved Skill
Offering Choices	Offering Alternative Activities
Listening to the Child's Questions re Activities	Listening to Questions re Choice

Encouraging Activity	To Persist and Complete the Task
Listening to the Child's Comments	Listening to Problems on Completing Activities
Providing Assistance/Clarification/Solutions	Offering Solutions to Problems
Providing Assistance/Clarification/Solutions	Offering Solutions to Problems
Listening to Child's Request for Assistance	Listening to Request for Help
Giving Positive Feedback	Giving Praise or Approval
Giving Negative Feedback	Indicates Disapproval of Task Performance
Listening to the Child's Comments	Listening to Responses on Feedback
Participation/shared activities	
Participation/shared activities	Joining in as an equal partner in an activity
Listening during shared activities	Listening to explanations or statements
Nurturance/Expressions of Affect	
Engaging in affectionate/friendly behaviour	Warm-hearted interactions; cuddling/hugging
Listening to child's remarks	Listening to requests re: affectionate behaviour
Giving reassurance and support	Comforts and reassures
Listening to child's remarks	Listening to requests for reassurance

Engaging in neutral behaviour	Adult presence without interaction
Engaging in negative behaviour	Demeaning expressions or behaviour
Child management	
Establishing/reminding child of rules	Setting Standards, Rules
Establishing/Reminding Child of Rules	Setting Standards, Rules
Listening to the Child's Comments re Rules	Listening to Questions in Relation to standards
Verbal/Physical Intervention	Stops Undesirable Behaviour
Giving an Order	Instructions to Carry out a Task
Listening to the Child's Response to an Order	Listening to Answer
Giving Permission	Allowing Choice
Listening to Requests for Permission	Listening to Request for Permission
Problem-solving/Conflict Resolution	Assisting with solutions
Listening to the Child's Problem/Solution	Listening to explanation/solution
Giving Positive Feedback	Indicating Approval of Behaviour
Giving Negative Feedback	Indicating Disapproval of Behaviour
Listening to the Child's Comments	Listening to Comments on Feedback
Calling For Attention	Giving Direction for Attention

Supervision	Observing/Checking Behaviour and Areas
Transitional Activities	Purposeful Movement –Activity Related
Routine Activities	Planning and Managerial Activities
Personal Activities	Non Child related activities

Appendix B: Sample data analysis matrix; judicious quotes from interviews with infant teachers

Theme: Learning environment (general) – code category LEG.									
Teacher 1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
I think the children deserve a nice environment	I think the environment is absolutely extremely important	It's about colour; it's about having a nice safe environment. It's nice and colourful the type of environment that stimulates the children to.....you know not to be in a room with just blank walls.	The environment is huge....absolutely huge	Well the first thing for me would be that children feel happy to come into the room and they feel happy while in the room with their peers with me in the class that they don't feel threatened or that they don't feel like they're being judged	The learning environment is very important	There are loads of classrooms that you walk into and say "this is a wonderful learning environment" but when you actually look at what's up there it's not a celebration of what the children are about at all.	In an ideal world the environment would be key....it's quite a difficult thing when you have 29 children	The environment is everything, I think anyway	The learning environment is vital. If you get that right everything else just falls into place
I am so busy in other areas I don't have the time to spend rearranging it as often as I should.	If you come in and there's nothing on the walls you know it is very dull and everything is in boxes it creates an atmosphere straight away like because children can't work,	Everything is kind of centred around the child being able to reach things and do things for themselves and to support them so that it isn't always me giving out things.	It's hugely important that the feeling in the class is a good feeling, a safe feeling. I think that you certainly bring an awful lot of that yourself	It has to be attractive you know...wall displays, their work, all of that is so important	Organisation is a big thing for me....well with 32 children everything has to be really well organised all the time	This whole product is still instilled in people, in people's brains and I don't know why because it doesn't work	The tables all face me. That way the kids are looking up and it ensures that they're on task	The physical layout is huge that everything is at their level. We have helpers so sometimes I will get them to bring the copies or whatever and they know where everything is	It has to be bright and welcoming. Nobody likes coming into a drab classroom

	they can't speak or get involved in things								
it's very important to me because a lot of my children would be very disadvantaged that they have a nice environment	I would place a big emphasis on the presentation of the classroom and it's the kids you know not my work.	The children enjoy having their little jobs here in the classroom as well and I think that it's important that they are not sitting there all day waiting for me to get off my chair and give them out	I think the atmosphere itself in the class whereby there's not total screaming and roaring going on with other children; I feel that's huge	We have three groups we have the red group, the yellow group and the green group. That how you manage the numbers....that's a huge challenge; a big issue	You need to organise resources; having the physical set up of the furniture, having displays and just thinking things out in advance, having the planning done.	Everything is very static, your nature corner, your art corner, your English corner....when the inspector comes out that what she expects to see.	Everything has a place and stays in its place. Organisation is a big thing because of the numbers really	I'm so lucky I have only 20 children here in my classroom. That's manageable but you're still trying to get everything covered	Displaying their work is so important. They feel good about themselves and it says they're valued
I think it's very important that the kids are comfortable in the area and that they have ownership that they feel it's their place				children especially now-a-days you know from the age of around...there's computer games, teeny weenies, tweeny's you know all the cartoons and everything; are so colourful and so dynamic	Making the classroom attractive for them and that it changes over time that it isn't just fixed and then the children have involvement as well in creating their own learning space		They love to see their work on the walls, it makes them feel valued	You try to make it a happy place for them that they feel secure and that you're there for them	The physical layout has to be right you know that there is space to get around to the groups to check their work and make sure they're focussed

	I try to create a sense of belonging in the classroom	It's nice and colourful the type of environment that stimulates the children	when you shift the desks a little bit and you have a challenging guy on the edge rather than being in the middle of the melee- straight away it changes how the child is behaving	so you need to kind of match that in a way in the classroom. If they're coming in to a bare room with nothing on the walls it just wouldn't work			You can see the number friezes and the alphabet and the word wall; it all reinforces the learning when they look around	I give little rewards for the best ciúnas, that helps to keep them on task and to keep order in the classroom which is very important too	The emotional environment is absolutely huge. That is all down to the teacher. You know that you get to know them as well as you can. That you there for them and they know that
I think colour is really important as well, that its a nice attractive environment	most of their work is to be done on their tables	So to me the learning environment is about stimulation more than anything you know.	you need endless patience on the day and whether you can stop and give the time to the child that needs it at the time	I'll give a star to the quietest group or the group that has tidied up first or the group that can tell me something like when I'm doing sounds maybe somebody can tell me or all day it together something like that you know there's a kind of a competitive edge			They need structure....routine. It's really important that they know there are rules and they can't just wander around		I have a split class with 14 juniors and 13 seniors. That makes it harder to get things right. Sometimes there can be a huge gap between the youngest and the oldest in that kind of a grouping so you're trying to create an emotional environment that suits both lots of

									children
	we have our reading shelf over there where if they are reading a shared reading book they go over there. You know it's laid out, they know where things are.	When the children are finished their work early they can look around; look at the word wall and practice your words and practice your reading	– and that the children know that if they have a problem that they're going to be listened to and that when I go up to her she'll listen to me	Space is a big thing for me. It's very important it also enables me to go around to each child as well to make sure that they're engaged in the task which they are supposed to be engaged in			The teacher makes the environment really you know We all start out with the best intentions but the reality is that it's very hard to be the nice caring teacher all the time when there is only one of you and 29 little people who need your attention		
	they have to get into a routine and they have to know that there are certain things they can do at certain times	Like the room is not static everything is always changing so they're happy and the love coming in.	The space as well, the physical space – not being too over crowded – all of those would be huge as well.	that is a work space and behind it is the reading corner and on the wall in the same place as the reading corner are Jolly Phonics sounds and the alphabet is on top; so all the language materials are together					
	Things can go missing or things can get moved and it can	So I think it's good for them to see their own work as well	Light is very important, it's good for the teacher and it has to affect the						

	cause chaos like. So that's why I think routine is very important. I think it helps with the environment in the classroom	and to feel valued and to see each other's work. "Look there's yours and look at mine isn't it great" so that's a very important part of the learning.	children as well						
			The numbers is a big issue....						

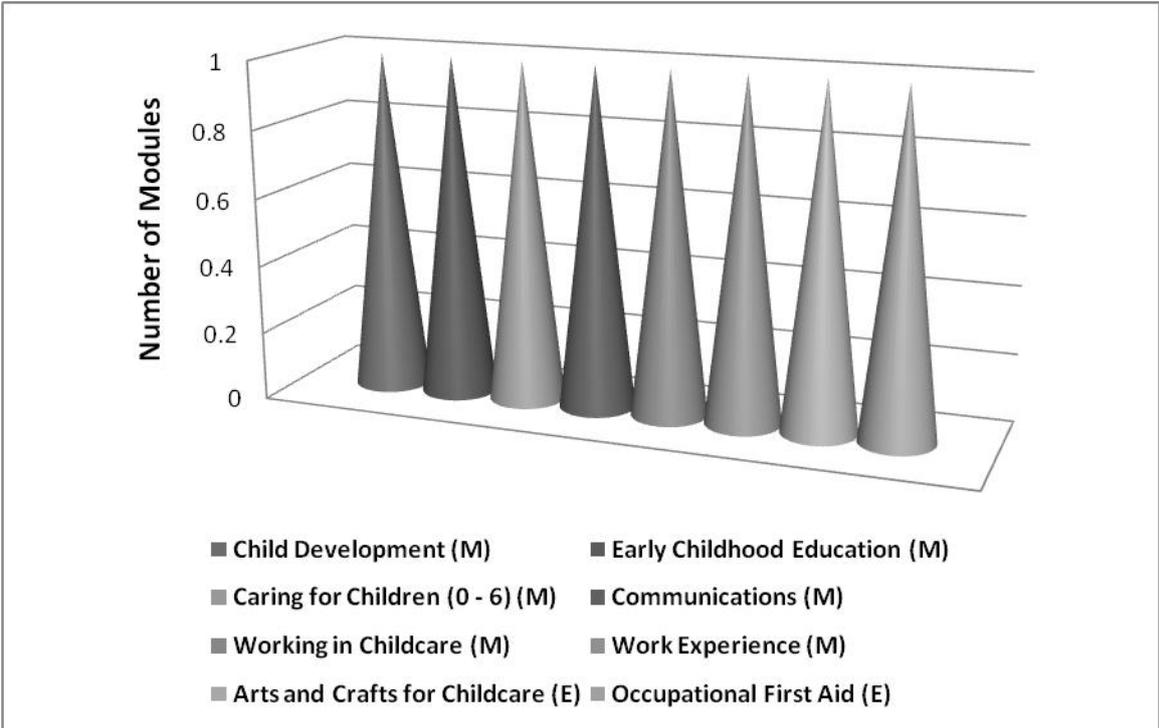
Appendix C. 1: FETAC Level 5 description and content

1. **Child development:** designed to provide the learner with an introduction to the theory and practice of child development from 0-6 years. The module aims to promote good practice, equality of opportunity and respect for diversity in lifestyles, religion and culture in early years care. This Module covers and overview of child development (Physical, cognitive, language, social and emotional) and primary research in child development.
2. **Caring for children (0 – 6):** designed to equip the learner with the skills and knowledge to care for children from 0-6 years either in the home or as part of a supervised team in a childcare setting. The module aims to promote good practice, equality of opportunity and respect for diversity in lifestyles, religion and culture and the maintenance of a healthy, hygienic and safe environment for children. This Module covers safety, health, feeding babies and children, nappy changing and toileting.
3. **Early Childhood Education:** designed to equip the learner with the skills and knowledge to care for children from 0-6 years either in the home or as part of a supervised team in a childcare setting. The module aims to promote good practice, equality of opportunity and respect for diversity in lifestyles, religion and culture and the maintenance of a healthy, hygienic and safe environment for children. This module covers understanding play, play activities, toys, games and play equipment.
4. **Communication:** Communication skills are highly valued in the workplace but this module extends beyond exclusively vocational needs, recognising that the acquisition of these skills is a life-long process, and central to personal, social and professional development and fulfilment. This module covers listening and speaking, reading and writing, non-verbal and visual communications, communications technology.
5. **Working in childcare:** designed to equip the learner with the personal skills and knowledge required to work in a professional manner with children, parents and colleagues either in the home or a childcare setting. It aims to promote good practice, equality of opportunity and respect for diversity in lifestyles, religion and culture in

early years care. This Module covers working in childcare, legislation, working with parents, relating to parents and the childcare team and personal reflection.

6. **Work experience:** The module is designed to meet the needs of learners undertaking a wide range of Level 5 further education and training courses. Work Experience is a planned experiential learning activity and is an integral part of an educational process. It involves learners preparing and planning for work, working under direction in a specific vocational area and reviewing and evaluating that work. The experience of work enables learners to develop work skills, evaluate employment opportunities and cope with changing work environments. The three units: Planning and Preparation, Experience, and Review and Evaluation should be viewed as an integrated package.
7. **Elective arts and crafts:** This module aims to enable the learner to understand the value of participation in art and craft activities to the overall development of children (0 - 7 years). Learners will develop the skills to plan and carry out appropriate activities with children. The module also aims to develop the creative ability of learners and equip them with the skills and knowledge to work with young children in the art and craft area. This Module covers child development and art and craft activity, creative development of the learner, and creative activities with children
8. **Elective occupational first aid:** The module is designed to provide the learner with the knowledge, practical skills and understanding required to provide and coordinate first aid in the workplace in compliance with the requirements of the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work (General Application) Regulations 2007 and the associated Guide to these Regulations.

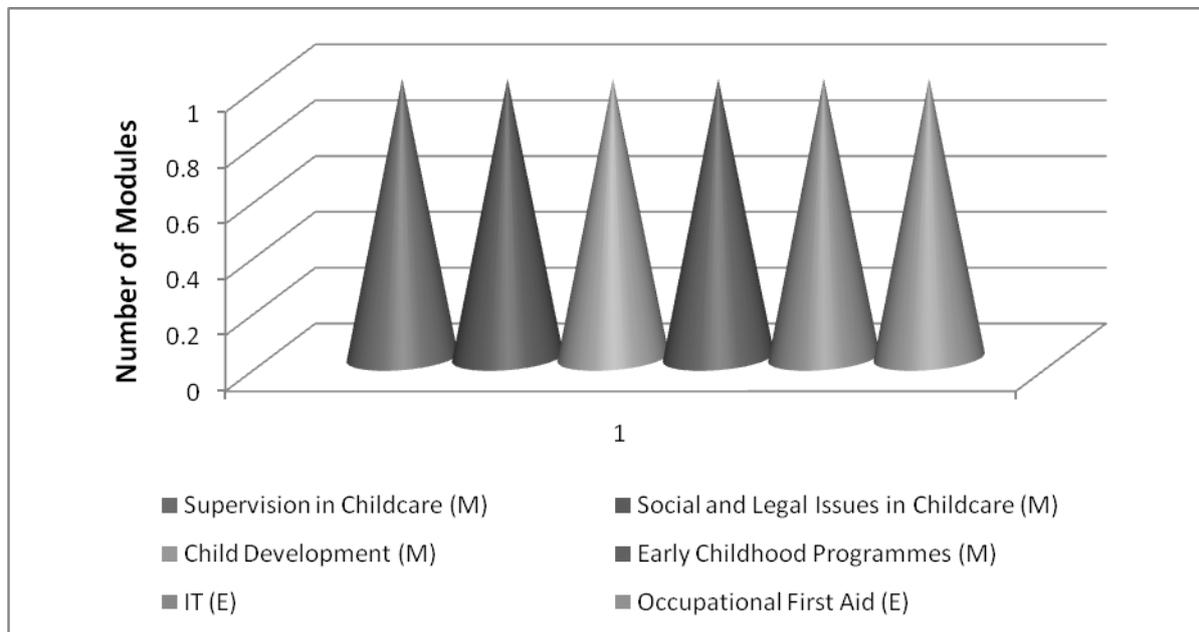
FETAC Level 5



Appendix C.2: FETAC Level 6 description and content

- 1. Supervision in childcare:** designed to provide the learner with opportunities to acquire the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary to effectively supervise an Early Childhood Education and Care setting. The module aims to promote good practice, equality and respect for diversity in early childhood education and care. This Module covers personal development, supervisory management, organisational skills, leading a childcare team, working in partnership with parents and carers.
- 2. Social and Legal Studies:** designed to provide the learner with an understanding of social policy and legislation relevant to early childhood education and care settings, children and their families and the skills necessary for dealing with child protection issues. It aims to promote good practice, equality and respect for diversity in early year's education and care. This module covers overview of the sector, social policy and legislation, child protection, equality in childcare.
- 3. Child development:** This module is designed to provide the learner with knowledge and understanding of child development from 0-6 years and the skills required to implement and promote the use of observations in the early childhood education and care setting. The module aims to promote good practice, equality, and respect for diversity in early childhood education and care. This Module covers the physical, thinking, social and emotional child, observations and the whole child
- 4. Early Childhood programmes:** designed to provide the learner with the knowledge, understanding and practical skills required to supervise the implementation of early childhood programmes of learning for 0-6 years. The module aims to promote good practice, equality, and respect for diversity in early childhood education and care. This Module covers an overview of Early Childhood Education; features of effective early childhood programmes; programme development and implementation, planning and evaluation.

FETAC Level 6



Appendix D. 1: Síolta Principles

- 1. Early childhood is a significant and distinct time in life that must be nurtured, respected, valued and supported in its own right.**

Early childhood, the period from birth to six years, is a significant and unique time in the life of every individual. Every child needs and has the right to positive experiences in early childhood. As with every other phase in life, positive supports and adequate resources are necessary to make the most of this period. Provision of such supports and resources should not be conditional on the expectations of the economy, society or other interests.

- 2. The child's individuality, strengths, rights and needs are central in the provision of quality early childhood experiences.**

The child is an active agent in her/his own development through her/his interactions with the world. These interactions are motivated by the individual child's abilities, interests, previous experiences and desire for independence. Each child is a competent learner from birth and quality early years experiences can support each child to realise their full potential. Provision of these experiences must reflect and support the child's strengths, needs and interests. Children have the right to be listened to and have their views on issues that affect them heard, valued and responded to.

- 3. Parents are the primary educators of the child and have a pre-eminent role in promoting her/his well-being, learning and development.**

Quality early childhood care and education must value and support the role of parents. Open, honest and respectful partnership with parents is essential in promoting the best interests of the child. Mutual partnership contributes to establishing harmony and continuity between the diverse environments the child experiences in the early years. The development of connections and interactions between the early childhood setting, parents, the extended family and the wider community also adds to the enrichment of early childhood experiences by reflecting the environment in which the child lives and grows.

4. Responsive, sensitive and reciprocal relationships, which are consistent over time, are essential to the wellbeing, learning and development of the young child.

The relationships that the child forms within her/his immediate and extended environment from birth will significantly influence her/his well-being, development and learning. These relationships are two-way and include adults, peers, family and the extended community. Positive relationships, which are secure, responsive and respectful and which provide consistency and continuity over time, are the cornerstone of the child's well-being.

5. Equality is an essential characteristic of quality early childhood care and education.

Equality, as articulated in Article 2 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and in the Equal Status Acts 2000 to 2004, is a fundamental characteristic of quality early childhood care and education provision. It is a critical prerequisite for supporting the optimal development of all children in Ireland. It requires that the individual needs and abilities of each child are recognised and supported from birth towards the realisation of her/his unique potential. This means that all children should be able to gain access to, participate in, and benefit from early years services on an equal basis.

6. Quality early childhood settings acknowledge and respect diversity and ensure that all children and families have their individual, personal, cultural and linguistic identity validated.

Diversity is a term which is generally used to describe differences in individuals by virtue of gender, age, skin colour, language, sexual orientation, ethnicity, ability, religion, race or other background factors such as family structure, economic circumstances, etc. Quality early childhood environments should demonstrate respect for diversity through promoting a sense of belonging for all children within the cultural heritage of Ireland. They should also provide rich and varied experiences which will support children's ability to value social and cultural diversity.

7. The physical environment of the young child has a direct impact on her/his well-being, learning and development.

The child's experiences in early childhood are positively enhanced by interactions with a broad range of environments. These include the indoor and outdoor, built and natural, home and out-of-home environments. The environment should be high quality and should extend and enrich the child's development and learning. These experiences stimulate curiosity, foster independence and promote a sense of belonging. The development of respect for the environment will also result from such experiences.

8. The safety, welfare and well-being of all children must be protected and promoted in all early childhood environments.

The promotion of child well-being is a characteristic of a quality environment. This involves the protection of each child from harmful experiences and the promotion of child welfare. Additionally, the opportunity to form trusting relationships with adults and other children is a key characteristic of quality. Promotion of safety should not prevent the child from having a rich and varied array of experiences in line with her/his age and stage of development.

9. The role of the adult in providing quality early childhood experiences is fundamental.

Quality early childhood practice is built upon the unique role of the adult. The competencies, qualifications, dispositions and experience of adults, in addition to their capacity to reflect upon their role, are essential in supporting and ensuring quality experiences for each child. This demanding and central role in the life of the young child needs to be appropriately resourced, supported and valued.

10. The provision of quality early childhood experiences requires cooperation, communication and mutual respect.

Teamwork is a vital component of quality in early childhood care and education. It is the expression of cooperative, coordinated practice in any setting. Shared knowledge and understanding clearly communicated among the team within the setting; with and among other professionals involved with the child; and with the parents is a prerequisite of quality practice and reflects a "whole-child perspective". This also ensures the promotion of

respectful working relationships among all adults supporting the well-being, learning and development of the child. Such teamwork, coordination and communication must be valued, supported and resourced by an appropriate infrastructure at local, regional and national levels.

11. Pedagogy in early childhood is expressed by curricula or programmes of activities which take a holistic approach to the development and learning of the child and reflect the inseparable nature of care and education.

Pedagogy is a term that is used to refer to the whole range of interactions which support the child's development. It takes a holistic approach by embracing both care and education. It acknowledges the wide range of relationships and experiences within which development takes place and recognises the connections between them. It also supports the concept of the child as an active learner. Such pedagogy must be supported within a flexible and dynamic framework that addresses the learning potential of the 'whole child.' Furthermore, it requires that early childhood practitioners are adequately prepared and supported for its implementation.

12. Play is central to the well-being, development and learning of the young child.

Play is an important medium through which the child interacts with, explores and makes sense of the world around her/his. These interactions with, for example, other children, adults, materials, events and ideas, are key to the child's well-being, development and learning. Play is a source of joy and fulfillment for the child. It provides an important context and opportunity to enhance and optimise quality early childhood experiences. As such, play will be a primary focus in quality early childhood settings.

Appendix D.2: Síolta Standards

Standard 1: Rights of the child

Ensuring that each child's rights are met requires that she/he is enabled to exercise choice and to use initiative as an active participant and partner in her/his own development and learning.

Standard 2: Environments

Enriching environments, both indoor and outdoor (including materials and equipment) are well maintained, safe, available, accessible, adaptable, developmentally appropriate, and offer a variety of challenging and stimulating experiences.

Standard 3: Parents and Families

Valuing and involving parents and families requires a proactive partnership approach evidenced by a range of clearly stated, accessible and implemented processes, policies and procedures.

Standard 4: Consultation

Ensuring inclusive decision-making requires consultation that promotes participation and seeks out, listens to and acts upon the views and opinions of children, parents and staff, and other stakeholders, as appropriate.

Standard 5: Interactions

Fostering constructive interactions (child/child, child/adult and adult/adult) requires explicit policies, procedures and practice that emphasise the value of process and are based on mutual respect, equal partnership and sensitivity.

Standard 6: Play

Promoting play requires that each child has ample time to engage in freely available and accessible, developmentally appropriate and well-resourced opportunities for exploration, creativity and 'meaning making' in the company of other children, with participating and supportive adults and alone, where appropriate.

Standard 7: Curriculum

Encouraging each child's holistic development and learning requires the implementation of a verifiable, broad-based, documented and flexible curriculum or programme.

Standard 8: Planning and Evaluation

Enriching and informing all aspects of practice within the setting requires cycles of observation, planning, action and evaluation, undertaken on a regular basis.

Standard 9: Health and Welfare

Promoting the health and welfare of the child requires protection from harm, provision of nutritious food, appropriate opportunities for rest, and secure relationships characterised by trust and respect.

Standard 10: Organisation

Organising and managing resources effectively requires an agreed written philosophy, supported by clearly communicated policies and procedures to guide and determine practice.

Standard 11: Professional Practice

Practicing in a professional manner requires that individuals have skills, knowledge, values and attitudes appropriate to their role and responsibility within the setting. In addition, it requires regular reflection upon practice and engagement in supported, ongoing professional development.

Standard 12: Communication

Communicating effectively in the best interests of the child requires policies, procedures and actions that promote the proactive sharing of knowledge and information among appropriate stakeholders, with respect and confidentiality.

Standard 13: Transitions

Ensuring continuity of experiences for children requires policies, procedures and practice that promote sensitive management of transitions, consistency in key relationships, liaison within

and between settings, the keeping and transfer of relevant information (with parental consent), and the close involvement of parents and, where appropriate, relevant professionals.

Standard 14: Identity and Belonging

Promoting positive identities and a strong sense of belonging requires clearly defined policies, procedures and practice that empower every child and adult to develop a confident self- and group identity, and to have a positive understanding and regard for the identity and rights of others.

Standard 15: Legislation and Regulation

Being compliant requires that all relevant regulations and legislative requirements are met or exceeded.

Standard 16: Community Involvement

Promoting community involvement requires the establishment of networks and connections evidenced by policies, procedures and actions which extend and support all adult's and children's engagement with the wider community.

Appendix D.3: Aistear the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework

Principles of early learning and development

Aistear is based on 12 principles of early learning and development. These are presented in three groups:

1. The first group concerns **children and their lives in early childhood:**

- ✓ the child's uniqueness
- ✓ equality and diversity
- ✓ children as citizens.

2. The second group concerns **children's connections with others:**

- ✓ relationships
- ✓ parents, family and community
- ✓ the adult's role.

3. The third group concerns **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 E: Principles underpinning the language of space

1. The language of space is very strong, and is a conditioning factor. Though its code is not always explicit and recognisable, we perceive and interpret it from a very early age
2. Like every other language, the physical space is therefore a constituent element of the formation of thought.
3. The “reading” of spatial language is multi-sensory and involves both the remote receptors (eyes, ears and nose) and the immediate receptors for the surrounding environment (skin, membranes and muscles).
4. The relational qualities between the individual and his/her habitat are reciprocal, so that both the person and the environment are active and modify each other in turn.
5. The perception of space is subjective and holistic (tactile, visual, olfactory and kinesthetic). It is modified throughout the various phases of life and is strongly linked to one’s own culture: we not only speak different languages but also inhabit different sensory worlds. In the shared space, each of us makes a personal meaning of that space, creating an individual territory which is strongly affected by the variables of gender, age and culture.
6. Young children demonstrate an innate and extremely high level of perceptual sensitivity and competence - which is polysemous and holistic - in relation to surrounding space. Their immediate receptors are much more active than they will be in later stages of life, and they show a great ability to analyse and distinguish reality using sensory receptors other than those of sight and hearing. Therefore, the utmost attention should be given to designing light and colours, as well as olfactory, auditory and tactile elements, all of which are extremely important in defining the sensory quality of a space.
7. Considering the children’s age and posture, greater importance should be given to surfaces that are normally treated as merely background elements, such as floors, ceilings and walls.
8. We should be more aware of the space and the objects we place there, knowing that the spaces in which children construct their identities and their personal stories are many both real and virtual. Television, computers and other household appliances are now instruments of daily life, just as the coexistence of real, virtual, and imaginary elements is an everyday phenomenon, to the extent of modifying - in a way that we might not even imagine - the definition of space and of the self that children are constructing.

Appendix F: Structure of the knowledge dimension of revised taxonomy of educational objectives.

A. Factual knowledge- the basic elements that students must know to be acquainted with a discipline or solve problems in it.

Aa. Knowledge of terminology

Ab. Knowledge of specific details and elements

B. Conceptual knowledge - the interrelationships among the basic elements within a larger structure that enables them to function together.

Ba. Knowledge of classifications and categories

Bb. Knowledge of principles and generalisations

Bc. Knowledge of theories, models and structures

C. Procedural Knowledge - How to do something, methods of inquiry, and criteria for using skills, algorithms, techniques and methods.

Ca. Knowledge of subject specific skills and algorithms

Cb. Knowledge of subject-specific techniques and methods

Cc. Knowledge of criteria for determining when to use appropriate procedures

D. Metacognitive knowledge- Knowledge of cognition in general as well as awareness and knowledge of one's own cognition

Da. Strategic knowledge

Db. Knowledge about cognitive tasks, including appropriate contextual and conditional knowledge

Dc. Self- knowledge (Krathwohl, 2002: 214.