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‘My Self-Image and Your Interactions’
The Influence of the Preschool Educator’s Image of the Child as a Learner on Children’s Wellbeing and Involvement

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A thesis submitted April 2020
To the School of Political Science and Sociology
College of Arts, Social Science and Celtic Studies
National University of Ireland, Galway,
for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
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<td>American Academy of Paediatrics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AIM</td>
<td>Access and Inclusion Model</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AMI</td>
<td>Association of Montessori International</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APHA</td>
<td>American Public Health Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BARIN</td>
<td>Boston Area Reggio Inspired Network</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCDBG</td>
<td>Child Care and Development Block Grant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCS</td>
<td>Community Childcare Subvention Scheme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CDA</td>
<td>Child Development Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CECDE</td>
<td>The Centre for Early Childhood Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CEGO</td>
<td>Centre for Experiential Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CLASS</td>
<td>Classroom Assessment Scoring System</td>
</tr>
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<td>CSCCE</td>
<td>Centre for the Study of Child Care Employment</td>
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<td>CSO</td>
<td>Central Statistics Office</td>
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<td>CoRE</td>
<td>Competence Requirements in Early Childhood Education and Care</td>
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<td>CYPSC</td>
<td>Children and Young Peoples Services Committees</td>
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<td>Department of Children and Youth Affairs</td>
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<td>DES</td>
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<td>European Council</td>
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<td>ECERS</td>
<td>Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale</td>
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ECERS-R .......................... Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale Revised
ECERS-E .................. Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale Extended
ECI ................................................................. Early Childhood Ireland
EEL ................................................................. Effective Early Learning Project
EST ................................................................. Ecological Systems Theory
EU .................................................................. European Union
EU ................................................................. European Union Commission
EYEI ............................................................... Early Years Education Inspections
GDP ................................................................. Gross Domestic Product
HGSE .............................................................. Harvard Graduate School Education
HSE ................................................................. Health Service Executive
IDEA ............................................................... Individuals with Disabilities Education Act
ISCED .............................................................. International Standard Classification of Education
IQ ................................................................. Intelligence Quotient
MA ................................................................. State of Massachusetts
NAEYC .................. National Association for the Education of Young Children
NAREA ........................................................... North America Reggio Emilia Alliance
NCCA ............................................................. National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NESSE .... Network of Experts in Social Sciences of Education and Training
NFQ ................................................................. National Framework of Qualifications
NUI ................................................................. National University of Ireland
NUI Galway ......................... National University of Ireland Galway
NVCO ............................... National Voluntary Childcare Organisation
NVIVO..........................Qualitative data analysis computer software
OECD..............The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PISA..........................Programme for International Student Assessment
Pobal.....................Administer and manage Government and EU Funding
POP..................................Pedagogy of Play
PPCT..............................Process Person Context Time
QLI.................................Quality of Learning Instrument
QRIS..............................Quality Rating and Improvement System
REAIE.......................Reggio Emilia Australia Information Exchange
REPEY......................Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years
RRR.............................Reflect Respect Relate Observation tool
SDT..............................Self Determination Theory
SPSS..............................Statistic Software Package
SST..............................Sustained Shared Thinking
SSTEW......................Sustained Shared Thinking Emotional Wellbeing
TEC..............................Training and Employment Childcare Scheme
TUSLA.............................Child and Family Agency
UNESCO...............The United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UNICEF..........................United Nations Children’s Fund
US.....................................United States
VCO.............................Voluntary Childcare Organisation
ZPD..............................Zone of Proximal Development
Declaration

I declare that the work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original and my own work, except as otherwise acknowledged in the text. The material has not been submitted, either in whole or part, for a degree at this or any other university.

_____________________________________________________________________

Rita Melia
April 2020
Abstract

The introduction in 2011 of a universal free preschool year for all children in Ireland prior to attending primary school was heralded as a significant commitment to children and families. As a result of this policy initiative there are increasing numbers of young children accessing preschool provision. However, despite increased access and increased investment in ECEC provision, little is known about the quality of preschool children’s experiences, or the impact of the pedagogical approach on children’s levels of wellbeing and involvement in their learning. Equally there has been no evaluation of the quality or the effectiveness of the preschool provision in supporting children’s development of 21st century skills.

This thesis explores how the preschool educator’s image of the child as a learner influences her/his pedagogical approach and how the educator’s pedagogical approach subsequently impacts on children’s levels of wellbeing and involvement in their meaning making processes. The study, an ethnographic comparative study, was conducted across three preschool setting types, Montessori, Play-based and Reggio inspired in the west of Ireland and Boston. The findings identify that children’s levels of wellbeing and involvement are high when their basic needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness are met in an autonomy supportive, child-centred learning environment. In comparison, when the learning environment is controlling and the approach to teaching and learning is didactic and adult-led, children’s levels of wellbeing and involvement are low. These findings have significant implications for policy and practice and provide a compelling argument for the evaluation of the quality of preschool provision in Ireland.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction & Context

This research study was undertaken to answer the following research question: How does the educator’s image of the child as a learner influence her/his pedagogical approach, and how does the preschool educator’s pedagogical approach subsequently impact on children’s level of wellbeing and involvement in the preschool setting? In specific terms, the overarching aim of this research was to ‘Explore the preschool educator’s image of the child as a learner on the choice of her/his pedagogical approach, (Montessori, Play-based or Reggio inspired) and the subsequent influence on preschool children’s levels of wellbeing and involvement’. This research question and the associated aim and objectives which will be outlined later in this chapter was conducted in the context of the rapidly changing nature, understandings, and influence on young children’s wellbeing as a result of their early childhood experiences in Ireland and internationally.

The number of young children attending out-of-home childcare and education settings before starting in primary school has been continually increasing since the 1960s and has become the norm for most children in Ireland and in developing countries (Melhuish, 2015). This has resulted in a definite cultural shift as this is the first generation in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries where most young children spend a large proportion of their early childhoods in out of home care (UNICEF, 2008; OECD, 2015; Janta et al., 2016). The growth in the provision of early childhood education and care was underpinned by the requirements under the Lisbon Strategy. The Strategy was adopted by the European Council in 2000 and European Union (EU) Heads of States and Governments agreed to make the EU:

“The most dynamic and competitive knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion, and respect for the environment by 2010”.

(Kok, 2004, p.6)
This Strategy also set targets for levels of female employment with an aim to reach 60% female employment in Ireland by 2010. To meet these labour market requirements, the EU introduced targets on childcare which required European Union member states to provide childcare by 2010 to facilitate women to access employment or training. The target for member states was that at least 90% of children between three years old and the mandatory school age, or at least 33% of children under three years of age, would have access to childcare provision (Urban, 2009; Kok, 2014).

The European requirements have resulted not only in an increased number of women in the workforce across Europe, but also as a result, increased numbers of children accessing centre-based care (OECD, 2015; Janta et al., 2016). Because of these developments, together with increased interest and research in early childhood education and care, the focus has shifted from the provision of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) places to the quality of the provision and children’s experiences in these settings (Eurydice, 2009; Sylva et al., 2010; Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 2013; European Commission, 2014; Melhuish, 2015; Heckman, 2016).

Research confirms that brain development begins shortly after conception, with most of the neural pathways being developed in the early months and years of life. This provides the architecture for future cognitive and emotional development (Denham, 1998; Centre on the Developing Child, 2018; Government of Ireland, 2018). The first 1,000 days of a child’s life have been identified as a unique period of opportunity, when the foundations of optimum health, growth, and neurodevelopment across the lifespan are established (Cusich and Georgeff, 2016). It is during these firsts three years that the building blocks for lifelong learning are put in place (Marmot et al., 2010). With more children attending center based ECEC settings, it is the quality of these early experiences which is crucial for optimum growth and development. Quality ECEC experiences are associated with more equitable child outcomes, a reduction in poverty, increased intergenerational social mobility and better social and economic development (Council of the European Union, 2010). Equally poor-quality early childhood education and care provision can have a negative impact on
young children with long term effects such as deficits in language and cognitive development, particularly for children from low income families (Penn, 2009; Cabell et al., 2015; Melhuish, 2015). According to the OECD.

“Expanding access to services without paying attention to quality will not deliver good outcomes for children or the long-term productivity benefits for society. Furthermore, research has shown that if quality is low, it can have long lasting detrimental effects on child development, instead of bringing positive effects”. (OECD, 2012, p.9)

This evidence highlights that the benefits of ECEC for children is dependent on the quality of the experiences and opportunities offered to preschool children accessing the services. This is particularly a factor for children at risk (European Commission, 2011, 2014). It is also agreed that quality early childhood education and care provides the foundations for young children’s holistic development and is significant to their future success (Sylva et al., 2004; Bradley and Vandell, 2007; Litjens and Taguma, 2010; OECD, 2012; Phillips and Lowenstein, 2011; Melhuish, 2015). Wall et al. (2015) having analysed The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) concluded that 15-year-old students who attended a preschool for at least one year, performed better on PISA tests than those who had not attended an early childhood education and care programme. Heckman’s (2016), extensive research on the long-term effects of investment in early childhood education and care, confirms a return of investment of 13.4% or 7.3 dollars for every dollar spent in providing ECEC provision. The cognitive and economic statistics are impressive. However, from a sociological and rights-based perspective, the work of Moss and Dahlberg (2013) and most recently, Urban (2018) have called for a reconceptualisation of early childhood education and care. This reconceptualisation of ECEC proposes to place the provision of ECEC as a shared societal responsibility and a right for all children, a common good which benefits all children, families and society.

Quality in early childhood education and care provision is difficult to define and to measure. However, there is consensus that there are three indicators
of quality, comprising of structure, process and outcome (Sylva et al., 2010). Structural quality refers to the quantifiable measurable components, such as, how the ECEC setting is designed and organised in relation to the rules and regulations or accreditation system (European Commission, 2014). Structural quality reflects the physical environment which is in place to meet health and safety requirements such as the adult /child ratio, group size, the space requirements and materials. Process quality refers to the more qualitative elements of provision, by looking at the practice within the setting considering relationships, interactions and pedagogical practice. Outcome quality considers the benefits of ECEC for children, families and communities in terms of children’s social and emotional, moral and physical development (European Commission, 2014). Laevers (2017) argues that it is important to measure the structural and process elements of quality; however, it is equally important to measure what it feels like for a child to be present in a childcare setting. This, Laevers (2017) suggests, will confirm if the quality of the provision is effective.

There are some internationally recognised scales, such as the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale (ECERS), Harms et al. (2015) and the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), La Paro et al. (2012) available to assess the quality of early years settings. These tools measure the structural elements of quality. However, they do not measure what it feels like to be a child in the educational setting. Laevers (2017) suggests that if one wants to assess the quality of any educational setting (from pre-school level to adult education) that there must be a focus placed on two dimensions. These dimensions, he suggests, are the level of the childrens’ emotional wellbeing and the level of their involvement in their learning processes. Children with high levels of wellbeing feel at ease, they act spontaneously and show vitality and self-confidence (Laevers, 2017). High levels of wellbeing will only occur when the child’s physical need for tenderness and affection, safety, clarity, social recognition and the need to feel competent are satisfied (Maslow, 1954; Laevers, 2015). The second criteria, of involvement, is linked to the developmental processes and requires the educator to provide challenging environments and a
pedagogical approach which supports children’s intrinsic motivation to explore and think. Measuring the quality of ECEC settings traditionally measured the structural and the process elements of quality, without measuring the experiences of the children accessing the provision.

Over the last two decades in Ireland there has been increased interest at a policy level with subsequent increased investment in ECEC. There is recognition that quality ECEC experiences have positive long-term effects for children, families and society (Government of Ireland, 2018). However, while investment in the provision of preschool places has been unprecedented in Ireland, little is known about the quality of the preschool provision or its impact on children’s lives. There is currently no form of evaluation which measures the quality of the provision in preschool settings in Ireland. Síolta, The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (CECDE, 2006), is a framework which assists and supports early education settings to improve quality and enrich young children’s experiences. Síolta provides a framework for self-evaluation and reflection as opposed to measuring quality. Equally, other than the Department of Education and Skills (DES) inspections which were introduced in 2017, there is no comprehensive evaluation of the quality of the pedagogical approaches in Irish preschool settings. Lack of such evaluation means that there is no evidence to confirm if the pedagogical approaches being implemented in Irish preschool settings enhance high levels of wellbeing and involvement or support preschool children to develop 21st century skills or indeed confirm if these preschools are effective.

The above information generated several broad questions which helped to ground and motivate this study. For example, how can we ensure that every preschool child has a quality ECEC experience? What is the educator’s image of the child as a learner? Is this image reflected in their pedagogical practice and if not, why not? What do we know about teaching and how young children learn? Is this reflected in the pedagogical approach in ECEC settings? What are parents’ understandings about their child’s learning and what are their expectations of the preschool service? How can we measure what it feels like to be a child in a preschool setting? How can
the findings of this study contribute to knowledge and influence policy and practice?

The remainder of this chapter is divided into five sections. Section 1.2 introduces the primary theoretical and conceptual ideas informing this study. The rationale motivating this research study is provided in Section 1.3, followed by the research aim and objectives in Section 1.4. Section 1.5 presents an overview of the thesis content, providing an outline for each of the chapters in this study. Section 1.6 concludes with a summary of the overall chapter.

**1.2 Theoretical Underpinnings for this Study**

This study brings together theories of teaching and learning to explain and understand indicators and outcomes of quality provision in early childhood education and care settings. Therefore, the study is theoretically underpinned by theories of pedagogy, child well-being and involvement theory, self-determination theory and bio ecological theory. Malaguzzi (1994) suggests that the educator’s image of the child is where teaching begins, suggesting that educators carry inside them, their own image of the child as a learner. This he says impacts both implicitly and explicitly on the assumptions and the choices that educators make in relation to their pedagogical approach. This confirms Bruner’s (1996) position that the educator’s pedagogical approach is a direct reflection of the beliefs and assumptions that the educator holds about the learner. Bruner (1996) goes on to claim that the choice of pedagogical approach is never straight forward; it is always influenced by the beliefs and values of the educator.

**1.2.1 Pedagogical Approach of the Educator**

Bruner’s (1996) Models of Mind and Models of Pedagogy suggest that there are four types of learners. He suggests that the educator will adapt a pedagogical approach which is based on her/his image of the learner and understandings and knowledge about how learning occurs. When describing models of learners, Bruner (1996) suggests that some educators may see children as imitative learners while others may believe that children
learn best from didactic exposure. Alternatively, the educator may see the child as a thinker, or Bruner’s fourth model of learner is where, the educator sees the child as knowledgeable.

Based on these models, Bruner (1996) suggests that the curriculum should foster the development of problem-solving skills through the processes of inquiry and discovery. This happens, Bruner posits, in play where the learner constructs his or her own knowledge by discovering, as opposed to being told about something. Learning happens, Bruner (1996) suggests, in play when children are intrinsically motivated and curious, and the curriculum is designed so that the development of skills leads to the child’s mastery of even more complex skills.

The two pedagogical approaches most frequently used according to Bruner (1996) are a didactic approach and the experiential model. A didactic approach to teaching and learning has its history in theories of behaviourism and cognitive development. The experiential approach to teaching and learning has its basis in social constructivist and social constructionist theories and discourse in early childhood education where ‘knowledge is not passively received and absorbed but actively built up by the individual’ (Watson, 2000, p.136). Therefore, young children must engage actively in the learning process to ensure that effective learning takes place. This study will consider the pedagogical approach of the educators in a sample of Montessori, Play-based and Reggio Inspired settings, it will consider where each preschool setting type fits on a continuum between a didactic approach to ECEC or an experiential model. The study will then reflect on how the pedagogical approach reflects on the educator’s image of the child as a learner, based on Bruner’s (1996) models of Mind and Models of Pedagogy.

1.2.2 Children’s Wellbeing and Involvement

When children are enjoying themselves, when they are given the opportunity and choice to follow their interests in the learning environment, they feel at ease. When at ease, children act spontaneously and exhibit signs of increased vitality, they are self-confident and happy; this is what high emotional wellbeing looks like (Deci and Ryan 2008; Laevers, 2015).
Wellbeing is considered from two perspectives. The first of these is subjective wellbeing or hedonia, which is described by Deci and Ryan (2008) as a high level of positive affect, a low level of negative affect, and a high degree of satisfaction with one’s life. Therefore, essentially wellbeing means, feelings of happiness. The second perspective of wellbeing is known as Eudaimonia (Waterman, 1993). It is based on living well, self-actualisation and being fully functional. When individuals display this type of wellbeing, they are autonomous; they have a clear purpose, environmental mastery and personal growth (Ryff, 1989). Csikszentmihalyi (2008) suggests that ‘a state of flow’, which Laevers (1993) refers to as ‘involvement’, is the secret to happiness or wellbeing. Involvement is described by Laevers (2017) as a dimension of human activity where the predominant characteristic is concentration. Laevers defined involvement as:

“A quality of human activity characterized not only by a high level of motivation, but also by concentration and persistence, intense perceptions and experience of meaning, a strong flow of energy and a high degree of satisfaction”. (Laevers, 1993, p.61)

As the research suggests, when children are enjoying themselves, they have high levels of vitality and spontaneity. These high levels of vitality and spontaneity result in children being curious about their world as they investigate, explore, think and make meaning. This study will consider where the pedagogical approach, fits on a continuum between a didactic approach to ECEC and an experiential model, and how the pedagogical approach impacts on children’s level of wellbeing and their involvement in their learning.

1.2.3 Self Determination Theory

Self Determination Theory (SDT) is a macro theory for the study of human motivation, development and wellbeing (Ryan and Deci, 2000). The theory is based on the belief that young children are born with an innate curiosity to learn about their world. However, the theory examines how biological, social, and or cultural conditions can either enhance or undermine the intrinsic human capacities for psychological growth, engagement and
wellbeing (Ryan and Deci, 2017). Self Determination Theory is premised on the belief that the individual’s intrinsic motivation and curiosity to learn is the primary motivation for activity and the source of energy for the active nature of the individual (Ryan and Deci, 2017). The essential nutrients, for human flourishing, psychological health, wellbeing and vitality, according to Ryan and Deci (2017), depend on the individual experiencing feelings of competence, autonomy and relatedness. Ryan and Deci (2017) also suggest that when elements such as curiosity, creativity, productivity and vitality are present, then social integration, well-being and compassion are heightened. Equally, factors which hinder human flourishing, such as, lack of autonomy, poor quality relationships or feelings of being ineffective can contribute to depletion, fragmentation, antisocial behaviours, and unhappiness (Ryan and Deci, 2017). In ECEC learning environments where children experience autonomy, competence and relatedness, children who are intrinsically motivated and curious become deeply involved in their explorations. This, according to Laevers (2017) happens particularly in play. In play, children become what Dweck (1986) referred to as ‘mastery’ learners or ‘learners who are challenge seeking, who persist in the face of difficulty’, and who enjoy ‘exerting effort in the pursuit of task mastery’ (p.1040).

Similarly, the sociology of childhood identifies children as social constructors and social actors ‘active in the construction and determination of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and the societies in which they live’ (James and Prout, 1997, p. 8). Self Determination Theory offers strategies and advice on the optimum environments necessary to support and enhance the individual’s intrinsic motivation to learn, resulting in high levels of wellbeing, involvement and self-actualisation. The premise of this theory is that the child is born curious and intrinsically motivated to explore and discover his or her world. The child is competent from birth and has agency to engage with, act on and change his or her environment (Dahlberg et al, 2013; James and Prout, 1997; Rinaldi, 2005; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Self Determination Theory considers how, the child’s agency can be impacted by the culture, context or biology, as a result of the level to which, their basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness
are being met in the environment or context. This study will consider how young children’s basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness are supported where the pedagogical approach based on a continuum between a didactic approach and an experiential model fits, in three preschool setting types, Montessori, Play-based and Reggio inspired preschools.

1.2.4 Bioecological Theory

Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory (EST) (Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1995; Bronfenbrenner and Morris 1998, 2006) is one of the most well recognised and adopted theoretical frameworks for studying the influencing factors and the context or ecology of individual’s development. Bronfenbrenner was passionate about understanding how environments change, and the implications of this change for the human beings who live and grow in these environments. The initial ecological model of human development conceived by Bronfenbrenner (1979) identified the development of the child as being influenced and embedded within four broad systems. The micro system considers the influences closest to the child such as the parents, guardians and families. The second system the meso system refers to the communication and interactions between the different elements of the child’s micro system such as the relationship that the family have with the early childhood education and care setting. The exosystem refers to the distal influences which impact indirectly on young children’s lives such as parents’ stress levels and/or work life balance. The fourth system the macro system represents an even further distal influence, and this includes, societal norms and values and the cultural images of children. A fifth system was later added which is referred to as the chronosystem. The chronosystem considers the impact of time on development, this is important in relation to early years provision when considering the importance of transitions (Hayes et al, 2017). Bronfenbrenner’s model places the child at the heart of a complex network of family, social, cultural and relational influences. The image of the child
as a learner is that of an active participant who learns over time through and from his or her interactions with the people, space and objects in the learning environment (Halpenny and Pettersen, 2014). An expansion of the theory developed by Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998, 2006) the Bioecological Theory reflects how dynamic personal and environmental interactions impact and influence development across the life course. The Bio Ecological model outlines how the proximal processes of person, space, context and time contribute to the quality of ECEC provision. This concept of dynamic, reciprocal relationships between individuals and their context is as Hayes (2013) confirms, central to early childhood education and care, pedagogy and practice and supports a dynamic and transformative pedagogy.

1.3 Rationale for this Research

There are four main rationales’ which inspired this study. The initial rationale for the study came from a media exposé by Prime-Time Investigates, a programme aired by RTE, the national broadcaster in Ireland, in May 2013. Having worked as an ECEC provider I was shocked at the quality of care and the rough treatment of very young children displayed by hidden cameras in this programme. I wondered how these ECEC providers could be so disrespectful to these children and I was saddened at the educators’ lack of care, understanding and nurturing. I really wondered about the educators’ image of the children and how they perceived these children, to think that it was acceptable to treat them in this disrespectful way. Where were the children’s rights to survival and development (Article 6, UNCRC, 1989) in this situation?

The second rationale for this study was based on my belief that children are rights holders as outlined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989). In the year prior to the Primetime Programme, I had delivered several workshops: ‘Children’s Rights in Everyday Practice’, to the ECEC sector in my role as Early Years Specialist with Early Childhood Ireland. This was part of the campaign for children’s rights and amendment of the Irish constitution in 2012. The workshops
focused on the practice of working with children in ECEC settings from a rights-based perspective. The practice identified on the Prime-Time programme was in contravention of children’s rights under the UNCRC (1989).

My initial interest in a democratic rights-based approach to ECEC was ignited when employed as the National Policy Advisor for the National Children’s Nurseries Association. I was introduced to the Reggio Approach at the World Forum in 2007. My reading and increased knowledge of the approach to ECEC in the infant toddler centres of Reggio Emilia Italy and my subsequent role as named Irish Reggio Children International representative on behalf of my employer, Early Childhood Ireland, has influenced and underpinned my thinking and reflection in relation to quality ECEC provision for young children. I remain acutely aware that no national quality evaluation or monitoring of the impact of quality on young children’s daily experiences exists in ECEC settings in Ireland.

Finally, as a parent, grandparent and previous provider of a full day-care early years service, I wanted to gain an understanding of how the early childhood education and care sector could provide quality early childhood experiences which support quality outcomes for children. To learn from the international context, I have travelled widely to expand my knowledge and experience. A travel bursary from UNESCO Child & Family Research Centre, NUI Galway, provided the opportunity to spend one month, August 2014, in South Australia at Flinders University in collaboration with colleagues at Reggio Emilia Australia Information Exchange (REAIE). In Australia I observed how quality indicators and outcomes were measured using an observation tool; Assessing for Learning and Development in the Early Years using Observation Scales, Reflect Respect Relate (State of South Australia, Department of Education and Children’s Services, 2008). In October 2014, having defined my research topic, I was awarded an Irish Research Council Employment Based Postgraduate Scholarship starting in 2015. The scholarship offered the opportunity to concentrate on the research while remaining an employee of Early Childhood Ireland and in
daily contact with ECEC policy and practice in collaboration with the National University of Ireland Galway, where I was based.

1.3.1 Rationale for two geographical data collection sites

The initial plan for this research was that it would be undertaken in Irish preschools where 59% of settings identify as providing a Play-based pedagogy and 42% of early childhood education and care providers identify that they offer a Montessori programme (Pobal, 2018). In my professional work in ECEC as a National Policy Advisor with a National Voluntary Childcare Organisation (NVCO) I had spent time exploring and thinking about different pedagogical approaches. One such approach which I found particularly interesting was the approach to ECEC in Reggio Emilia in Italy. I attended numerous study visits to Reggio Emilia and took my annual leave to attend an intensive week on pedagogical documentation in 2012. I was appointed the Reggio Children’s International representative on behalf of my employers the National Children’s Nurseries Association, (this organisation subsequently became known as Early Childhood Ireland in 2012) from 2009 to 2016. During this time, I visited English speaking Reggio inspired schools in the UK, South Africa and South Australia. In order to add another dynamic to this research I applied for a Fulbright Scholarship to extend this research study to English speaking Reggio inspired preschools in the United States (US).

After successfully securing a Fulbright Scholarship to extend my PhD research in the US. I was accepted to conduct the study in association with Harvard Graduate School of Education (HGSE) as a visiting Fulbright scholar, under the supervision of Professor Howard Gardner. The research proposal to conduct comparative research in Reggio inspired preschools in Boston was initiated as English was the language spoken in the Reggio inspired preschools in Boston. It would not have been possible for me to conduct this study in Italy as I do not speak Italian. I had hoped to conduct research in three English speaking Reggio inspired settings in Boston. Prior to leaving for Boston in Sept 2016, two Reggio inspired settings in Boston had confirmed their initial participation in the research. A manager
from a third setting had confirmed that she would be interested in receiving further information about the study. On arrival in Boston I arranged to meet the managers of the three settings separately. The manager of the third setting at this stage had moved on from managing a Reggio inspired setting and was now managing a Play-based setting. This manager confirmed that, the Play-based setting would like to participate in the study. As a result, the three setting types included two Reggio inspired and one Play-based setting in Boston and two Play-based and two Montessori preschools in Ireland.

1.4 Aim and Objectives

Considering the dearth of information on the quality of the pedagogical approach and preschool children’s experiences in Irish preschool settings, the research question for this study was: How does the educator’s image of the child as a learner influence her/his pedagogical approach and how does the preschool educator’s pedagogical approach subsequently impact on children’s level of wellbeing and involvement in the preschool setting?

The overarching aim of this research was to ‘Explore the preschool educator’s image of the child as a learner on the choice of their pedagogical approach, (Montessori, Play-based or Reggio inspired) and the subsequent influence on preschool children’s levels of wellbeing and involvement’.

To address the research question and the overall research aim, the study will investigate the following set of objectives.

➢ Objective 1 - To explore the preschool educator’s understanding of her/his role as an early childhood educator in a sample of preschool settings in the west of Ireland and Boston.

➢ Objective 2 - To identify the preschool educator’s image of the child as a learner and explore how this influences the pedagogical practice in the preschool settings in the west of Ireland and Boston.

➢ Objective 3 - To compare children’s level of wellbeing and involvement as a result of the quality of the relationships and the
active learning environment in settings offering different pedagogical approaches, (Montessori, Play-based, Reggio inspired).

Objective 4 – To examine the implications for ECEC policy and practice as a result of the addition to knowledge of this study.

1.5 Overview of Remaining Chapters

Chapter 2 - The Image of the Child, Pedagogy and Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care.

This chapter explores, through a review of national and international literature, in relation to the discourses of children and childhood, the image of the child in society and how this influences the educator’s image of the child as a learner. This is followed by a review of the literature on pedagogy and pedagogical practice. As pedagogy and pedagogical practice is identified as a key requirement of quality provision (European Commission, 2014, Melhuish, 2015), the literature and theory of quality ECEC provision is examined.

Chapter 3 - Understanding Well-being, Involvement and Self Determination Theory and Bioecological Theory in ECEC Settings.

Children’s wellbeing and involvement levels have been identified as quality outcomes in ECEC settings (Laevers, 1997; Deci & Ryan, 2000; State of South Australia, Department of Education and Children’s Services, 2008). The theoretical literature on wellbeing and involvement and Self Determination Theory (SDT) is explored in this chapter. A tentative conceptual model based on the theory reviewed in literature in chapter 2 and 3 is presented in this chapter.

Chapter 4 – Context Chapter

The context chapter introduces the reader to the current context of early childhood education and care in Ireland and in Boston, Massachusetts (MA) in the United States. The two jurisdictions are then compared in relation to the policy and practice of ECEC. The context in both jurisdictions is subsequently linked to the historical and policy emergence of centre-based
early childhood education and care in both Ireland and Boston. The historical context highlights the dominant policy narratives which have informed the development of centre-based early childhood education and care provision in Ireland and Boston (MA).

Chapter 5 - Methodology

This chapter introduces the epistemological and ontological basis for this research. It outlines the theoretical and methodological foundations which may be considered depending on whether the researcher takes a positivist or an interpretivist approach. Following on from this, the methods used to answer the research question based on the aim and objectives of the study, giving a detailed description of the study design, data collection and analysis, are discussed. The ethical considerations of conducting this ethnographic study in early childhood education and care settings where young children are generally considered to be a vulnerable population is outlined, in relation to the two ethics applications for the Irish and Boston aspects of the study. A description of the data analysis using NVIVO, SPSS and Assessing for Learning and Development in the Early Years using Observation Scales; Reflect Respect Relate (State of South Australia, Department of Education and Children’s Services, 2008) which will be referred to for ease of use throughout this thesis as Reflect, Respect Relate Observation Scales (State of South Australia, Department of Education and Children’s Services, 2008) is presented.

Chapter 6 - Presentation of Findings

Chapter 6 outlines the findings of the study based on the aim and objectives and the research question. The chapter begins by introducing a general profile of the 17 preschool educators who participated in the study across the two data sites, Ireland and Boston. The findings are presented based on the three pedagogical approaches; Montessori, Play-based and Reggio inspired. Findings from the data collated from educator and parental questionnaires, educator semi-structured interviews and onsite observation of practice to measure the active learning environment and relationships as quality indicators and children’s wellbeing and involvement as quality
outcomes are presented. A case study based on one observation across the quality indicators, relationships and active learning environment and quality outcomes of wellbeing and involvement as outlined in Reflect Respect Relate Observation Scales (State of South Australia, Department of Education and Children’s Services, 2008) will be presented for each the seven participating settings.

**Chapter 7 - Discussion**

This chapter provides a detailed analysis and discussion of the findings of the research data. The discussion focuses on the educator’s image of the child as a learner and his or her understanding of the role of the educator, in children’s learning. This is further expanded on to reflect on how the educators’ understandings of children’s learning strategies influence the quality of the pedagogical approach across a continuum between a didactic approach and an experiential model in the three setting types; Montessori, Play-based and Reggio inspired. The findings from the theory and the data are considered and discussed in the context of the tentative conceptual model presented in chapter 3. The discussion chapter concludes with an analysis of how the preschool educator’s image of the child as a learner influences her/his pedagogical approach, and the subsequent impact on children’s levels of wellbeing and involvement based on different pedagogical approaches.

**Chapter 8 - Conclusion**

Chapter 8 provides an overall summary and conclusion to the thesis. The conclusion begins with a recap on the aim and scope of the study followed by a brief review of the literature. The chapter then seeks to answer the research question asked; How, does the educator’s image of the child as a learner influence her/his pedagogical approach and how does the preschool educator’s pedagogical approach subsequently impact on children’s level of wellbeing and involvement in the preschool setting? Concluding remarks link the findings with the theoretical and conceptual framework and outline key recommendations for policy and practice in ECEC settings.
Chapter 2: The Image of the Child, Pedagogy and Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care

2.1 Introduction

How the image of the child as a learner is constructed can be traced through historical literature and societal change to what James and Prout (1997) describe as an enlightened present. There are as Dahlberg et al., (2013) suggest, many understandings of children and childhood and this chapter will consider the literature on how the educator’s image of the child as a learner may be constructed and influenced. Malaguzzi (1994) and Bruner (1996) posit that the educator’s image of the child as a learner is central to the pedagogical approach practiced by the educator. A review of the literature on pedagogy explores the theories of how young children learn and the influence of the educator’s knowledge, understanding and image of the child. This pedagogical approach which Bruner (1996) describes as Folk Pedagogy, influences the educators teaching and learning strategies and impacts on the quality of young children’s learning experiences. With increasing access to preschool provision in Ireland since the introduction of the universal free preschool year, or ECCE scheme in 2010, there is currently no systematic approach to measuring quality. Equally there is no evaluation which confirms that the pedagogical approach in preschool settings in Ireland supports children to develop 21st century skills or has moved away from an industrial model of education. The literature pertaining to quality in ECEC provision is reviewed to underpin the theoretical framework of this study.

The aim of chapter 2 and chapter 3 is to review the literature from academia and other research sources which underpin the theoretical framework of this thesis. The literature review has been split into two, with chapter 2 focusing on the literature relating to the image of the child, pedagogy and quality. This is followed by chapter 3, which reviews the literature relating to wellbeing and involvement, Self-Determination Theory and Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory. Chapter 3 will conclude with a conceptual synthesis of learning gleaned from the review of the literature.
in both chapters. Chapter 2 opens at section 2.2 with a review of the literature in relation to the changing discourses and images of children and childhood. This section reflects on the image of the child from a historical perspective to the current portrayal of the child as an active citizen with rights. The child’s right to education under UNCRC (1989) is the catalyst to examine the literature relating to pedagogy in section 2.3. The literature pertaining to these three pedagogical approaches, Montessori, Play-based and Reggio inspired will be reviewed in this section. This will be followed by an overview of the industrial and 21st century skills approach to education. Section 2.4 provides a review of the literature defining and exploring the constituents of quality ECEC provision, followed by the conclusion of this chapter.

2.2 Images of Childhood - Then and Now

There are many children and many childhoods, each constructed by ‘our understandings of childhood and what children are and should be’ (Dahlberg et al., 2013 p., 46).

All adults have experienced childhood and have as Malaguzzi (1994, p.52) describes a ‘background theory’ or the experience of being a child which is influenced by historical, social, cultural and ideological views. These views may be influenced by specific doctrines or beliefs about children and childhood that have been either consciously or subconsciously created. To understand how our image of the child is constructed it is necessary to examine differing discourses from the past which have influenced the image of the child today. Bronfenbrenner et al. (1986) argue that we need to deconstruct the history of children and childhood to understand the child, while James and Prout (1997) suggest that the history of childhood demonstrates the progress of society towards an enlightened present.

Aries (1962) suggests that childhood is not a natural phenomenon, but a time and context bound invention of modernity. This he suggests started with the gradual institutionalisation of specific children’s needs, commencing with the introduction of compulsory schooling and the subsequent development of further institutions such as health and legal
systems. This systematic approach contributed to the universalisation of childhood and a view of children as innocent, vulnerable and needing adult protection. As a result, the role of the adult was to care for, protect and manage children until they reached maturity. Thus, the image of the child can be clearly traced through historical literature. The literature offers the adult further understandings of conscious and subconscious beliefs and images of children and childhood.

The historical literature on childhood presents two ways of thinking about the child, the Dionysian child (evil image) and the Apollonian child (innocent image). The Dionysian child where the image of the child is that of chaos and disorder assumes that the child is evil or corrupt in need of constraint. This image of the child as described by James et al. (1998) emanates from the doctrine of Adamic original sin which considered that children entered the world as wilful material energy, harbourers of potentially dark forces which need to be controlled and managed by powerful adults. James et al. (1998) explain that this portrayal of the Dionysian child assumes that evil, corruption and baseness are primary elements in the makeup of ‘the child’. As a result, there was a belief that such children needed to be managed by programmes of discipline and punishment in order to enhance obedience for their own good and the good of society. It was considered also that rods should not be spared to save the evil child (James et al., 1998). Even today many are aware of the old saying ‘save the rod and spoil the child’. This model of child-rearing described by Smith (2012) as the pre-liberal/authoritarian order of pre-modern Europe is based on adults exercising strict controls over children. A description which Jenks (2005) suggests served as an affirmation of the collective societal values, producing what White and Hunt (2000, p.103) describe as an ‘upright’ moral subject.

The approach to child rearing, where the adult takes on the role of managing children to conform and be compliant, extended into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, particularly in institutional settings including care and education settings. Freire (1993, p.41) in Pedagogy of the Oppressed describes this power situation, where the child is oppressed by the adult
oppressor. He suggests that the more the oppressed (the children) are controlled by the oppressors (the adults), the more that they are changed into inanimate ‘things’. As inanimate objects the purpose of the oppressed is to do as they are told by the more knowledgeable oppressor. In this situation the power of the adult supersedes the rights of the child and rigid codes of behaviour and rules are used to control and manage young children’s behaviour. Alternatively, management of children in many institutions may also be facilitated by offering rewards or external motivators to promote good, compliant or ‘acceptable’ behaviour (Ryan and Deci, 2000).

The image of the Dionysian child as evil or corrupt is in complete opposition to the image of the Apollonian child or the innocent child as portrayed in historical literature (Jenks, 2005). The Apollonian child provides an image of the child as innocent, reflecting sweetness and light (Jenks, 2005). In tandem with this image where children are portrayed as having natural goodness, being angelic and uncorrupted by the world, childhood is depicted as a carefree idyllic time. During this time, it was considered that children needed to be protected by adults and their innocence preserved (Kehily, 2008). ‘The heir to the sunshine, and light, the espouser of poetry and beauty’ (Jenks, 2005, p.73).

The Apollonian image of the child is linked to a social order described by Smith (2012) as the liberal capitalist order of modern industrial societies. In this ‘the new order of modern industrial society’ an emphasis on shared values is displaced by a premium on individuality (Jenks, 2005, p.66). Children are not controlled or managed by adults; they are trusted by the adults to make choices through ‘child-centred’ approaches where the child is afforded the freedom to develop his or her own interests and talents (Jenks, 2005, p.65). Smith (2012) suggests that the Apollonian approach to childrearing represents a ‘child-centred’ form of socialisation. This approach she suggests is more concerned with producing unique, ‘well-adjusted’, individual subjects where the psychological welfare of the individual child is central (Smith, 2012). However, Dahlberg et al. (2013) posit that this image of the child as innocent is not cognisant of the competencies and potential of young children but portrays an image of the
child as being weak and in need of adult supervision and guidance. Equally portraying the child as innocent, natural and lacking in knowledge, Green (2005) suggests, values children for the adults they will become rather than the current beings that they are. Rousseau in *Émile* was one of the first to recognise the natural goodness of children and the importance of valuing children and childhood, as being rather than becoming. This valuing of childhood as being important, in its own right, and not just as a preparation for adulthood has also been highlighted by James and Prout (1998, 2015) resulting in significant interest in children’s experiences of childhood in the late 1980s and early 90s.

In the late 1980s and early 90s, the discipline of childhood studies emerged as a new paradigm (James and Prout, 1990). Study in this area was progressed by a group of interdisciplinary social researchers who were particularly interested in the study of children and childhood (James, 2010). These social scientists came to recognise and share their interpretations of children as active social agents who construct and interpret their own worlds, rather than passive subjects, needing adult supervision and guidance (James and Prout, 1990; Corsaro, 1992; Freeman, 1998; James, Jenks, and Prout, 1998; Matthews, 2007). The ‘Sociology of Childhood’; has advanced how we now think and know about children’s lives. Childhood is presented, not as a fixed natural phenomenon rooted in biology and genetics, but as being socially constructed (James and Prout, 1997). The introduction of this post-structuralist way of thinking about children depicts childhood as being, ‘Socially constructed, historically contingent, culturally situated and contextually bound’ (Sellers, 2013, p.67).

This concept entangles the image of children and childhood within historical and contemporary understandings where childhood is constructed and reconstructed for, with and by children (James and Prout, 1997, p.7). Within this way of thinking, children are recognised as social actors, co-constructors of knowledge and active agents (Qvortrup, 2002). Children, according to James and Prout (1997) construct and determine their own social lives and the lives of those around them. When one accepts this social constructivist image of the child, one accepts that children and
childhood are not universal. Rather, children and childhood vary depending on the time, the environment, the culture and the context. Equally every child is different and unique, with different capacities and capabilities.

This idea of children contrasts with the psychological perspective of normal development which is based on measuring assessable developmental milestones. A social constructivist approach to seeing children recognises children as active social agents who affect and are affected by the structures and society in which they live. The image of the child presented from this perspective is an image of the child as competent and confident, active protagonists of their own learning, social actors with rights (James and Prout, 1997). Children seen through this lens have multiple languages (Malaguzzi, 1998), multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1983) and are considered to be democratic citizens with rights, not merely needs (Rinaldi, 2006).

2.2.1 Children as Right Holders

The publication of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989), its widespread ratification and emerging discourses about children as active citizens with rights, laid the legal framework that first introduced and recognised children as holders of rights (Corsaro, 2017). Children’s specific rights as recognised under the UNCRC are significant when discussing early childhood education and care provision. There are several rights which take precedence when discussing ECEC, starting with Article (28), where children have a right to education and including Article (12), the right to participate, Article (31), the right to play and Article (28), the right to parental engagement. Article (18), the right of all children to freely express their views, and the responsibility of society to acknowledge and take those views into account, is particularly relevant in the context of this research. Under the standards of the UNCRC, provision, protection and participation, Hogan (2005, p.35) suggests that the convention reflects, ‘an unprecedented value for the subjective worlds of children and for their rights to be consulted and taken seriously’.
A rights-based approach to early childhood education provides for children’s active participation in their own learning, through the provision of space, voice, audience and influence as outlined in the Lundy model of participation (Lundy, 2007). A participatory approach to ECEC is in keeping with Article (12) UNCRC, which recognises that all children regardless of their age are experts in their own lives. Children’s active participation in their learning recognises each child’s competence and unique insight into their own experiences and perspectives (Lansdown, 2005). Children’s competencies are acknowledged by many, they are recognised as skilful communicators with a number of different languages and talents with which they can articulate their views and experiences (Rinaldi, 2006). As active agents, children influence and interact with the world around them. Children are also meaning makers, constructing and interpreting meaning in their own lives (Edwards et al., 1998).

Children’s participation rights in early childhood education, occurs in practice, according to Lansdown (2005), through a process of dialogue and reciprocal exchange between the adult and the child. Lundy (2007) identified why adults may have concerns regarding supporting children’s participatory rights into three main areas. The first of these areas is the loss of adult control, which might undermine the authority of the adult. The second reason she suggests is the adult’s scepticism about children’s capacity to participate or have meaningful input into decisions which affect them. The third reason Lundy (2007) posits is that adults may be concerned that by supporting children’s active participation in their learning experiences, the educator will have an increased workload. Therefore, while children’s rights have been recognised, the reality may not always be reflected in practice in ECEC settings.

2.3 Pedagogy and the Image of the Child

“I think; therefore, I am” - Descartes (1595- 1650)

Descartes established that the defining characteristic of humans is their capacity to think, make meaning and exercise reason (Blundell, 2012). This capacity was historically measured by psychologists taking a positivist
empiricist approach. Development was considered, in terms of progression from simplicity to complexity of thought or from irrational to rational behaviour (James and Prout, 1997). The work of Jean Piaget identified clearly defined stages of growth and development which could be measured and assessed. This, according to Green (2005), has instilled a deep positivist image of the child based on developmental milestones of the ‘normal child’. This modernist image of the scientifically universal child progressing naturally through specific age-related stages of development, Sellers (2015) suggests, promotes an individualized, homogenous child who has isolated childhood experiences. Traditionally, teaching and learning across educational institutions was assessed based on assessment of the psychological and cognitive development of the typically developing child. This goal-directed learning and instruction, Sommer (2012) argues, does not produce measurable results in mathematics, science or language but in fact reduces competencies in these areas.

The image of the child as a learner has been presented from a typical development perspective. However, the image of the scientifically universal child based on developmental milestones does not take cognisance of the image of the child as portrayed by Gardner and his multiple intelligences theory (1983, 2011) or Malaguzzi’s (1998) ‘Hundred Languages of Children’. Malaguzzi (cited in Edwards et al., 1998), suggests that the child has a hundred worlds to discover, a hundred worlds to invent and a hundred worlds to dream. However, Malaguzzi (1998) also suggests that the school, the educator and the culture can limit children’s opportunities and inhibit their holistic growth and development.

Malaguzzi (1994) posits that the educators’ image of the child is where their approach to teaching begins. The educator’s image of the child as a learner is, he suggests, a declaration of the ethical principles of the educator and as such should be reflected on when considering the ‘what for’ and the ‘how to’ of education (Hoyuelos, 2013, p.61). Malaguzzi (1994) also confirms that each educator carries inside them, their own image of the child as a learner and this, influences both implicitly and explicitly their assumptions and the choices that they make in their daily work. This confirms Bruner’s
(1996) position that the educator’s pedagogical approach is a direct reflection of the beliefs and assumptions that the educator holds about the learner. Bruner (1996) goes on to claim that the choice of pedagogical approach is never ‘innocent’ or straightforward, it is always influenced by beliefs, values and the educator’s image of the child as a learner. Moss (2010) concludes that for many early childhood educators, this image of the competent child, which may be alien to them due to historical, cultural and social influences, may require a transformation in the educator’s role. The change Moss (2010) suggests is where the early childhood educator changes from being a technician applying prescribed methods of teaching with predefined measurable outcomes, to a reflective, democratic professional. These democratic educators ‘create possibilities for children to explore and think rather than focusing on predefined goals’ (Moss, 2010, p.47).

Research projects in the late 1980s, such as ‘Childhood as a Social Phenomenon Project’ (Qvortrup et al., 1994) and a ‘new paradigm for the sociology of childhood’ (James and Prout, 1990) led to new understandings of children and childhood. This resulted in the image of the child as a social phenomenon, located within a context, as a co-constructor of knowledge rather than a reproducer of knowledge, identity and culture (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 2013, p.58). This new image of children and childhood requires children to construct their own identities and to form and shape their understanding of the world (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 2013). The pedagogical approach in this instance, according to Malaguzzi (1998), is constructed within a system of relationships, with relationships being the basis of all pedagogy, and communication as the key to children’s learning (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 2013).

2.3.1 Defining Pedagogy

“Pedagogy is both the behaviour of teaching and being able to talk about and reflect on teaching. Pedagogy encompasses both what practitioners actually DO and THINK and the principles, theories, perceptions and challenges that inform and shape it…… 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, p.5)
The term pedagogy remains a ‘contested’ term, based on the changing beliefs and understandings of how young children learn (Mortimore, 1999). However, pedagogy has been defined by Siraj-Blatchford et al. (1999, 2002) as an art or a set of instructional educational techniques, strategies and practices which enable learning to take place to meet the requirements of the curriculum. The techniques Siraj-Blatchford et al. (2002) have suggested, provide opportunities for young children to acquire knowledge, skills, attitudes and dispositions within a particular social and material context. The word pedagogy and its definition, while relatively recent in the discourse of the Irish early childhood education and care sector, is increasingly being used. This is due to Irish early childhood educators beginning to recognise their roles as a combination of educators and carers. Because of this shift, there is increased professional identity for early childhood educators and the ECEC sector in general (Moloney, 2015). A straightforward definition of pedagogy offered by Mortimore (1999) suggests that pedagogy describes any conscious action by one person designed to enhance learning in another. However, pedagogy is more complex than just a linear process or transfer of knowledge. Pedagogy is instead an open spiral based on reciprocal learning, respectful relationships and active participation (Malaguzzi, cited in, Edwards et al., 1998).

Petrie (2005) suggests that pedagogy encompasses the roles of both care and education. Care and education have been recognised as being inextricably linked in Ready to Learn: White Paper on Early Childhood Education (Government of Ireland, 1999). Hayes (2008) posits that pedagogy is a multi-layered and dynamic practice which is necessary to support children’s holistic development. The practice of pedagogy can occur through a social pedagogy as seen in the Nordic and some European countries. A social pedagogy is, according to Broström (2017), child-centred and holistic, using concepts including care, play, relationships and active participation. Children are seen as agents of their own learning, and learning occurs through active involvement with the environment in collaboration with others, by exploring, questioning, experimenting and debating (Moss et al.,
An academically oriented pedagogy in comparison emphasises teaching, learning and curriculum with measurable outcomes focusing on emergent literacy, numeracy and school readiness. This, according to Broström (2017), is the pedagogical approach said to be practiced in early childhood education and care settings in Ireland. However, while this may have been the case in 2006 following the OECD review, the publication of *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009), in combination with policy changes and supports to the ECEC sector, has had an influence on pedagogical practice. The pedagogical approach from a policy perspective in early childhood education and care settings in Ireland is focused on moving to more child centred practice and a Play-based curriculum.

### 2.3.2 Pedagogy in Practice

Dahlberg et al. (2013, p.56), suggest that the choice of pedagogy is located within and produced by, conditions of modernity but also ‘the product of who we think the young child is’. An image of the child as an empty vessel or ‘tabula rasa’, waiting to be filled, gives rise to an idea of pedagogy as a means of transmitting, depositing or filling the empty vessel, in this case, the child, with predetermined knowledge. Referred to as a ‘banking’ concept, in this situation, knowledge is a gift which is bestowed by those who consider themselves more knowledgeable on to those they consider know nothing (Freire, 1996, p.53). The teacher has a privileged voice or is the more powerful voice of authority (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 2013 p.57). Freire describes the banking model of pedagogy as where.

> “The teacher teaches, and the children are taught; the teacher knows everything, and the children know nothing; the teacher talks, and the children listen–meekly; and the teacher is the subject of the learning process while the pupils are mere objects”. (Freire, 1993, p.54)

This pedagogical approach of ‘banking’ suggests that education is a linear process that ‘transforms’ (Readings, 1996). Children are depicted as passive objects. The aim and function of education in this case is to transform the ‘poor’ and dependent children into ‘rich’ autonomous and mature adult subjects (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 2013). This banking
model of pedagogy or transmission approach to teaching is an outcome driven approach, valuing children not for the children that they are now, but for what they will become. Rinaldi (cited in Edwards et al., 1998) posits that such an outcome focused pedagogical approach, where the student patiently and passively receives information, memorizes it and then repeats the information, has critical consequences. Rinaldi (cited in Edwards et al., 1998) goes on to suggest that the child’s potential is stunted when the endpoint of the learning is formulated in advance by the educator. This occurs, Rinaldi (1998) suggests, when the child does not have an opportunity to think laterally but is instead directed towards linear thinking. In this situation the child is not intrinsically motivated to learn, there is little or no curiosity and the interests of the educator or the planned curriculum are foisted on the child.

Zufiaurre (2007) posits that ‘Social Pedagogy’ emerged as a reaction against the ‘banking’ concept of education. Changes in thinking about how learning occurs resulted, he suggests, in the old power structures being replaced by enlightened, democratic and progressive notions of equity, consciousness, development and self-realisation (Zufiaurre, 2007). This thinking presented a new approach, a pedagogy of discussion for democracy and citizenship. Pedagogy within this system is described as a ‘praxis’ or a regime of teaching and learning that, ‘Inducts human beings into knowing rather than knowledge’ (Zufiaurre, 2007, p.147). In this situation, the child is the author and inventor of his or her own meaning making processes.

Johansson’s (2004) research into the quality aspects of learning in Swedish preschools identified three main themes which were significant with respect to the pedagogical encounters in preschool, created by the teachers. These themes were the atmosphere, the educator’s image of the child and the educators understanding of learning. The results indicated when the educator’s image of the child was that of being competent then the preschool environment was characterised as being interactive. Alternatively, where the educator’s image of the child was based on the child’s development or maturity the learning environment was characterised by being teacher directed with knowledge being transferred to the child by
The most famous but unethical research, by today’s ethical standards, which explored the educator’s beliefs about children, was the research conducted by Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968), Pygmalion in the Classroom. This study hoped to determine the degree (if any) to which changes in teacher expectations or beliefs produced changes in student achievement. The study found that in general, the younger the student, the greater is thought to be the degree of susceptibility to social influence. In the ‘Pygmalion effect’ study, also called the ‘Rosenthal effect’, the teachers were advised by Rosenthal and Jacobson that some of their students were identified as ‘intellectual bloomers’. In fact, these students were randomly selected. The result of the study identified that teachers’ expectations or beliefs about the students could be correlated with different gains in intelligence quotient (IQ) between the control group of students and the students identified as the ‘bloomers’. The ‘bloomers’ gained an average of two IQ points in verbal ability, seven points in reasoning and four points in overall IQ (Chang, 2011). The experiment showed that teacher’s expectations worked as a self-fulfilling prophecy when it came to outcomes for their pupils.

Brophy (1987, 1988) who explored negative expectations identified the impact of such negative expectations on students’ learning. Brophy listed eight concrete forms of negative expectations or beliefs which resulted in disadvantageous learning conditions. Significant to this study in relation to negative beliefs or expectations is that teachers expressed less warmth towards those students who they had negative or low expectations off and were less interested in them as individuals. The teachers criticised the students more often for failure, seating these children in the back of the room. The study further highlighted that in general teachers paid less attention to these students and interacted with them less frequently. This research clearly identifies the impact of teachers personally held beliefs
about children and their pedagogical approach. Chang (2011) suggests that when teachers have positive expectations of students, when they believe in the competency of the student, then the student will be given more learning opportunities and will be challenged and provoked. In this situation the student will be provided with detailed feedback, be praised more often following success and be encouraged following failure. While Malaguzzi (1994) suggests that the educator’s image of the child is where teaching begins, Csikszentmihalyi (1997) declares that,

“If a teacher does not believe in his job, does not enjoy the learning he is trying to transmit, the student will sense this and derive the entirely rational conclusion that the particular subject is not worth mastering for its own sake”. (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997, p.7)

Equally, Chang (2011) suggests that student motivation, enthusiasm and achievement are influenced by multiple factors, besides teacher’s expectations or beliefs. However, Cooley (1902), referring to Mead’s theory on Symbolic Interactionism and the concept of a ‘looking glass self’, suggests that concepts of self-development from early childhood results from seeing how others respond. ‘In the presence of one whom we feel to be important, there is a tendency to enter, into and adopt, by sympathy, his judgement of our self. (Cooley, 1902, p.177)

2.3.3 Folk Pedagogy

“Any choice of pedagogical practice implies a conception of the learner and may, in time, be adopted by him or her as the appropriate way of thinking about the learning process. For a choice of pedagogy inevitably communicates a conception of the learning process and the learner”.

(Bruner, 1996, p.63)

Bruner (1996) posits that pedagogical approaches are a direct reflection of the beliefs and assumptions that the educator holds about the learner. Stating that the intuitive theories that educators have about how children’s minds work, and the role of the educator deeply affect the interactions and the pedagogical approach. Bruner named these intuitive theories as ‘Folk Pedagogies’ or the ‘wired in’ and cultural beliefs that individuals have about how the mind works. ‘Folk Pedagogies’, according to Bruner (1996),
consider how the child’s mind learns, what makes this learning happen and how as an educator one can help that child to learn. It is by recognising that these ‘Folk Pedagogies’ exist that one comes to understand that, ‘The teacher’s conception of the learner shapes the instruction he or she employs’ (Bruner, 1996, p.48).

Bruner suggests that folk pedagogies reflect the educator’s image of the child, suggesting that the educator may see the child as wilful and needing correction. Equally the educator may consider the child as innocent and needing protection or needing skills to be developed through practice. Alternatively, some educators see children as empty vessels that need to be filled by knowledgeable adults or children as being egocentric and in need of socialization. The educator’s image of the child has, he suggests, an enormous impact on the educator’s teaching activities and different approaches to learning. These different forms of instruction, he suggests, reflect different beliefs and assumptions about the learner.

Bruner (1996) suggests that there are four dominant models of learners which have been accepted:

2.3.3.1: One - Seeing children as imitative learners:

When the educator models or demonstrates how to complete a skill successfully, Bruner suggests that this is implicitly based on the adult’s belief that the child is not competent to do the activity themselves. It also presupposes that the child can learn to do the activity by being shown how to do it. There is also a presumption that the child wants to do the activity. Bruner (1996) posits that to learn by imitation the child must recognise the extrinsic goals presented by the adult; the goals are then achieved through the demonstration of the goal by the adult. This pedagogical approach is described by Bruner as the basis of apprenticeship learning, the novice being led by the more knowledgeable expert, transmitting a skill. This skill is then perfected through repeated practice. Bruner (1996) suggests that using imitation and demonstration suggests an underlying assumption about the competence of the learner which suggests that students learn through development of talents, skills and abilities rather than knowledge and
understanding. This is the historical approach to teaching and learning which continues today in many educational establishments.

2.3.3.2: Two - Seeing children learning from didactic exposure:
Didactic teaching, Bruner (1996) suggests, is usually based on the notion that students are presented with facts to be learned, remembered and then applied. Knowledge is provided by the teacher from books, the internet or other sources. The learning outcomes are measurable through standardised testing. This approach to teaching assumes that the child’s mind is a ‘tabula rasa’ or blank slate. Knowledge is put into the mind in a one directional approach. The child’s mind is seen as passive, a receptacle waiting to be filled (Bruner 1996).

2.3.3.3: Three - Seeing children as thinkers: The development of intersubjective interchange:
This pedagogical approach recognises the child’s perspective in the process of learning, where the teacher tries to understand how the child is making meaning (Bruner, 1996). The pedagogical approach in this instance recognises the competency of the child. Learning and understanding is through discourse, collaboration and negotiation. This pedagogy of mutuality posits that through discussion and interaction, the child and the adult move towards a shared frame of reference of reciprocal respect. This theory of children’s learning and meaning making was further developed by Siraj-Blatchford et al. (2002) who coined the term ‘sustained shared thinking’. Sustained shared thinking is an approach to pedagogy which was highlighted during the analysis of qualitative data collected for the Researching Effective Pedagogy in Early Years (REPEY) project (Siraj et al., 2015, p.7). The definition of Sustained Shared Thinking within the project was:

“An episode in which two or more individuals ‘work together’ in an intellectual way to solve a problem, clarify a concept, evaluate activities, extend a narrative, etc. Both parties must contribute to the thinking and it must develop and extend”. (Siraj et al., 2015, p.7)
Siraj-Blatchford et al. (2002) suggest that children’s cognitive development is enhanced when they experience initially more challenging sustained shared thinking in their play with adults, then in reciprocal peer play, and later in sophisticated collaborative play. Sylva et al. (2004) expanded on this theory, suggesting that children whose thinking skills have been nurtured in the company of supportive adults will do better than children whose thinking has developed alone or in the company of their peers. This type of pedagogy according to Bruner (1996) is concerned with interpretation and understanding in collaboration and through reciprocal dialogical exchange rather than achievement of factual knowledge or skilled performance (Bruner, 1996).

2.3.3.4: Four - Children as knowledgeable:

The fourth image of the child as identified by Bruner (1996) depicts the child as knowledgeable. Bruner suggests that all knowledge has a history, in this his fourth perspective on teaching and learning. Bruner acknowledges that children come to preschool with personal and cultural knowledge. This is often referred to as ‘funds of knowledge’, which Thomson (2002, p.53) describes as ‘the virtual school bag’. ‘The virtual school bag’, contains all the knowledge that the child has learnt at home, within their social context and with friends in the world they live in. Thomson’s research demonstrates that the culture of the school determines whether the child gets to open the bag and make use of its contents. This depends on the pedagogical approach of the educator and the culture of the educational environment. Bruner (1996) suggests that children’s personal and cultural knowledge must be incorporated within the pedagogical approach. Through listening to children and dialogue, Bruner (1996) suggests that the teacher of the students and the students of the teacher cease to exist. The teacher is not the one who teaches, but is being taught in dialogue with the students, in a reciprocal collaborative learning process where they are both jointly responsible for the learning process (Freire, 1996).
Seeing and respecting children as knowledgeable is in keeping with Malaguzzi’s image of the child. Malaguzzi (1998) suggests that right from the moment of birth, the child is actively engaged in developing a relationship with the world. To do this, he or she develops a complex system of abilities, learning strategies and ways of developing and building relationships (Rinaldi, 2006). This image recognises the child as a subject with rights who ‘know’ and who ‘can’.

Bruner (1996) suggests that the four views of teaching and learning are based on two dimensions, externalist and internalist theories. Externalist theories emphasise what adults do for children from the outside to support their learning. This, he suggests, is the bulk of traditional educational approaches. Internalist theories focus on what the child can do, what the child thinks, and the common understandings developed between the educator and the child. As modern pedagogy is moving to the view that the child should be aware of his or her own thought processes, it is therefore critical that educators support the child in this process. Achieving skill and accumulating knowledge is not enough for real meaning making and understanding to occur, according to Bruner (1996). ‘The creation of an atmosphere in which talking about thinking happens and in which children are encouraged to reflect on their thinking, may be most important’ (Fumoto et al., 2012, p.31).

Several researchers (Rogoff 1990; Rinaldi 2006; Jordan, 2009; Purdon, 2016) emphasise the importance of sharing the thinking, engaging with the understanding of the other and studying meaning with children. In Siraj-Blatchford and Smith’s study (2010), one of the success factors for effective sustained shared thinking was when the adults were ‘tuned in’ and showed an interest in the child’s conversation. In this situation the educator extended the child’s thinking without resorting to his or her own personal agenda or trying too hard to get the ‘right’ answer. It is evident that the preschool educator’s role is complex and these complexities often, according to Moloney (2010) go unrecognised. The role of the preschool educator is demanding and challenging, it requires skill, ability and competence in understanding and applying child development knowledge in
practice (Moloney, 2010). There is also a responsibility for ‘pedagogical framing’ which includes the provision of materials, arrangement of space and the establishment of routines within the setting (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002). Pedagogical approaches differ and the literature pertaining to the three pedagogical approaches identified in this study will now be presented.

2.3.4 Differing Pedagogical Approaches in Preschool settings - Montessori pedagogy

2.3.4.1 Montessori Pedagogy

“My vision of the future is… of individuals passing from one stage of independence to a higher [one], by means of their own activity through their own effort or will, which constitutes the inner evolution of the individual”.

(Montessori cited in Mac Naughton, 2003, p.93)

Key elements and theories of the Montessori approach.

Dr Maria Montessori and the Montessori approach to preschool education is recognised and acclaimed internationally with the Montessori approach to preschool education being practiced around the world (Whitescarver and Cossentino, 2008). According to Iman et al (2017) the Montessori method of education provides auto-education opportunities, where children have freedom to study individually. This, Iman et al (2017) suggests supports their cognitive, social and emotional development by working with educational materials which helps them to develop their self-sufficiency skills. Köksal-Akyol (2005) suggest that the philosophy which underpins the Montessori approach to early childhood education is, that children learn alone or together with their peers by trial and by repetition using the Montessori materials. Children who are learning through the Montessori method of education are not forced to participate in any activity, they have, according to, Mutlu et al. (2012), freedom to choose and decide what they want to work with, which supports their problem solving skills, creativity and communication skills.

As an educator, Dr Montessori viewed the trajectory of young children’s learning and development as being guided by children’s own intrinsic motivation to learn (Feez, 2010). The role of education, Montessori (1912)
suggested, is to guide activity and not to repress it. Founded in Rome in 1907, Montessori introduced the *Casa dei Bambini*, or Children’s House in a poor neighbourhood. The Montessori approach is now firmly placed within an education institutional context, with traditional Montessori preschools being called schools and the educators referred to as the teacher or the directress. The teacher’s function according to Lillard and Taggart (2019) is to observe children carefully and time their presentations of new materials appropriately for each child. Children in the Montessori classroom are according to Lillard and Taggard (2019) free to choose activities and are encouraged to repeat exercises until they master them.

In Montessori preschools the learning environment is highly organised (Humphreys, 1998). However, while the prepared environment is an underpinning principle of the Montessori approach, Dr Montessori confirms that while a prepared learning environment is important, learning she suggests comes from intrinsic motivation within the child.

“The environment is certainly secondary in the phenomena of life. It can modify, as it can assist or destroy, but it can never create. The source of growth lies within”.

(Montessori, 1967 reprint of 1936 original, p.61)

The Montessori classroom and the Montessori materials stimulate children’s learning, and children are free to develop their learning in an individualised and natural way (Gray and Macblain, 2015). A Montessori preschool environment is presented to the children in five very distinct areas. The five areas include, the sensorial area, the practical life area, the language and arts area, the mathematics area and the cultural studies area. Dr Montessori identified six principles which influence the preparation of the five areas in the Montessori environment. These include freedom where the child is free to explore and follow his or her own natural impulses, thereby developing and increasing knowledge of the world. The second principal Montessori (1966) identified was structure and order which may seem counter-intuitive to the principal of freedom. Montessori stated that children undergo a sensitive period for order between the ages of one and three years of age therefore she explained that there should be structure and order in the classroom, which is reflected in the daily routines. Montessori (1966)
posited that all learning environments should be beautiful and aesthetically pleasing and contain a variety of natural and real materials. It is within such a prepared environment Montessori (1966) suggests that the environment is a social and a learning environment.

A distinctive feature of the Montessori educational approach is the number of specific Montessori materials and activities that confer learning through action, based on a constructivist model (Lillard, 2012). These materials were developed by Dr Montessori and colleagues over a hundred years ago and they are integral to the Montessori program. The Montessori approach places an emphasis on the importance of young children learning through their senses. Because of this belief that children learn best from sensory experiences, Montessori developed several materials or exercises to support the Montessori approach to teaching and learning. The Montessori materials provide corrective feedback and are grouped into the five curricular areas (Montessori, 1967, 1989a, 1989b). A typical Montessori classroom setting contains at least 200 Montessori exercises (Epstein, Schweinhart and McAdoo, 1996). Dr Montessori (1966) confirmed that the aim of the prepared environment is to, in as far as is possible, support the growing child’s independence from the adult.

The Montessori materials are presented by the teacher to the children in a one- to-one individual lesson or lessons with small groups of children (Hojnoski et al., 2008). Presentation of the materials to the child or children is based upon the teacher’s observation of each child’s readiness. The teacher presents the materials to the child and the child then develops his own knowledge through hands-on learning with didactic materials and manipulating the Montessori materials (Lillard, 2005). The Montessori materials are mainly self-correcting, (the children can recognise and correct their mistakes) educational objects which are designed to teach subjects and concepts through repeated use and in a structured sequence (Ruijs, 2015). To teach writing skills, for example in a Montessori school the children practice the phonetic sounds of letters while tracing letters made from sandpaper with their fingers, this use of the voice and the sense of touch
together, makes learning meaningful (Montessori, 1966). It also supports the development of motor skills needed for writing (Lillard, 2005).

One of the main goals of Montessori education is to help students to become independent. Dr Montessori believed that children need to acquire independence in order to grow and develop (Montessori, 1989b) and independence is fostered in Montessori classrooms through the practical life exercises such as table washing and shoe polishing (Lillard, 2005). A further aim of the Montessori classroom environment is to provide an environment in which the children are intrinsically motivated to learn. The Montessori materials were designed to ignite children’s interest and their active manipulation of the Montessori materials. This learning through experience enhances according to Lillard (2005) both learning and motivation. Increasing motivation is also the argument for the absence of formal grades and tests. Dr Montessori believed that children are intrinsically motivated to learn and that within every child there is an innate desire, or an intrinsic motivation to be part of the greater community of man (Montessori, 1972). The value or necessity of offering extrinsic rewards based on grading or testing Montessori argued is not necessary, she went on to confirm that the use of extrinsic rewards may even disrupt students’ learning (Lillard, 2005).

Montessori education incorporates two key features of play that Maria Montessori considered crucial to self-development (Montessori, 2017). The first being that children engage in activities voluntarily for their own sake, and that they repeat the activities often (Burghardt, 2011). However, unlike a play pedagogy which uses toys, Montessori activities are according to Lillard and Taggart (2019) real life and have measurable outcomes. Most early childhood education and care settings even the alternative schools, such as Reggio inspired schools and Wardorf /Steiner schools in the western world provide toys such as dolls and cars, dress up and home corners which encourage pretend play and reflect the social and cultural context (Edwards, 2002; Kirkham and Kidd, 2015). Traditional Montessori preschools are an exception to this approach, they do not have pretend play or fantasy materials, they have been criticised by some for these omissions (Kirkham
& Kidd, 2015; Soundy, 2009). Rather than engaging in pretend play and playing with toys, traditional Montessori classrooms provide practical life exercises where children can imitate real life scenarios, as children are more likely to engage in activities with real objects and people (Tudge et al., 2011). Dr Montessori confirmed that this decision to use real life objects instead of toys, is based on children’s preference and her observation of children and the supports required to facilitate their development (Montessori, 1995).

The classic implementation of the Montessori approach is strict and traditional. It includes 3-hour work periods using the specific Montessori materials (Lillard, 2012). Torrence (2012) suggests that the child is at the centre of education and all practice is built around the child in the Montessori classroom. From this belief comes the phrase attributed to the Montessori approach, ‘follow the child’. The role of the teacher in the Montessori classroom is to observe the child. Through observation the teacher moves from, being the ‘chief knower’ and dispenser of knowledge, to that of ‘guide, supporter, facilitator and coach’ (Torrence, 2012, p.20). The Montessori teacher directs or guides individual children to purposeful activity based on the teacher’s observation. The first role of the teacher according to Lillard (2013) is to present the learning materials and demonstrate to the child how to correctly use the materials and how to complete the activity. In Montessori schools, children cannot choose to work with materials which the teacher has not yet shown them how to use. Before children can take materials from the shelves, they receive a lesson from the teacher on how to use the materials in a way, which results in the expected learning benefits to the child (Lillard et al., 2013).

The role of the Montessori teacher is “first to nourish and assist, to watch, encourage, guide, induce, rather than to interfere, prescribe, or restrict and there by facilitate children’s learning” (Montessori, 1912, p.13). The importance of quietness, order and discipline are central to the Montessori approach. Children undertake their ‘work’ with the Montessori materials in silence. This silence is not forced on the children, children are presented with the idea of working in silence and practice lessons in silence. Silence
in the Montessori classroom is presented as a valuable good and children according to Verstraete (2017) are seduced into becoming silent to support their individual learning and development.

2.3.4.2 Critical analysis of the Montessori Method as identified in the literature.

The teaching and learning exercises in the Montessori classroom were developed by Dr Maria Montessori in the early twentieth century. The approach has been open to interpretation, and in some instances, has changed to reflect the current context (Lillard, 2019). The key to the success of the Montessori approach according to Lillard (2019) is related to the implementation of the approach and fidelity to the Montessori method. Lillard (2019) suggests that there are two basic Montessori education styles or approaches. The two approaches are the classic approach that adheres tightly to Dr Montessori’s original program as outlined in her books (Montessori, 1967, 1989a, 1989b) and a supplemented Montessori approach in which conventional school activities and materials are added to the core program. Adapting Montessori education to the local culture was integral to its re-rooting in America in the 1960s and it may be suggested its popularity internationally. Many Montessori classrooms worldwide have adapted the basic program and have included for example shorter work periods, special classes and additional teachers for extracurriculars, grades, and homework (Lillard, 2012). Murray (2012) suggests that the Montessori community in the US believe that misunderstandings about the Montessori approach abound. In The Montessori Controversy (McNichols, 1998) highlights conflicting criticisms that, Montessori education is either too rigid and robs children of creativity or that it is completely unstructured and without any academic standards.

When Maria Montessori first introduced her educational philosophy in the early twentieth century according to Kilpatrick cited in Beck (1961) the approach to teaching young children reading, writing and numbers held out hope for parents to prepare their children for formal education. The underpinning philosophy and approach to learning of the Montessori method is that of constructivism where the child learns as an individual and
constructs meaning through their experiences alone (Ultanir, 2012). In the Montessori approach this learning focuses on learning through the senses, where children close and open dressing frames, tie fasteners, fold clothes, use sand paper numbers and letters and undertake real life experiences in an effort to train the tactile sense, which Beck (1961) describes as ‘sense realism’. Training of the senses and repetition, it is suggested, results in a disciplined mind and this training is facilitated in the Montessori approach, using Montessori didactic materials (öksal-Akyol, 2005). The didactic approach and an emphasis on individual learning conflict with social constructivists views. Social constructivists view development and learning as being cooperative and collaborative, where children and educators and peers construct meaning together in a social context (Bruner, 1996; Dewey, 1922; Vygotsky, 1978), through intersubjective learning (Newson and Newson, 1975) and sustained shared thinking (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002).

In the Montessori curriculum, all actions are purposeful each having a measurable outcome. Beck (1961) suggests that the lack of opportunities for children to explore alternatives or experiment, reduces children’s intrinsic motivation to learn. The use of self-correcting or control of error materials, suggests according to Beck (1961) that there is only one correct way to explore materials and this is the way the materials are presented by the teacher. Therefore Beck (1961) concludes that the motivation is extrinsic and comes from the teacher rather than the child being intrinsically motivated to explore the materials. In contrast Weissglass, (1999) confirms that an underlying premise of the Montessori Method is that each child possesses an inner power that motivates them to seek out specific activities and interactions. Taking direction from the writings of Montessori, he clearly identifies the importance of a rich environment for children to explore and think where the environment supports children’s intrinsic motivation to learn and be part of a learning community (Montessori, 1912, 1967, 1989).

Pretend and fantasy play are highly placed as valuable for young children’s learning and development in the western world as can be demonstrated by the numbers of toys and fiction/fantasy stories and books in many ECEC
settings (Krafft & Berk, 1998; Roopnarine, 2011). The value of imaginative play, with toys to support children’s learning are not prioritised and do not have a place in the traditional Montessori approach to ECEC (Lillard, 2019). However, based on her observation of children, Montessori noted that children preferred to engage with real life objects. As a result, she removed the man-made toys from the Montessori learning environment and stated in relation to the real-life objects that it was “very clear that the children needed these things. “A child chooses what helps him to construct himself. At first, we had many toys, but the children always ignored them” (Montessori, 1995, p. 223).

There is an emphasis in Montessori schools on working in silence and the ‘lessons in silence’ are integral to the Montessori approach. Montessori presents silence as a didactic instrument which invites children to be autonomous and choose to work in silence to support their individual thinking processes without teacher intervention. However, Verstraete (2017, p.7) suggests that Montessori’s silent exercises can only be understood when connected to Dr Montessori’s ideas on power, discipline, and freedom, stating that the Montessori method not only shook the educational land but shook the educational soundscape to its foundations. Silence he suggests has become educationalized it has become the educator’s way of wielding power over pupils in schools he goes on to confirm that “there seems to be no silence without power”. Directions by educators, such as ‘silence’, ‘fingers to the lips’ ‘inside voice’ have become part of some, pedagogical approaches and have induced silence and isolated learning. A pedagogical approach which silences children, Verstraete (2017) suggests is a covert way by educators to seduce pupils to discipline themselves and willingly subject themselves to educational goals.

Within Montessori schools a constructivist approach to teaching and learning underpins the pedagogical approach; the educational process is based on “self-direction” (Ultanir, 2012). Within a constructivist paradigm the learner learns by interaction with his or her own environment, and in doing so understands and makes meaning. Another crucial aspect of the Montessori pedagogy is independent work. A child chooses what he wants
to do as well as how long and with whom he wants to work. When the learner has autonomy and independence the learning is according to Ultanir (2012) a result of individual Meta construction. The Montessori pedagogy according to Dr Montessori (1997) encourages creative problem-solving skills, it teaches independence and supports the development of self-control with the teacher assuming the role of a “facilitator”. The learner is active in the learning process and is not a passive receptor of knowledge transmitted from the more knowledgeable educator. The success of Dr Montessori’s interactive curriculum led her to question the traditional classroom model of students immobilized at desks, trying and retrying rote tasks.

The educational vision, that Dr Montessori had according to Ultanir (2012) challenged this model of children being immobilizes at desks, it emphasized instead the use of real-life objects and scenarios in the Montessori classroom which support children’s testing and understanding of various concepts and makes learning meaningful. Dr Montessori (1966) recommended a new classroom model to replace traditional classrooms; such a model she suggested supports children’s natural curiosity. The pedagogical approach based on the Montessori approach encourages children’s natural curiosity and problem-solving skills; it encourages individual creativity, teaches independence and supports the development of self-control when and where the teacher assumes the role of a “facilitator” (Montessori, 1997).

2.3.4.3 Summary:

Based on the theoretical literature presented, the Montessori approach to early childhood education is based on a belief that learning happens when the child is intrinsically motivated to learn. In order to support children’s intrinsic motivation Dr Montessori developed a curriculum where children are supported to be independent, have choice and learning is meaningful. The core element of the curriculum is that the child is at the centre and the educator “follows the child”. The classic values and principals of the Montessori approach are based on a child centred model, where the emergent interests of children are facilitated and expanded on. The image of the child is that of a child who is curious and is intrinsically motivated to
explore his or her environment. The use of extrinsic motivators is not a value promoted by Dr Montessori; in fact, she clearly identified the disruptive effects on children’s intrinsic motivation to learn (Lillard, 2019). The Montessori environment based on a classic approach provides natural and real-life materials to support children’s intrinsic motivation to learn and engage in the metacognitive processes of learning. The Montessori approach is underpinned by a rights-based perspective where there is mutual respect and the educator prepares a beautiful aesthetically pleasing environment for the children.

The adapted Montessori environment introduces other interesting materials such as playdough, paint, and toys, this adaptation from the classic Montessori environment has emerged over time and was initially as a result of the Montessori method being adapted to meet societal change and the cultural context of American preschools (Lillard, 2019). Dr Montessori’s dream that children should not be sitting behind desks but should be free to move in a structured well-planned environment is central to the approach. The role of the teacher is to observe and facilitate children’s learning, which occurs in a one to one individual lesson or in small groups. The teacher observes the child and watches for opportunities to introduce the Montessori materials to the child. Meaningful learning is promoted through the process of the practical life experiences, where the children learn how to look after themselves and their environment and the learning is meaningful for the child (Torrence, 2012).

Montessori preschools have been in existence for over 100 years however, studies of Montessori education's impact on development are rare (Walsh & Petty, 2007). This may be due to issues with fidelity to the Montessori programme (Lillard, 2012). There are two basic styles of the Montessori programme according to Lillard (2009), the classic approach and a supplemented one in which conventional school activities and materials are added to the core program. The classic implementation is strict and traditional, and often identified with the Association Montessori Internationale (AMI). The second a more modified version of Montessori education is more attuned than the original to mid-20th century American
culture (American Montessori Society, 2011). The educator’s interpretation of the Montessori programme is critical to the implementation and the pedagogical approach in practice in early years settings. The Montessori approach to early childhood education based on the literature is underpinned by a right based, child centred approach where children’s intrinsic motivation to learn is supported. In this learning environment children have choice, freedom to explore and have relevant meaning experiences in beautiful environments facilitated by the Montessori teacher.

“I believe that I have by my method established the conditions necessary to the development of scientific pedagogy; and whoever adopts this method opens, in doing so, a laboratory of experimental pedagogy.”

(Montessori, 1964, p.370)

2.3.5 Differing Pedagogical Approaches in Preschool settings - A Play-based Pedagogy

“First and foremost, all play is a voluntary activity, children and animals play because they enjoy playing, and therein precisely lies their freedom.” (Huizinga, 1955, p.8)

2.3.5.1 Key elements and theories of play

Two of the most predominant theorists of children’s early learning of the 20th century, Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky stressed the essential role of play for cognitive development. Piaget (1896-1980) developed his theory of cognitive development following extensive observations of his own children including when they were at play, he was the first theorist to explain the internal process of thinking (Gray and MacBain, 2015). Piaget argued that children learn through interacting with the physical environment and that learning occurs through processes of assimilation and accommodation. Piaget known as the father of constructivism (1953) has contributed to our understanding of the constructed nature of knowledge and to the image of the competent, proactive child. He focussed on learning as an individual process, where knowledge acquisition is a process of continuous self–construction, invented and reinvented by the child as he or she develops and interacts with the surrounding world (Golinkoff, R, M., 2006).
Vygotsky (1896-1934) emphasised the sociocultural influences on children’s development, particularly how interactions with people fosters cognitive development. Vygotsky argued that ‘it is as a result of social interactions between the growing child and other members of the child’s community that the child acquires the tools of thinking and learning’ (Smith et al, 1998, p. 426). Learning and development is not an individual process, he suggested, it is the result of the social relations embodied within the individual (Gray and Mac Blain, 2015) and this can only be understood by examining the social and cultural contexts from which it derives. It is therefore essential when considering children’s learning and development to examine the social context, children’s learning environments and children’s social relationships and interactions (Corsaro, 1992). Like Piaget, Vygotsky believed that children are born with basic building blocks of cognition, these include visual recognition, memory, attention and processing skills. These skills enable the child to develop higher order thinking skills such as problem solving, reasoning and planning. The premise of social constructivist theory is that the individual learns firstly at the social external level, through experience and mediated learning between people and then at the internal level where the learning becomes internalised as thought.

“Every function in the child’s cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later on the individual level; first between people (interpsychological), and then inside the child (intrapsychological). This applies equally to voluntary attention, to logical memory, and to the formation of concepts. All the higher functions originate as actual relations between human individuals”.

(Vygotsky, 1978, p.57)

Vygotsky (1978) distinguishes between development and learning with the 'zone of proximal development' (ZPD) theory, this is a process where a child’s understanding is assisted by ‘a more knowledgeable’ person or a person more skilled at the task. The zone of proximal development is described by Zigler and Bishop-Josef (2004) as having two levels, a lower level which signifies what a child can do alone and an upper level which signifies what the child is capable of with guidance. The child at the lower level according to Gray and Mac Blain (2015) is dependent on the teacher to guide their learning. The role of the educator is to support the child’s
increasing competence, he/she does this by providing a rich environment to support children’s learning and by trusting children’s competencies to construct their own meaning at a social and an individual level.

At the optimal level of the ZPD the child is an autonomous learner and the role of the educator is to provide further challenges and provocations to extend learning. Vygotsky (1978, p.138) claimed that play serves as the primary context for cognitive development; “play is the source of development and creates the zone of proximal development”. In play Vygotsky argues that children interact with others and can learn from them. In 1976, Wood et al., first coined the term ‘scaffolding’ as a metaphor to explain the supports provided by an adult that challenges a child at the upper level of the ZPD. Benson (1997) states,

> “Scaffolding is actually a bridge used to build upon what students already know to arrive at something they do not know; if scaffolding is properly administered, it will act as an enabler, not a disabler”.

(Benson, 1997, pp. 126-127)

2.3.5.2 Play and Learning:

Vygotsky (1933) specifically makes a link between play and learning, he regarded play as the leading source of development in early childhood and creates the ZPD because.

> “In play a child is always above his average age, above his daily behaviour; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself. As in the focus of a magnifying glass, play contains all developmental tendencies in a condensed form; in play it is as though the child were trying to jump above the level of his normal behaviour”.

(Vygotsky, 1967, p. 16)

In play, Vygotsky posits that children learn to use objects and actions in their symbolic functions, this happens in make-believe or role play which is described by Vygotsky as symbolically mediated intentional behaviour. ‘Real’ play according to Vygotsky has three major features; children create an imaginary situation, they take on and act out roles and they follow a set of rules specific to that role (Vygotsky, 1978). Each of these features
contribute to the development of the child’s higher mental functions through external and internal processes, from thought processes which are as a result of sensory-motor and visual representations to more advanced symbolic thought. In make-believe play children learn from the external learning environment which prepares the foundation for symbolic thinking and imagination. In this situation imagination is not a pre requisite to play, but is actually a result of play: “The old adage that children’s play is imagination in action can be reversed: we can say that imagination in adolescents and school children is play without action” (Vygotsky, 1978, p.93).

Vygotsky proposed that children learn to create, master and give meaning to signs and symbols through play. Children he suggests go beyond recollection and imitation and reconstruct implicit social rules for their own play purposes. Play is therefore both a medium and context to negotiate and exercise their understanding of cultural relationships, roles and practices. Make-believe play also according to Vygotsky contributes to the development of higher mental functions by promoting intentional, self-regulated behaviour. In make-believe play children take on the rules of the roles they play, they practice versions of grown-up experiences which according to Elkonin (2005) allows them to explore, experience and make meaning of some of these experiences. In an analysis of play, Elkonin (1977) identified the unique characteristics that make play the most important activity of preschool children. Elkonin (1977) emphasised the symbolic nature of play that affords children the opportunity to model real-life objects, actions and relationships. This modelling requires children to isolate and abstract the core features of these objects, actions and relationships, which lay the foundation for the development of abstract thinking and imagination.

The four principles of play which facilitate the development and mastery of higher mental functions according to Elkonin (1977) are, that play impacts on the child’s intrinsic motivation and facilitates the child’s ability to take other people’s critical perspectives. Play also advances the development of mental representation, which occurs when children separate the meanings of
objects from their physical form, such as a rock representing a mobile phone. In play children set and monitor rules and engage in ‘other regulation’, which involves comparing observed behaviours with ‘planned’ behaviour. When children practice other and self-regulation in play, they are preparing the foundations for more advanced deliberate behaviours, including the planning and monitoring of their own mental processes, which is metacognition.

Contemporary psychological literature identifies five broad types of Play, based upon the developmental purposes. These include physical play, play with objects, symbolic play, pretence / socio-dramatic play and games with rules. Although each type of play has a main developmental function or focus, they all support aspects of physical, intellectual and social-emotional development. A radical critic of the focus on the educational benefits of play Dutch historian Huizinga (1955) suggests that the core essential feature of play is pleasure, and play provides a sense of freedom for children. Huizinga (1955) suggests that when the focus on the educational benefits of play becomes too dominant, then the most essential feature of play, children’s pleasure is lost.

The ‘functionalist approach of play’ assumes that play must serve something else, which is not play. While there are many theories of the benefits of play in supporting children’s development these theories do not capture the essence of play, because, ‘it is precisely the fun-element that characterises the essence of play (Huizinga, 1955, p.3). Play, according to Huizinga can only be captured in qualitative descriptions of feelings like excitement, tension, release, uncertainty, togetherness, surprise, rhythm, risk, balance. Play presumes an intense relation with the immediate social and physical environment. The child and the educator create a play world together a ‘magic circle’ (Singer, 2013, p.175) where they co-construct a shared play reality. In fact, Huizinga (1955) goes further and suggests that play is not just an aspect of social life but is one of the sources of culture. He suggests that the heart of culture is constructed from elements of drama, joyful activity, jokes, humour, competition and contests, where all humans are essentially playful or Homo Ludens (man the player).
Play is not easy to define, Gray (2015) concedes that play fills the mind with contradictions; it is he suggests, spontaneous and imaginative, trivial yet profound, it is nature’s way for children to survive and do well. Play, Gray (2015) also suggests, makes life worth living; it is linked to motivation and mental attitude and has five universal characteristics. These characteristics include the premise that play is self-chosen and self-directed. Secondly the process of play is more important than the product and it has structures and rules which emanate from the minds of the players. Play is also imaginative and removed from ‘real’ or ‘serious’ life. Finally, Gray (2015) confirms that involvement in play requires an active, alert and non-stressed mind. Children’s own ideas of play centre on ‘having fun, being outdoors, being with friends, and choosing freely’ (Singer, 2013, p.173). While there are many physical, social and psychological benefits associated with children’s play, from a policy perspective under the UNCRC (Article 31) children have a specific right to play.

2.3.5.3 Play based

The pedagogisation of play, according to Rogers (2011) is a conflict in terms. When taken separately the words ‘play’ and ‘pedagogy’ hold diverse and distinct meanings in educational discourse. The concept of play in early childhood conjures images of active, spontaneous, intrinsically motivated child-led activity. Play is described as fluid, unpredictable and at times scornful of authority (Mardell et al., 2016). In contrast, the term pedagogy takes its starting point from the adult’s role, where the adult has autonomy of providing the environment to support teaching and learning. This is increasingly being linked to standards, accountability and testing (Edwards and Usher, 2007). Kuschner (2012) argues that there are unremitting contradictions which arise between play and school. In play, the players lose their sense of time while in contrast, schools are governed by timetables, and while play may be chaotic, messy and loud, schools tend to aspire to be places of order (Mardell, 2016).

Play-based pedagogies are not new in early childhood education. The coupling of play and pedagogy in early childhood education is according to
Rogers (2011) problematic. The traditional concept of play in the western world has been positioned in opposition to its supposedly more worthwhile counterpart, work (play versus work). In Huizinga’s analysis of play he suggests that play differs from work, work he suggests is situated in the laws of society and nature, whereas play breaks through the rules of law that governs ‘normal’ life (1955). In play children are free to escape the rules and obligations of ‘work’ and reasoning, play offers freedom, and this is what makes play exciting. Play offers the freedom to change the experience of reality (Singer, 2013). The separation between work and play evident in many early childhood education and care settings may, according to Rogers (2011) prevent the integration of play into pedagogical practice, as conceptualising a Play-based pedagogy presents significant challenges for many early childhood educators. This according to Rogers (2011) is due to the lack of clarity about pedagogies of play and the pedagogical techniques and strategies used by early childhood educators to support or enhance learning in play. Equally theorizing ‘play as work’ Gibbons (2007) argues may reduce play to become a technique of social control and take away children’s choice and autonomy in their play.

“Let my playing be my learning and my learning be my playing”.

(Singer, 2013, p.173)

Educators such as Bruner, Froebel, Montessori, Malaguzzi and Steiner have focused on the active playing and learning child, with many studies demonstrating the educational benefits of play (Singer, 1992; 2013; Sutton-Smith, 1997). According to Singer (2013) unlike teacher-based curricula where the pedagogical approach is based on didactic instruction and transmission of knowledge, in contrast a ‘play curricula’ is considered to be child centred and developmentally appropriate. As a result, play is increasingly being recognised as the royal road to learning in early childhood (Singer, 2013). Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009) in Ireland is a play-based curriculum. As the early childhood curriculum framework, Aistear provides information for
adults to support them to plan and provide enjoyable, challenging play and learning experiences for young children so that they can grow and develop as competent and confident learners. The basis for this curriculum is that in the early years children learn through loving, trusting and respectful relationships and through discussion, exploration and play. This according to Singer (2013) is the essence of play, where play is seen as the basis for fun and taking delight in intimate relationships and to co-construct shared meanings.

The emphasis on the social and educational benefits of play have become so focused in what Huizinga (1955) describes as the functionalist approach to play, where the essence of play, being freely chosen, fun, spontaneous and non-goal directed, are being forgotten about. This is resulting in teachers behaving too ‘teachery’, using play for their own teaching goals and spoiling children’s fun (Samuelsson and Carlsson, 2008). Within this ‘teachery’ approach there are few opportunities in play for choice, wonder or delight. These, according to Mardell et al. (2016) are the ingredients required for learning to happen in play.

2.3.5.4 The instrumentalist approach to play:

Hillen and Aprea (2015) refer to instrumentalism in education. To instrumentalise they posit is to use objects or subjects for the sake of a specific purpose. Their work and that of Nome (2015) and Øksnes, (2013) highlights that, increasingly in ECEC settings and kindergartens that play for learning purposes has become more prevalent. Nome (2015) while accepting that it is difficult to define play, suggests that there are two conflicting notions of play, firstly, an instrumentalist approach to play which is a learning-oriented approach to play. Play in this situation is seen as a tool for learning it is planned with preconceived learning outcomes. The second approach, which Nome (2015) suggests is a Bildung-oriented approach to play which recognises play as a contributor to personal and social growth. In this instance children’s play is considered as a valuable experience which supports children’s right to play, their intrinsic motivation, their wellbeing, identity and belonging.
ECEC settings in Ireland prior to the introduction of the ECCE scheme were primarily considered to be places where children were cared for by adults in an environment where they were free to play, while their parents accessed work or education, as outlined in the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (2000-2006) (Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, 2000). The focus of the preschools or playschools as they were then referred to prior to the introduction of the ECCE scheme in 2011 was on the care, health safety and welfare and the holistic development of young children as outlined in the 2006 Child Care (Pre-school Services) (No 2) Regulations 2006 and Child Care (Pre-School Services) (No 2) (Amendment) Regulations 2006. The playschools and preschools settings were traditionally considered places where children were cared for in a family-like environment. Within these caring environments there were a variety of possibilities for children’s emergent play in the daily caring rituals. Singer (2013) describes this as one of the important hallmarks of the quality of upbringing of young children and Huizinga cited in Singer (2013, p., 176) refers to it as 'the necessities and obligations of the normal life'.

The ‘idealistic’ notion of play, according to Øksnes (2010) cited in Nome (2015) suggests that, where children’s play is incorporated into the activities of daily living that this has to some extent romanticised and trivialised play as an unbinding combustion of excess-energy.

The institutionalisation of ECEC settings under an educational remit has introduced a focus on play as an instrument for learning. This instrumentalist notion of play which Nome (2015) discusses, where the outcomes of play may be assessed and measured, limits children’s autonomy to play and as such is in conflict with the basic premise of play as being freely chosen (Gray, 2015) and autotelic (Deci and Ryan, 2017). Nome (2015) also suggests that when play is instrumentalised while it may be a useful way to achieve learning goals, the pedagogical approach is more didactic. The reasoning for this is that educators’ preconceived ideas of expected learning outcomes are the catalyst for the planned, managed and controlled play experiences of young children. The curtailing, of children’s autonomy and intrinsic motivation to play, results in lower levels of flow
(Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) and involvement in the play activity (Laevens, 2017). There is a concern that by disconnecting play and cognitive development outcomes in ECEC settings and kindergartens that this will reduce the value of play. However, one could argue or question what; the identified outcomes are based on. Are the measurable outcomes academically oriented, such as measurable levels of literacy, numeracy and school readiness or more holistic dynamic outcomes such as levels of social and emotional wellbeing and what are the societal values placed on these outcomes?

In Boston the second location for this study, in order to bridge the gap between ‘play’ and ‘pedagogy’, Project Zero, Harvard Graduate School of Education set up a Pedagogy of Play (POP) project with a goal of understanding, articulating and advocating for the role of play in learning and schools (HGSE). Pedagogy of play is defined as ‘a systematic approach to the practice of playful learning and teaching’ (Mardell et al., 2016). Creating a pedagogy of play according to Mardell (2016) requires a culture where playfulness is celebrated, made visible, recognised and valued as a powerful pathway of learning. Within this culture the essence of play, risk taking, exploration, excitement, wonder, making mistakes and joy are central to the beliefs and values of the school. In trying to decide what a pedagogy of play might look like, the researchers at Pedagogy of Play, Project Zero developed indicators of playful learning. The tool was developed to support educators to plan for, assess, and reflect on playful teaching and learning. The model of playful learning has three overlapping categories: choice, wonder and delight. The categories aim to describe the quality of learners’ experience as they build understanding, knowledge, and skill. This model of playful learning is being used across the educational institutions at preschool, primary and second level in some schools in the US. Mardell et al. (2016) suggest that learning is happening when all three categories; choice, wonder and delight are ‘in play’ in the play experience (Mardell et al., 2016) as shown in the Playful Learning Framework, Figure 2.1.
In the *Playful Learning Framework*, Mardell et al. (2016) describe wonder as when children experience curiosity, novelty, surprise, and challenge, which can engage and fascinate their learning. They suggest that where there is wonder in play the learner experiences feelings of delight, including excitement, joy, satisfaction, inspiration, anticipation, pride, and belonging. As with other writers on play in early childhood education and care (Singer, 2013; Gray, 2015; Broström, 2017), the importance that play is freely chosen is essential. Choice includes a sense of empowerment, autonomy, ownership, spontaneity and intrinsic motivation (Mardell, et al. 2016). The final requirement, according to Mardell et al. (2016), for playful learning to occur is the feeling of delight. This includes excitement, joy satisfaction, inspiration and anticipation. Learners who feel delighted may smile, laugh, joke, or sometimes are silly. They might sing, hum or dance, and their attention is focused. The child is totally absorbed and unaware of time,
exhibiting high levels of motivation, interest, fascination and perseverance or persistence (Laevers, 2017). Learning in play occurs, according to Mardell (2016), when children have choice, wonder and delight. Sandseter and Seland’s (2015) study of preschool children’s subjective wellbeing in Norway also demonstrates that high levels of wellbeing have been demonstrated when young children choose, like and enjoy the activities they are engaged in. These findings concur with Deci and Ryan (1991) that when children’s curiosity and interest is focused, the developmental process is energised. However, Deci and Ryan (1991) warn that this can be nourished or diminished by the context or the environment, which either facilitates or hinders the natural processes of self-motivation and healthy psychological development and wellbeing (Ryan and Deci, 2000).

2.3.5.5 Critical analysis of a play-based pedagogy as outlined in the literature.

The focus of a Play-based pedagogy is primarily, according to Sutton-Smith (1997), about learning and development rather than enjoyment and fun. However, when play is associated with freedom, choice and autonomy he suggests.

‘play effectively becomes privileged over work, both as a learning or arousal seeking activity and as a major factor in the individuals mental and emotional development.’

(Sutton-Smith, 1997, p.203)

With children spending increasing time in centre based ECEC settings, children’s play is increasingly being subjected to institutional guidelines, where adults are hijacking children’s play, by regulating and controlling play (Ailwood, 2003). This is resulting in children having less freedom for excitement, tension, release, uncertainty, togetherness, surprise, rhythm, risk, balance and most of all fun (Huizinga, 1955). The increased focus on the value of play as an educational tool by both parents and educators and seeing play from a functionalist perspective is based on cognitive and developmental psychology theories where, the outcomes or benefits of play can be evaluated and measured. This has resulted in play situations being produced or orchestrated in ECEC settings to covertly lure children to
acquire knowledge, competence and skills (Kleiber, 1999). According to Sutton-Smith (1997) this serves the needs of adults to teach children over the needs of the children themselves and their emerging interests. Play in this context is about preparing children for ‘real’ life as adults; in order to do this the play is guided by the educator to ensure that it is correct and supports future oriented aspirations (Øksnes, 2013).

Sutton-Smith (1997) suggests that to understand play we need to transcend our limited mindsets and recognise that play is about risk taking, nonsense, fun, joy, laughter and surprise. However the glorification of play as being functional, voluntary and cooperative according to Øksnes ignores the coercive, cruel and dangerous aspects of many forms of play and even though children are aware of the institutional rules around play, play in its true sense of being freely chosen and self-directed, recognises children’s competence and offers children choice and autonomy in their play.

It is evident that play is a highly significant activity in children’s experiences and development. A Play-based pedagogy in ECEC settings can be characterised by a range of tensions and according to Rogers (2011) can be conceptualised as a conflict of interests between seeing children’s broader learning, social and emotional development and a narrowly prescribed educational agenda. While the concept of free play has been identified as problematic, play should not be viewed simply as a vehicle for delivering a curriculum under the banner of ‘Play-based learning’ (Rogers, 2011, p.15). A starting point would be to hear the voice of children and see the value of play from their perspectives. In order to overcome the conflicts which exist between an emergent Play-based curriculum and adults pedagogical imperatives, Cannella and Viruru (2003) suggest that a play pedagogy should be a negotiated practice, co constructed between children and educators which explores the play/ work dualism that exists in the ECEC setting. This will require the educators to recognise and value children’s different play experiences, including the ‘not nice’ play from the educator’s perspective, but play that emerges from children’s own interests (Lester and Russell, 2008, p.42). By adopting a relational and co-constructive approach to play pedagogy Rogers (2011) suggests that we
may resolve some of the conflicts of interests which arise between play and pedagogical practice. This will require further exploration and discussion about the understandings and meanings attributed to pedagogy in relation to play in ECEC settings.

2.3.5.6 Summary:

Play is recognised as an important influence on young children’s holistic development. All children have a specific right under Article 31 of the UNCRC (1989) to play. Having a right to play is premised on the fundamental values and principles of play which include the fact that all play should be voluntary and be valued. The enjoyment and the joy children experience in play should supersede all other expectations including those of the adults. Using play as a tool for learning where children learn through play or in play has consequences for children’s play experiences. Separating play and work in early years settings undermines and devalues play, as the value of play is based in many cases on measurable learning outcomes. Playful learning across the educational sector is recognised as contributing to student’s holistic wellbeing and development (Perkins, 2014).

2.3.6 Differing Pedagogical Approaches in Preschool settings- Reggio inspired Pedagogy

The approach to early childhood education and care known as the Reggio approach is internationally recognised. The first international interest was in December 1991 when the American magazine Newsweek, ‘The Ten Best Schools in the World’ chooses the preschools of Reggio Emilia in the Early Childhood category (Gardner 1998, cited in Edwards et al., 1998). Many distinguished educators and researchers have visited and written about the Reggio approach over the years, including Gardner, who confirms that ‘to my mind, no place in the contemporary world has succeeded so splendidly as the schools of Reggio Emilia’ (Edwards et al. 1998, p.18). While Bruner (cited in Edwards et al., 1998) confirms that what struck him in Reggio Emilia was seeing how imagination was cultivated while reinforcing children’s sense of what is possible. This recognition for excellence for
teaching and learning in early childhood education has resulted in the development of the Loris Malaguzzi International Centre, numerous publications and an international network of countries who are members of the Reggio Children International network.

In 2010, the infant toddler centres and preschools of the Instituzione of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia developed a set of guidelines or ‘indications’ which guide the practice in the Reggio education settings and underpin the practice in settings which are inspired by the Reggio approach.

The Approach

The following are the main underpinning values and principles of the approach as outlined in ‘Indications’ (Reggio Children, 2010).

2.3.6.1 Education is a right:

The practice of teaching and learning in the infant toddler centres and preschools of Reggio Emilia involves children, teachers, parents, extended family and the local community of the city of Reggio Emilia. Learning in the preschools is understood to be, according to Dahlberg et al. (2007, p.50) ‘a cooperative and communicative activity, where children construct knowledge and make meaning of the world, together with adults and other children’. Education as a right is considered a responsibility of the community which offers an opportunity for growth and emancipation for both the individual and the collective. Education is seen as a source for gaining knowledge and learning to live together. Early childhood education and care settings are considered as meeting places where ‘freedom, democracy and solidarity are practiced’ (Reggio Children, 2010, p.7). In these ECEC settings, education is based on mutual respect, valuing the diversities of identities, competencies and each individual’s knowledge. The approach to education is through listening, dialogue, participation and cooperation within a system of relationships (Rinaldi, cited in Edwards et al., 1989, p.115). Reggio Children (2010) confirm.

“Relationships, communications and interactions sustain our educational approach in its complexity, they are powerful terms characterised by two important elements: action and group
socialization. This system of relationships promotes the rights and potentials of all children which includes their rights to autonomy, creativity and learning”. (Reggio Children, 2010, p.7)

The Reggio educational approach is based on an image of the child who is ‘…rich in potential, strong, powerful, competent and most of all, connected to adults and other children’ (Malaguzzi 1993, cited in Edwards et al. 1998, p.275). Malaguzzi, the founder of this approach, introduced the theory of the hundred languages of children where children have ‘a hundred ways of thinking, of playing speaking, a hundred always a hundred ways of listening, of marvelling, of loving’ (Edwards et al. 1998, p.3). However, Malaguzzi suggests that the school and the culture or the educator, steals ninety-nine of these hundred languages and tells the child to ‘think without hands, to do without head, to listen and not to speak, to marvel only at Christmas and Easter’ (Edwards et al. 1998, p.3). The poem: The Hundred Languages of Children, offers an image of a competent child with many ways of expressing themselves and their knowledge. The poem/theory which is a metaphor for the extraordinary potentials and competencies of children forms the basis of the Reggio approach. The poem highlights the important role of the educator in supporting children’s learning.

2.3.6.2 The pedagogical approach

‘Early childhood education and care in Reggio Emilia is anything but linear; it is instead, an open-ended spiral’ (Edwards, 1998, p.10). In the Reggio infant and toddler centres and preschools Malaguzzi confirms.

“Children are helped to perceive themselves as authors or inventors, once they are helped to discover the pleasure of inquiry, their motivation and interest explodes”. (Malaguzzi, 1998, p.67, cited in Edwards et al., 1998)

2.3.6.3 The environment:

“An environment is a living, changing system. More than the physical space, it includes the way time is structured and the roles we are expected to play. It conditions how we feel, think, and behave; and it dramatically affects the quality of our lives. The environment either works for us or against us as we conduct our live”. (Greenman, 1988, p.5)
The ECEC environment is seen as a critical influence in the Reggio preschools, co-teaching, where two educators work together as a team is the norm and an underpinning principle in all Reggio preschools. Therefore, ‘the environment is seen here as educating the child; in fact, it is considered as the ‘third educator’ along with the team of two teachers’ (Gandini, L., cited in Edwards et al., 1998, p.177). The environment is constantly seen as a living changing space, it is recognised that the quality of the environment impacts on the quality of the experiences of the children and adults who ‘live’ in the space (Greenman, 1988). In this rich ECEC environment it is understood that, ‘the wider the range of possibilities we offer children, the more intense will be their motivations and the richer their experiences’ (Malaguzzi, Edwards et al., 1998, p.79).

Visitors to the infant toddler centres and preschools of Reggio Emilia are always struck by the aesthetic beauty of the environments, the décor, and the streaming light coming through doors and windows, healthy green plants, the piazza which acts as a place for encounters, meetings and interaction (Millikan, 2003). The environments in the Reggio preschools reflect and embrace the Italian social, traditional and cultural context (Edwards et al., 1998). The attention given to the beauty and harmony of the design is evident in the furniture and fittings which are often made by parents and teachers together. The selection of open and up cycled materials available to children is extensive as the Reggio schools access these materials from the local REMIDA centre. The careful attention to detail and meticulous maintenance of the space ensures that the youngest children spend time in the most beautiful spaces (Gandini, cited in Edwards et al., 1998). Rinaldi (2006) affirms that beautiful spaces are a ‘right’ for all children; they are a value statement of a society who values children and early childhood education.

2.3.6.4 The role of the adult

The role of the adult is clearly outlined in the Reggio preschools as a support for children’s zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978), where the distance between the level of capacity of the child and their
potential development is attained by the help of a more competent other, be that an adult or another child.

“The central role of adults, therefore, is to activate, especially indirectly, the meaning-making competencies of children as a basis of all learning”. (Malaguzzi, cited in Edwards et al., 1998, p.81)

In the infant toddler centres and preschools teachers encourage children to ‘debate, hypothesise and test the merits of their beliefs’ (New, cited in Edwards, 1998, p.273). The teacher is seen as a provocateur who ‘complicates’ the child’s already complex thinking processes. The role of the educator is that of a reflective, democratic and rich professional who is attentive in creating possibilities as opposed to pursuing predefined goals. The focus is on choice, experimentation and reflection. The rich environments and the abundance of open-ended materials, natural and man-made, offer provocation, wonder, amazement and joy (Edwards et al., 1998).

In the preschools in Reggio the ‘rich’ educator is supported by pedagogistas and atelieristas. Pedagogistas are experienced educators who work with a small number of early childhood settings to support educators to deepen their understanding of the learning process and pedagogical work. Atelieristas are educators with a background in visual arts, they bring an ‘aesthetic dimension’ to the learning process (Moss, 2010). Educators believe that knowledge is constructed by the learner, rather than being transmitted to the learner. The educator, in preparation for her role in supporting young children’s learning, stays one step ahead, always to facilitate children’s exploring and thinking and meaning making processes. Katz, (cited in Edwards et al., 1998) comments that an ECEC programme has intellectual vitality if the teacher’s interactions are concerned with what the children are learning, planning and thinking and their interactions with others, as opposed to a situation where the primary concern is rules and routines. This has been confirmed by Malaguzzi when he states.

“If teaching is monodirectional and rigidly structured according to some ‘science’, it becomes intolerable, prejudicial, and damaging to the dignity of both teacher and learner.”
(cited in Edwards et al., 1998, p.83)
Teachers in Reggio inspired schools do not follow a set curriculum or programme as to do this, according to Malaguzzi, would push the schools towards ‘teaching without learning’ (Malaguzzi, cited in Edwards et al., 1998, p.98). In the preschools, children’s emergent interests are followed, supported and scaffolded by competent adults where the educator ‘encourages children to debate, hypothesise, and test the merits of their beliefs’ (New, 1994, cited in Edwards et al., 1998, p.273). The pedagogical approach is based on flexible strategies rather than ridged plans. Rinaldi (2006) uses a metaphor to describe this way of thinking about curriculum as that of taking a journey. On this, learning journey the learner finds the route using a compass rather than taking a train with a fixed route and schedule.

Teachers in Reggio schools and Reggio inspired schools in other parts of the world have been described as provocateurs (New, 1994, cited in Edwards et al., 1998), protagonists (Edwards et al., 1993; Rinaldi, 1993), partners, nurturers and guides (Edwards et al., 1998), and learners and researchers (Bredekamp, 1994).

Teachers working in Reggio and Reggio inspired schools are also asked to think of themselves as learners, researchers and collaborators. Edwards et al. (1998) suggest that by seeing themselves as learners, the educator does not see her or himself as being the font of all knowledge or as an expert transmitter of knowledge. Instead the educator is seen as one who values their own learning, recognising that learning is lifelong and happens daily with colleagues and together with the children. Seeing the educator as a researcher situates the educator in the position of a classroom ethnographer (New, 1994, cited in Edwards et al., 1998). By immersing themselves within the learning context they observe and listen and gather a variety of data. This data, according to Moran (cited in Edwards et al., 1998) is at the core of teachers’ reflective practice and the subsequent pedagogical documentation. In the introduction to the book *Loris Malaguzzi and the Schools of Reggio Emilia*, Cagliari et al. (2016) recall how Loris Malaguzzi gave teachers a sense of importance, raising the work to an intellectual level which made educators believe in its value to young citizens and society.
2.3.6.5 Image of the child

Loris Malaguzzi (1993) suggests that the educator’s image of the child is where teaching begins. He concludes that the educator’s image of the child impacts both implicitly and explicitly on their assumptions and the choices that educators make. The educator’s image of the child is influenced by historical, social, cultural, and ideological views; views which may be influenced by specific doctrines or beliefs that have been either consciously or subconsciously created (Hoyuelos, 2013). The image of the child is the primary underpinning principle of the Reggio philosophy. The child is seen through a social constructivist lens as ‘rich in potential, strong, powerful, competent, and most of all connected to adults and other children’ (Malaguzzi, cited in Edwards et al., 1998, p.274). The child is a unique individual with ‘rights rather than simply needs’ (Rinaldi, cited in Edwards et al., 1998, p.114). Malaguzzi’s image of the child is that of a child who right from the moment of birth, is actively engaged in developing a relationship with the world. To do this, he or she develops a complex system of abilities, learning strategies and ways of developing and building relationships (Rinaldi, 2006).

This image sees the child as a subject with rights who ‘know’ and who ‘can’. This child is looking for an ‘interlocutor/ resource rather than a protector or instructor’ (Malaguzzi, 1990, cited in Cagliari et al., 2016, p.383). This reimagined image of the child underpins the system of education in the infant toddler centres and preschools in Reggio Emilia. The image of the child of course is influenced by the social, cultural and political context; it is within this cultural context that certain qualities and potentials are recognised or are negated. According to Rinaldi (2006), what the society believes about children is a determining factor in defining children’s social and ethical identity, their rights and the educational context which is provided.

2.3.6.5 Relationships

Rinaldi (cited in Edwards et al., 1998, p.114) states that ‘schooling for us is a system of relationships and communications, embedded in the wider social
system’. This system occurs where the active participation of children, teachers, parents and community are considered as a right and are essential to the educational system. The system, according to Rinaldi, is so highly integrated that the wellbeing of each of the protagonists is dependent on the wellbeing of the others. The emphasis of the approach in the Reggio preschools is placed not on the individual child, but on each child in relation to other children in the group. Action and group socialization, according to Rinaldi, are the most important elements in structuring each child’s identity, where knowledge emerges in the process of self and social construction (cited in Edwards et al., 1998, p.115). Malaguzzi, (cited in Edwards et al., 1998) confirms that active learning is built on a system of relationships which come together through the expectations and skills of children, the professional competence of the adults, and in general the educational process. Malaguzzi recognised,

“The age of childhood, more than the ages that follow, is characterised by such expectations. To disappoint the children deprives them of possibilities that no exhortation can arouse in later years”. (Edwards et al., 1009, p.68)

Traditionally in schools, parents are expected to delegate responsibility to the teachers and rarely discuss choices which must be made; this is not the case in Reggio schools. The three participants of the educational programme are the child, the educator and the family. In Reggio these are considered inseparable and integrated (Edwards et al., 1998). The active participation of parents is an integral part of the educational experience (Rinaldi, 2006).

The importance of early childhood education and valuing children as citizens with rights is a societal commitment by the municipality of Reggio Emilia. This is reflected in the investment in early childhood education and care of between 16 and 18% of the gross municipality income (Reggio Children, 2014). This commitment to early childhood education represents a unique sociocultural context, which is linked to history, tradition and culture (New, cited in Edwards et al., 1998). The Municipality of Reggio Emilia invests in early childhood education as early childhood education
and care is recognised as a social responsibility and a democratic right for the city’s youngest citizens and their families.

“The years between birth and 6 must be seen as a precious resource of human potential, in which a forward-looking society must be prepared to invest responsibly”.

(Spaggiari, cited in, Edwards et al., 1998, p.99)

2.3.6.6 Critical analysis of the Reggio approach as outlined in the literature.

While there are many publications and articles written about the Reggio approach to early childhood education and care, Browne (2004) suggests that there has been a reluctance to critique the ‘Reggio approach’ due to its endorsement by highly regarded people, such as Jerome Bruner, Howard Gardner, Peter Moss, Gunilla Dahlberg and others within the field. It is relevant, Moss (2016) noted,

‘the schools of Reggio Emilia are not to be exported and copied; they are (like all education) very much of their time and place. But they show that there are alternatives, not just on paper but in reality’.


The infant toddler centres and preschools in Reggio Emilia are described by Moss (2016) as a system of publicly provided schools inscribed with values of democracy, cooperation and solidarity. These values and the system are specific to the cultural context and societal values of the Emilia Romagna region of Italy. The approach to early childhood education and care in Reggio Emilia, Italy is not a curriculum, it is a philosophy, therefore ECEC educators cannot ‘do Reggio’ they can be inspired by the approach and implement some, or all of the philosophies in their own cultural context. As Edwards et al. (1998, p.13) confirm, the Reggio philosophy ‘can never be transplanted wholesale from one cultural context to another without extensive change and adaptation’. Therefore, the only Reggio schools are the schools in Reggio Emilia Italy. However, the Reggio approach to ECEC has inspired numerous early childhood educators across the globe and they have been inspired by the philosophies of the Reggio approach when setting up Reggio ‘inspired’ schools. As Rinaldi, cited in Moss and
Petrie, (2005, p.9) suggests, “We do not offer a recipe, nor is it a method, our work not to be copied, because values can only be lived not copied”.

The underpinning philosophy of the infant toddler centres and preschools of Reggio Emilia are not new or different from the philosophies that have influenced and still influences early years practice in many countries. What is different or new according to, Papatheodorou (2006) is how this philosophy has been interpreted and articulated into a coherent pedagogical praxis. Behind the exploratory and investigative nature of learning in the Reggio Emilia preschools, there is Papatheodorou (2006) suggests a strong didactic approach underpinned by a relational pedagogy.

Papatheodorou (2006) suggests that the pedagogues, as they are referred to in the Reggio preschools strongly assert that the approach is not a didactic approach. Projects which are a significant element of this pedagogical approach are primarily identified by the pedagogues based on their observation and pedagogical documentation. It is Papatheodorou (2006) suggests the pedagogues together, who firstly agree on a project to work on with the children. Therefore, according to Papatheodorou (2006) the didactics of potential projects are firstly worked out by the pedagogues through careful planning and reflection on the documentation of previous projects undertaken, by and with the children. This all happens before children are given the opportunity to explore potential projects themselves. This criticism references adults making decisions without children’s input and identifies the educators as guiding and manipulating the programme with preconceived outcomes or resulting projects. Papatheodorou (2006) also questions, how children are selected to engage with different projects which continue over a long period of time. The prolonged engagement of children in projects she suggests questions children’s right to decide to participate in a project and questions how children can remove their assent to continued participation. The focus on art and creativity as opposed to physical activity, outdoor play and risky play and the absence of clear pathways to support school readiness is a concern for educators who have studied and explored the Reggio approach (Browne, 2004).
Educators have identified challenges such as loss of control, the lack of a curriculum to guide planning and clear inclusion and diversity strategies (Papatheodorou, 2006). Browne (2004) suggests that there is a gap between theory and practice, where the theory which underpins the approach does not adequately deal with gender issues and the concept of gender equality.

Another significant criticism of the Reggio approach by Thomsen (2013) is that in the majority of public and private preschools in the US, there are limited funds and the expectations and focus are on outcomes and results, such as school readiness as opposed to the process of learning. Thomsen (2013) suggests that, Reggio schools and Reggio inspired schools are found in wealthy countries and are attended by children from wealthy families. The demand in Reggio schools for space, a rich environment and art supplies she suggests, are accessible in affluent areas however they are not accessible to most public and private preschool providers.

Furthermore, Johnson (1999) makes explicit the power inequities that he believes exist in the structures which transmit knowledge about children and curricula to those working directly with children. Johnson (1999) suggests that access to training and information about the approach is limited and elitist, due to the cost implications of travelling to Italy and attending conferences or events. The promotion of the approach he suggests has been largely by professional academics, which elevates its status. Wright (2000) in his response to Johnson (1999) also highlights his concern in relation to the approach in Reggio schools to pedagogical documentation which, he suggests may be interpreted as an extensive surveillance of children.

2.3.6.7 Summary:

The Reggio approach to early childhood education was conceived as a result of oppression of the citizens of the city of Reggio Emilia after the Second World War. Women wanted a better and different life for their children, and they believed that this could only happen, through investment in an educational system, not a traditional pedagogy, but one which would be based on principles of democracy and rights. From the outset the principles
of the Reggio approach in Reggio Emilia Italy were based on education being considered as a right and a societal responsibility for the growth and emancipation of the individual and the collective (Rinaldi, 2006). The infant toddler centres and preschools in Reggio Emilia are meeting places, the hub of the community, where educators together with children, their families and the wider community grow and learn together. ECEC provision is not seen as a service to support parents to access work or training, the focus in the preschool in Reggio is on the child and the child’s right to quality ECEC experiences. This right to quality ECEC experiences permeates to the children’s right to beautiful aesthetically pleasing learning environments. Children have a right to access highly qualified educators who are valued and respected. These rights include, educators working in active partnership with parents in spaces and places where the competent, confident child with rights has voice, agency and autonomy to express her/his ‘hundred languages’.

The high level of investment in ECEC in the city of Reggio Emilia reflects the societal value placed on quality ECEC provision. The Reggio approach has inspired ECEC providers across the world who seek to apply the underpinning principles in their own cultural context. However as outlined in Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) Bioecological Model of Human Development, there are many influences from a macro to a micro level, starting with the political landscape, culture and history which impact on the approach to ECEC provision. Therefore, the Reggio approach cannot be copied, the values and principles of the approach may be used to inspire educators in their own cultural context, to reflect on quality ECEC provision. James and Prout (1997) portray an image of the child as a competent child with agency, this image of the child underpins the educational philosophy of the Reggio approach. The image of the competent child has brought about a shift in thinking about how children learn and the most effective teaching and learning approaches. Literature in relation to a traditional pedagogical approach known as the industrial model and education for 21st century skills will be presented now.
2.3.6.7 The Industrial / factory model of education:

An industrial era educational system has served most learners well for much of the 20th century by providing core knowledge and basic skills to millions, (Andrews et al., 2015). This inherited education system is according to Andrews et al (2015) based on a standardized, “factory” model which was designed in a different era and structured for a different society. The function of education in this industrial era according to Katz (1971, p.9) was to provide ‘a vehicle for the efforts of one class to civilize another and, thereby ensure that society would remain tolerable, orderly, and safe’. There was an emphasis on rules and order, which it was hoped would “invest the poor with the values of compliance, punctuality, cleanliness, and knowing one’s place in society” (Cuban, 1972, p.8). The primary function of education was according to Leland and Kasten (2002) to prepare young people for factory jobs, which did not require any independent thinking, but did require the young person to undertake simple repetitive tasks. The education system was responsible to prepare young people for ‘cog’ jobs which required that they “had to be trained to comprehend and accept instructions, and then to implement them conscientiously. Under this model, discipline and reliability were the core virtues” (Reich, 1989, p.97).

Taking this industrial or factory model of education Kliebard (1971) suggests that schools were like factories where the raw products (the children) were shaped and fashioned into products to meet the various demands of life. Within this educational model pupils were, “drilled until skilled” (Fosnot, 1989, p.5) and students were passive recipients in the learning process (Reich, 1989, p.100). Learning was in large groups and universal, not individualised and as Fosnot (1989, P.5) suggests, an empowered learner in this model was “both unwanted and dangerous”.

The industrial model according to Leland and Kasten (2002) also fosters a spirit of competition similar to a business model, children soon learn that there is more to be gained from working alone than from sharing ideas. They also learn that rather than being intrinsically motivated to learn there is a focus on extrinsic motivation and rewards. There is a movement away from this relatively simplistic input/output factory model. A growing body
of research suggests that models of education designed to meet the needs of the industrial past are inadequate for the myriad of challenges and opportunities facing 21st century students (Alberta Education, 2010; Barron & Darling-Hammond, 2008; Friesen & Jardine, 2009; Perkins, 2014). New educational environments require different ways of designing learning experiences for students as well as new approaches to teaching and assessment. The call for educational reform away from, passive transmission-based learning and the imparting of discrete skills and processes is not new. Institutions of education around the world are reconsidering some of their most deeply held assumptions about how they conceptualise learning and to what end, education should be directed (Friesen and Scott, 2013).

2.3.6.8 Education for 21st Century Skills:

Increasingly over the last number of years educational discourse has centred on the importance of pedagogical approaches to teaching and learning across the lifelong learning spectrum, (starting in early childhood), which support the development of ‘twenty-first century skills’ (Tan, 2016). These skills, it is suggested aim to prepare students to meet the challenges and demands of contemporary society (e.g. Binkley et al., 2012; European Parliament & the Council of the European Union, 2007; National Research Council, 2012; Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2009a, 2009b; Tan, 2016; Trilling & Fadel, 2009). The World Economic Forum, *New Vision for Education (2015)* suggests that, there is an increasing gap between the skills people learn in the education system and the skills that are required for success. This they suggest is due to traditional teaching and learning approaches which are failing to equip students with the knowledge they need, to thrive.

The new vision for education (2015) considers 21st Century Skills under three headings, foundational literacy, which addresses how students apply core skills in literacy and numeracy. The second area discussed, are the competencies which students develop to support them when faced with complex and challenging tasks. This includes the student’s ability to think
critically, their problem-solving abilities, levels of creativity, communication and ability to collaborate. The third area for consideration, are the character qualities which The World Economic Forum (2015) suggest are required for individuals to thrive. These character qualities include the skills that students use in a changing environment. They include the student’s level of curiosity, their initiative, persistence, adaptability, leadership and their social and emotional awareness.

In the Partnership for twenty-first Century framework (Trilling & Fadel, 2009, p.21) twenty first century skills are identified as the four ‘C’s. The four ‘C’s include critical thinking, communication, collaboration and creativity. Preschools and early years services where the pedagogical approach is autonomy supportive and offers opportunities to support children’s curiosities, critical thinking, communication, collaboration and creativity (Ryan and Deci, 2017) support the development of these identified 21st century skills. For these skills to be supported, the quality indicators, such as the quality of the active learning environment and the quality of the relationships must be high. This is evidenced, when children have high levels of hedonic and eudemonic wellbeing and high levels of involvement (Laevers, 2017). The pedagogical approach which is known to support the development of these 21st century skills is an autonomy supportive pedagogical approach (Bruner, 1996, Gray, 2015, Singer, 2013).

The learning strategies identified by the World Economic Forum (2016, p.8) which support development of 21st Century skills, include, ensuring that students have a safe nurturing learning environment, with high quality interactions and relationships. Within this learning environment the report recommends that there is ‘open-ended time to play freely and creatively’. The (2016) report offers an example of what Play–based learning looks like in practice. The World Economic Forum report (2016, p, 8) confirms that, ‘play-based learning provides unscheduled time to explore without restrictions, rules or pressure,’ these are they suggest a central component of a creative and active learning process. When considering optimal teaching strategies, the World Economic Forum (2016) report suggests that project
and inquiry-based learning, supports children to learn to think critically and problem solve.

2.4 Pedagogy and Quality

Melhuish (2015) suggests that the basic characteristics of quality which support young children’s learning and development are primarily the quality of the relationships and the interactions between the educator and children and the pedagogical practices or the quality of the teaching. This section reviews the literature relating to quality ECEC provision relevant to this study. As identified in Chapter 1, quality ECEC experiences lead to quality outcomes for young children. Equally poor quality ECEC experiences can have a negative impact on young children, with long term effects (Penn, 2009; Melhuish, 2015). There are many contributions which outline the essential elements of quality preschool provision.

*The key principles of a Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care* (European Commission, 2014) identify that a key element of quality ECEC provision is the presence of a curriculum which is based on pedagogical goals, values and approaches. These goals and values should enable children to reach their full potential in a holistic way. Studies in the US found higher measurable outcomes in language and academic skills of preschool children were related to the quality of instruction as well as the time spent in specific instructional activities (Howes et al., 2003). Similarly, the pedagogical approach was identified by Montie et al. (2006) as being correlated with higher language scores in seven-year olds who had attended preschool. This they suggest was a result of the pedagogical approach in preschools where children spend less time in whole group activities and where educators allowed children opportunities to choose their own activities. This was compared to preschools where personal care and a focus on large group activities predominated (Montie et al., 2006).

Reynolds et al. (2010) suggest that the type of instruction is linked to children’s early learning. They make a distinction between child-centred instruction, where activities are child initiated, children engage in problem solving and inquiry-based learning occurs as opposed to didactic instruction.
Didactic instruction is where the teaching is teacher directed, tasks are planned and focus on acquiring and practicing academic skills with an emphasis on literacy and numeracy. Learning in this teacher-led didactic environment is through repetition and practice to achieve mastery and competence (Pianta et al., 1997). Bruner (1996) suggests that both approaches are based on the educator’s image of the child as a learner. When educators choose a didactic or teacher-led approach the child is seen as a tabula rasa or empty vessel waiting to be filled by transmitting knowledge from the knowledgeable adult. In a child-centred approach, the child is seen as competent and trusted to explore, think and make meaning. It is important to reflect on the type of approach taken as it has been identified that the key determinants of children’s successful learning outcomes are the pedagogical relationships and the practices of educators (Winter, 2003; Laevers and Heylen, 2004; Bennett, 2005; State of South Australia, Department of Education and Children’s Services, 2008).

The pedagogical relationships and the pedagogical practice or the active learning environment referred to in Reflect Respect Relate Observation Scales (State of South Australia, Department of Education and Children’s Services, 2008) have been identified as indicators of quality early childhood education and care provision. Stipek et al. (2017) also confirm the importance of the social learning environment. Learning environments where teachers are caring, respectful, listen to children and show concern for their wellbeing are associated with more engagement and better learning outcomes than a negative social climate (Stipek et al., 2017). It is therefore important to define quality provision in early childhood education and care and explore the impact of the pedagogical approach on quality provision with subsequent impact on young children’s wellbeing and involvement in their learning processes.

2.4.1 The Importance of Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Provision

Accessible, high quality early childhood education and care provision which empowers individuals to have successful lives is a priority for Member States of the European Union European Commission (2014). This relatively
recent focus at a European policy level recognises that for early childhood education and care to be effective it must be of high quality (Eurydice, 2009; European Commission, 2011; Lindeboom and Buiskool, 2013). The heightened interest in the quality as opposed to the provision of early childhood education and care is primarily due to the growing number of children spending increased time daily in ECEC services (OECD, 2015; Janta et al., 2016). While ‘The age of quality is upon us’, there is recognition that ‘quality’ in the context of early childhood education and care is not a neutral word. It is a socially constructed concept, with meanings being produced through what is referred to as ‘the discourse of quality’ (Dahlberg et al., 2013, p.92).

This discourse of quality referred to by Dahlberg et al. (2013) in early childhood education and care is complex and often contradictory (Penn, 2009). However, there is increased recognition that quality, early childhood education and care provides the foundation for young children’s learning. Quality ECEC supports the development of young children’s cognitive and non-cognitive skills which are significant to their future success (Litjens and Taguma, 2010). Neurobiological research by Knudsen et al. (2006) highlights the importance of the quality of early childhood experiences and interactions on children’s brain and behavioural development at a crucial time, when development occurs at its most rapid pace (Shonkoff and Philips, 2000; Harrison and Ungerer, 2005). Longitudinal research by Sylva et al. (2014) identifies the long-term benefits that quality early childhood education and care provide into adolescence and beyond.

“The first years of life lay the foundations for an individual’s future skills development and learning. Investments in high-quality ECEC pay dividends in terms of children’s long-term learning and development”.

(OECD, 2017, p.5)

Melhuish et al. (2015) posit that high quality ECEC benefits children’s cognitive, language and social development, in both the short and long term. Equally low-quality childcare can produce a dual risk for children from low income families, which may result in deficits in language and cognitive
development (Melhuish et al., 2015). Recent research by Heckman, *The Lifecycle Benefits of an Influential Early Childhood Program*,

“...shows that high quality birth-to-five programs for disadvantaged children can deliver a 13% per year return on investment realised through better outcomes in education, health, social behaviours and employment”.

(Heckman, cited in Garcia et al., 2016, p.54)

Longitudinal research conducted by Lowenstein (2011) also demonstrates that the benefits from quality ECEC experiences cannot transform children’s lives without additional educational and social supports. They suggest that the benefits can only accrue for children in early childhood education and care settings when the provision is of high quality, specifically process quality, such as relationships, interactions, the active learning environment and the curriculum.

2.4.2 Defining Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care

“Quality in early childhood services is a constructed concept, subjective in nature and based on values, beliefs and interest, rather than an objective and universal reality; quality childcare is, to a large extent, in the eye of the beholder”. (Moss and Pence, 1994, p.72)

While it is difficult to define quality, there is general agreement regarding the elements in early childhood education and care which are necessary to ensure positive outcomes for children. French (2003) suggests that quality cannot be viewed as just one standard of excellence which is identified for all children in all services. Quality is instead a set of core requirements or criteria which the service provider can work towards and measure their progress against. The OECD (2001) *Start Strong* report identifies the elements required for quality early childhood education and care provision. These include from a macro perspective; adequate investment, a coordinated policy and regulatory framework, an efficient and coordinated management system, staff qualifications and professionalisation. At the practice level, the policy structures identified as essential components of quality ECEC provision include the implementation of a pedagogical framework, inclusive practice and regular systems of monitoring and evaluation. These indicators
are the external macro, or policy elements, which are recognised as influencing quality provision in early childhood education and care settings.

At a micro level in practice, measures have been identified which help to produce and assure high quality. Melhuish (2015) identifies two quality indicators: structural indicators of quality and process indicators of quality. However, according to Sylva (2010) there are three indicators of quality; structure quality, process quality and outcome quality (Sylva, 2010; Dahlberg et al., 2013). Sylva (2010) suggests that measuring the outcomes of quality early childhood education and care provision on children’s development is complex and requires longitudinal research. To measure the quality of the ECEC provision, Sylva (2010) suggests one should consider the three quality indicators, structural, process and outcome quality.

2.4.2.1 Structural Quality

Structural quality refers to the quantifiable measurable components of quality. It looks at how the ECEC setting is designed and organised in relation to the rules and regulations or accreditation system (European Commission, 2014). Structural quality reflects the physical environment which is in place to meet health and safety requirements such as the adult to child ratios, group size, the space requirements and materials.

2.4.2.1.1 The Key Structural Indicators of Quality

The key structural indicators of quality identified by the European Commission (2014) most applicable to this research will now be outlined. The complete list is available in Appendix A. The European Commission (2014) suggest that ECEC provision should be a free universal provision rather than a targeted provision. This recommendation takes cognisance of young children’s right to education and places preschool or ECEC provision within the realm of the education system as the initial first step on the education journey. The recommendations outline that at least half of the staff working in ECEC or preschool should hold a bachelors’ level degree to ensure a stable learning environment for young children and support secure attachments. The suggestion also includes that the pay and working
conditions of staff should be equivalent to primary school teachers, and the preschool curriculum should include a broad national framework which complements local cultural and social contexts (European Commission, 2014). The importance of regular monitoring and evaluation of the provision is also highlighted. It is also recommended that appropriate tools to support this quality monitoring and evaluation at local, regional and central levels should be developed.

2.4.2.2 Process Quality

Process quality refers to the qualitative aspects of early childhood education and care these are the aspects of quality which are difficult to measure. The process quality elements refer to the daily practice in the setting. The relationship and interactions between the educator and the children, the child to child interactions, relationships with parents and the active learning environment are all considered to be indicators of process quality. The active learning environment which includes the pedagogical approach to teaching and learning and the role of play within the curriculum are also indicators of process quality (Dahlberg et al., 2013; European Commission, 2014; Melhuish, 2015).

‘Relationships are the ‘active ingredients’ of an environment’s influence on healthy development; they incorporate the qualities that best promote wellbeing’ (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004). The Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years (REPEY) study determined that a key ingredient of high process quality was the extent to which early childhood educators engaged in sustained shared thinking (SST) together with children. When sustained shared thinking occurs, children have opportunities to choose to play freely, thus offering educators opportunities to provoke and extend children’s thinking (Siraj- Blatchford et al., 2002). In developing the key principles of a quality framework for early childhood education and care, the European Commission (2014) working group guided the underpinning values and principles of the proposed Quality Framework. They identified several process elements of quality
which are required to support quality provision. The list is available in Appendix A.

2.4.2.2.1 Process Quality Indicators

The European Commission (2014) suggest that a core element of quality is the pedagogical approach. This they suggest should include a balance of both care and education, referred to by Hayes (2013) as a ‘nurturing pedagogy’. Essential to the provision of quality, the European Commission suggest, is a qualified workforce who have access to ongoing professional development, reflective and innovative practices. The importance of leadership and a clear value and belief system is also essential, they suggest, when discussing process quality. Positive adult to child relationships are identified as key to promoting children’s emotional wellbeing. Equally, responsive adults who encourage active engagement, sustain children’s curiosity and participation in their learning processes are essential in the provision of quality ECEC experiences for children. The curriculum should combine both staff and child-initiated activities to sustain and support children’s engagement.

The European Commission further outlines, that for high levels of process quality, the curriculum should ensure that children have choice and autonomy in their decision making. The curriculum should be inclusive, and child centred, as opposed to formalised learning, which they suggest does not meet children’s developmental potential. All learning should emerge from the child’s own interests, supported by the adult and a variety of materials should be provided to support these interests. It is recommended that the curriculum should combine staff-initiated and child-initiated activities to sustain children’s active engagement in the learning process. The importance of working collaboratively and in partnership with parents and communities is also recommended to support high quality process quality. Finally, the EU Commission (2014) highlight the importance of using pedagogical documentation to give visibility to children’s learning in the ECEC setting as another essential component of process quality (European Commission, 2014).
2.4.2.3.2 Outcome Quality

The discourse of quality has influenced early education research for many years, resulting in studies which clearly identify the importance and value of quality early childhood education and care provision upon children’s development. The greatest impact, Melhuish (2015) suggests, is for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. The evidence provided by Melhuish (2015) highlights that for children who are not disadvantaged in their home environment, high quality ECEC benefits their cognitive, language and social development. However, low-quality childcare can produce a dual risk for children from low-income families, leading to possible deficits in cognitive or language development (Melhuish, 2015). Low levels of quality provision in early childhood education and care have been identified in the US as a cause of concern.

Haskins and Barnett (2010) suggest that some of the government funded preschool programmes in the US, such as Head Start programmes, funded childcare centres and state funded prekindergarten are offering services which are of ‘mediocre or worse’ quality. They suggested that greater benefits could be gained by improving the quality of the services which would result in better outcomes for the children attending. Studies by Melhuish (2011) and Reynolds et al. (2010) suggest that the quality of the preschool provision is critical for long and short-term outcomes. Studies from the US and the UK, as identified above, indicate that it is the quality of the provision that is important and that only high-quality preschool provision has long term benefits for young children’s holistic development. While the research shows that ECEC for children at risk can contribute to combating educational disadvantage, Leseman (2009) confirms that this can only occur if certain circumstances are met such as the design of the ECEC programme, the pedagogy and the curriculum.

There have been several indicators identified for both, structural and process quality in ECEC settings. There are several tools developed which have been, used to assess quality provision in ECEC settings. The most well know and widely used example from the US is the Early Childhood
Environmental Rating Scale (ECERS) (Harms and Clifford, 1980) and ECERS-R, (Harms, Clifford and Cryer, 1998). The discourse of quality has also resulted in the development of standards and good practice tools such as ECERS-E which was developed in the UK by Sylva et al. (2004). This observation scale assesses four subscales of Quality: Literacy, Mathematics, Science and Environment, and Diversity. Subsequently, standards have been developed in many countries to measure the quality of provision in ECEC settings.

*Siolta*, The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education was developed in Ireland by the CECDE (2006). In Boston, the quality of the ECEC provision is guided by the Massachusetts Government, Early Childhood Education Standards and Curriculum Guidelines. One of the best-known programs in the United States is the Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programme (Bredekamp, 1987). The discourse of quality in ECEC has resulted in a search for objective, rational and universal standards which, according to Dahlberg et al. (2013), prioritises the ‘how’ of quality rather than the ‘why’. However, Dahlberg et al. (2013) also suggest that the discussion and measurement of quality rarely seeks to answer the important questions about children or their experiences in early childhood education and care settings.

The use of *Reflect Respect Relate Observation Scales* (State of South Australia Department of Education and Children’s Services, 2008) provides an independent tool to measure the three quality indicators: structural, process and outcomes of quality. The quality of the active learning environment measures both, structural and process quality indicators, by assessing the pedagogical approach. The structural elements of quality such as the physical environment and the materials in the environment which support learning are also measured when evaluating the active learning environment. The relationships indicators measure the process quality in the preschool settings, while children’s levels of wellbeing and involvement provide evidence of quality outcomes which are as a direct result of the structural and process indicators.
To conclude, research has demonstrated that the benefits of early childhood education and care for young children is dependent upon the quality of the experiences and opportunities offered to them (Sylva et al., 2004; OECD, 2012). These learning experiences are enhanced when the practice or the Pedagogy (the art, the science or the craft of teaching), in the early childhood education and care setting is wide enough to include the provision of learning environments for play and exploration (Sylva et al., 2004). The literature shows clearly that good pedagogical interactions are a key dimension and an essential aspect of child wellbeing and development (OECD, 2015).

2.5 Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to review the literature from academia and other research sources relevant to this study. This chapter is the first chapter of two chapters which review the literature pertinent to this study. Firstly, in section 2.2, the literature relating to the changing discourse and image of children and childhood was presented. The literature review provided an overview of the shift from the historical image of the child to seeing the child from a rights-based perspective. Children’s right to education under the UNCRC (1989) was the catalyst to examine the literature relating to pedagogy in section 2.3. The literature pertaining to the three pedagogical approaches, Montessori, Play-based and Reggio inspired was reviewed and critiqued in this section. This was followed by a brief overview of the industrial model and 21st century skills approach to education. Section 2.4 provided a review of the literature defining and exploring the constituents of quality ECEC provision. The literature relating to how pedagogy influences the quality of young children’s early childhood preschool experiences was reviewed in section 2.4. This concludes the chapter.

At the end of chapter 3, a synthesis of learning from the two literature review chapters will provide the underpinning theoretic and tentative conceptual framework for this study.
Chapter 3: Understanding Wellbeing, Involvement, Self-Determination theory and Bioecological theory in ECEC Settings

3.1 Introduction

Chapter 2 explored literature on the image of the child, pedagogy and quality. This chapter will add to that review by focusing on children’s wellbeing and involvement, Self-Determination Theory and Bioecological theory. While investment in ECEC provision in Ireland is the lowest in Europe (Appendix A, 1) (OECD, 2017), there is a policy commitment in Ireland to improve the quality of ECEC provision (Government of Ireland, 2018; Social Justice Ireland, 2019). Laevers (2017) suggests that while it is important to measure the structural and process elements of quality provision, it is equally important to measure what it feels like to be a child in an ECEC setting. The level of children’s wellbeing and involvement, Laevers (2017) suggests, will confirm if the quality of the provision is effective.

With increasing numbers of children accessing preschool provision in Ireland it is critical to explore what effective ECEC provision looks like. Taking Laevers (2017) suggestion, it is therefore important to explore the literature pertaining to wellbeing. When preschool children enjoy what they are doing, Sandseter and Seland (2015) suggest they exhibit signs of happiness and subsequent increased levels of subjective wellbeing. Laevers (2017) posits that when children’s levels of wellbeing are increased their exploratory drive and curiosity are ignited and they are intrinsically motivated to learn. Learning environments which support children’s active participation in their learning, which Laevers (2012) and Csikszentmihalyi (1979) suggests, occurs particularly in play and allows for deep level learning to occur. This deep level learning or involvement nurtures and develops children’s curiosity and imagination, critical thinking, problem solving and entrepreneurial skills which have been described by Wagner (2008) as 21st century skills and are outlined in chapter 2.
Ryan and Deci (2000) confirm that for high levels of motivation, development and wellbeing to occur, there are several social and cultural conditions which must be present. These conditions include the individual’s basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness. When these needs are supported in the learning environment, Ryan and Deci (2000) posit that high levels of intrinsic motivation, wellbeing and involvement are present. To ensure a deeper understanding of the influences which impact on young children’s development and learning in an early years setting, a review of the literature of Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) Bioecological Theory with a particular emphasis on the dynamic, bidirectional relationships or the proximal processes which impact on the quality of care and children’s subsequent wellbeing and involvement will be reviewed.

To further explore and understand the influence of wellbeing, involvement, self-determination theory and bioecological theory, this chapter will review the relevant literature as applicable to preschool provision. Section 3.2 will provide an overview of the literature which will be explored on wellbeing. This will be followed by Section 3.3, which will review the literature on involvement and children’s deep learning. Section 3.4 will present the literature on Self-Determination Theory. Section 3.5 will review the literature pertaining to Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) Bioecological Development Theory and Section 3.6 will look at integrating the theory into a tentative conceptual model.

3.2 Defining Wellbeing

“The concept of wellbeing comprises two main elements: feeling good and functioning well. Feelings of happiness, contentment, enjoyment, curiosity and engagement are characteristic of someone who has a positive experience of their life. Equally important for wellbeing is our functioning in the world. Experiencing positive relationships, having some control over one’s life and having a sense of purpose are all important attributes of Wellbeing”.

(Aked et al., 2008, pp.1-2)

The earliest conceptual definition of mental health or positive functioning is usually attributed to Jahoda (1958, p.23) who identified six key elements of mental health. The key elements identified include ‘attitudes of an
individual toward his own self’, ‘self-actualization’, ‘integration’, ‘autonomy’, ‘perception of reality’ and ‘environmental mastery’. The World Health Organisation (WHO) went on to define health in general as ‘a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity’ (WHO, 1978, p.1). Since then, the concept of wellbeing has evolved to describe the quality of people’s lives (Rees, Bradshaw, Goswami, and Keung, 2010). It is suggested that wellbeing is about how people feel about themselves, how they function as an individual and at a social level and how people evaluate their lives (Michaelson et al, 2012). White (2009) argues that wellbeing is socially and culturally constructed, it is not a state of being and does not belong to individuals, rather, it is a process that occurs in relationships. These relationships are, ‘between the collective and the individual, the local and the global, the people and the state’ (White, 2009, p.11). This state of wellbeing she suggests occurs in and through people’s relationships with others.

There are many definitions of wellbeing. Michaelson et al., (2009) describes wellbeing from two perspectives. The first perspective; personal wellbeing is a description of people’s experiences of their positive and negative emotions. This includes their satisfaction, vitality, resilience, self-esteem, sense of purpose and meaning, which makes them feel competent and autonomous. The second perspective, social wellbeing, they suggest is made up of two main elements, these are, supportive relationships and connection with others, trust and belonging. Both elements they suggest are critical elements for overall wellbeing (Michaelson et al, 2009). Ben-Arie et al. (2014) describes wellbeing as a highly complex and multi-faceted concept situated in contexts and relationships. It involves, Ben-Arie et al. (2014) suggests how people feel and function personally and in society and the value they give to their life.

To experience wellbeing Ryan and Deci (2017) suggest that the individual’s three basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness need to be fulfilled. This will occur according to Ryff (1989) where the individual experiences positive relationships, has mastery over the environment and their lives, has opportunities for personal growth, a clear
purpose in life and self-acceptance. Laevers (2013) in keeping with Maslow’s (1954) hierarchy of need required for self-actualisation argues that high levels of emotional wellbeing are present when children’s basic needs are satisfied. These needs, Laevers (2013) suggests, include physical needs, the need for tenderness and affection, the need for safety and clarity and the need for social recognition. This is most likely to occur, Laevers (2013) suggests, when the child has self-confidence, self-esteem, assertiveness and resilience and is well in touch with his/her own feelings. In essence, Laevers (2013) suggests that wellbeing is a psychological state.

3.2.1 The Philosophies of Wellbeing

Wellbeing has been derived from two distinct philosophies, hedonia and eudaimonia. The hedonic approach contends that wellbeing evolves around happiness and defines wellbeing in terms of pleasure attainment and pain avoidance. The eudemonic approach focuses on meaning and self-realization. It conveys a belief that wellbeing ‘consists of fulfilling or realizing one’s true nature’ and defines wellbeing in terms of the degree to which a person is fully functioning (Ryan and Deci, 2001, p.143).

3.2.1.1 Hedonia and Subjective Wellbeing

Subjective wellbeing is defined by Deci and Ryan (2008) as a high level of positive affect, a low level of negative affect, and a high degree of satisfaction with one’s life. In subjective wellbeing, individuals measure their own level of positive or negative affect and the degree of satisfaction with their life. Research on subjective wellbeing focuses on the influences which affect subjective wellbeing such as personal factors, social-environmental factors, cultural factors and assessment. Kahneman et al. (1999, p. 1908) were one of the first to link wellbeing to the hedonistic approach, or to happiness, they defined hedonic psychology as the study of, ‘what makes experiences and life pleasant and unpleasant’. Wellbeing has frequently been referred to as measuring ‘happiness’. Therefore, individuals with high levels of wellbeing have been viewed as having high levels of happiness (Deci and Ryan, 2008).
A study conducted by Sandseter and Seland (2015) on four to six-year-old children’s experiences of activities, participation in their preschool learning and their subjective wellbeing in Norwegian preschools, highlights the correlation between children liking something and wellbeing levels. The study confirms that when children like or enjoy what they are doing, they are happy and have as a result higher levels of subjective wellbeing. The findings are interesting particularly in relation to this study as they demonstrate that children’s levels of subjective wellbeing or levels of happiness are correlated with children’s autonomy, opportunities to choose and access activities freely. This is seen in practice in the early childhood education and care settings when children are free to choose the play environments such as the construction area or the home corner, and to choose their play friends. Children are happy and have higher levels of wellbeing when they have autonomy to choose in an environment where there is mutual dialogue and negotiation. Lower levels of subjective wellbeing were associated with lack of choice in decision making, where there is little time for free play and environments which are adult directed. The findings reveal that 9% of children identified that they did not like circle time and 70% of children stating that they do not have choice NOT to participate in circle time (Sandseter and Seland, 2015).

These findings suggest that the level of these children’s subjective wellbeing or happiness was low, because they did not like or were not happy with the position they were placed in when they did not have personal power or choice. Sandseter and Seland (2015) also highlight the impact on young children’s subjective wellbeing when they do not have freedom of choice to engage, or not to engage in a structured teacher-led activity which is guided by specific rules, content and behaviour. This is in keeping with Ryan and Deci’s (2017) argument for wellbeing and flourishing to occur. Ryan and Deci (2017) confirm the theory that, the basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness must be met, otherwise the individual falls into a passive mode of functioning, rather than an active, curious, engaged participant.
3.2.1.2 Eudaimonia and Full Functioning

Subjective wellbeing is not the only way to consider or think of wellbeing. A second view considers wellbeing meaning more than just happiness, as being happy does not necessarily mean that the individual is psychologically well. Waterman (1993) suggests that this second perspective of wellbeing known as eudaimonia is based on living well and/or self-actualisation and being fully functional. Waterman suggests that, if a person experiences eudemonic living he or she will also experience hedonic enjoyment, thereby suggesting if an individual is self-fulfilled or reaches self-actualisation, he or she will be happy. A model to measure psychological wellbeing developed by Ryff (1989) identifies six key components of wellbeing. These include self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life and personal growth. Ryff (1989) confirms that all the six components are necessary for eudemonic wellbeing.

This model developed by Ryff (1989) was originally formulated to challenge the prevailing hedonistic view of wellbeing within psychology where wellbeing is seen as more than just being happy. The two approaches to considering wellbeing, hedonism and eudemonism, are founded on different views of human nature and there is considerable overlap. The hedonic approach utilises the standard social science model, which considers the human organism to be relatively empty and therefore malleable. As a result, it gains meaning in accord with social and cultural teachings and society in general (Tooby and Cosmides, 1992). In contrast, the eudemonic approach focuses on meaning and purpose of life and self-realization, it defines wellbeing in terms of the degree that a person is fully functioning (Ryan and Deci, 2001). Laevers (2017) concurs that high levels of subjective wellbeing together with the child’s exploratory drive, result in high levels of involvement. When children have choice autonomy and relatedness, Deci and Ryan (2017) suggest that this is correlated with high levels of flourishing or eudemonic wellbeing.
3.2.1.3 Accrued Wellbeing

Gillett-Swan and Sargent (2015) taking a life course approach to wellbeing suggest that while individuals are experiencing fluctuating levels of subjective wellbeing throughout their lives, they are also accruing wellbeing which remains with them until death. They describe accrued wellbeing as.

“An individual’s capacity to manage over time, the range of inputs, both constructive and undesirable that can, in isolation, affect a person’s emotional, physical and cognitive state in response to a given context”.

(Gillett-Swan and Sargent, 2015, p.143)

The recognition of wellbeing accrual across the lifespan is important when considering services which are provided to children and families, particularly in early childhood. When taking a life course view of wellbeing it is imperative that young children’s wellbeing is prioritised in the early years. Gillett-Swan and Sargent (2015) suggest.

“Accrued wellbeing represents a primary state of wellbeing that influences how the individual responds to and experiences a range of inputs or stimuli and indeed recovers from experiences of low subjective wellbeing”.

(Gillett-Swan and Sargent, 2015, p.144).

Accrued wellbeing occurs because of wellbeing ‘inputs’ such as physical, social, environmental, economic, cognitive and psychological inputs. Each of these inputs through the life course influences the accrued wellbeing of the individual (Gillett-Swan and Sargent, 2015). White (2007) acknowledges that wellbeing is not a fixed concept confirming that accrued wellbeing is an enabler, a state of readiness and a capacity builder. Accrued wellbeing is grounded in early childhood, where young children learn coping skills, solve problems, learn to resolve conflicts, manage and control their behaviour, develop autonomy and become resilient through their daily lived experiences. Resilience is a key life skill which transfers into adulthood. It is, according to Gillett-Swan and Sargent (2015), both a contributor and result of wellbeing accrual. High levels of wellbeing developed throughout childhood assists children to recognise the accrual process as a protective strategy, enabling them to experience a more optimistic and resilient childhood and life course journey (Sargent, 2008).
Confirming the above, Fattore et al. (2007) agree that the process of wellbeing accrual is particularly relevant in childhood as the child’s resilience is being formulated through their experiences. This accrual of wellbeing, he suggests, enables competence, recognition, autonomy, personal power (not powerlessness), and purposefulness in addition to the development of physical, emotional, and social skills (Fattore et al., 2007).

3.2.2 Children’s Psychological, Social and Emotional Wellbeing

Linley and Joseph (2004) suggest that psychological wellbeing refers to any positive state that contains mental, psychological and emotional aspects of an individual’s life resulting in human flourishing and thriving. It refers to people’s psychological performance, life satisfaction and the ability to develop and maintain positive interpersonal relationships. Psychological wellbeing, they confirm, occurs in tandem with individuals also having the ability of experiencing autonomy, self-acceptance and personal growth (Linley and Joseph, 2004). Psychological wellbeing has been correlated with factors such as self-esteem, self-concept and self-confidence (Abed et al., 2016). When the individual, has high levels of psychological wellbeing, they experience, ‘a sense of agency, autonomy, competence, self-esteem, belonging, connectedness social responsibility and the feeling of being valued’ (Hännikäinen et al., 2015, p.753). Laevers (2012, p.6) states that children in a state of wellbeing feel like ‘fish in water’, he suggests that the prevailing mood in their lives is pleasure. Children in this state are having fun and enjoy each other’s company. They radiate vitality as well as relaxation and inner peace. Children with high levels of wellbeing have an open and receptive attitude towards the world and their environment; whatever comes in, they are ready to experience it (Laevers, 2012).

High levels of wellbeing are seen, according to the Milton Keyes Report, (Laevers, 2010) when children are spontaneous and are comfortable in their own skin, when they are happy with the attention they receive such as a hug, a compliment, a word of comfort, encouragement or help. When young children are faced with challenging situations in their daily experiences in the preschool setting, high levels of wellbeing enable their coping
mechanisms to deal with the situation (Mayr and Ulich, 1999). Laevers (1997) suggests that high levels of psychological wellbeing are characterised by respect for self and others and a sense of interdependence or ‘linkedness’. Laevers (1997) further argues that this sense of ‘linkedness’ or feeling connected and valued by others, helps children to develop concern for and a positive orientation towards their human and physical environment. This type of linkedness occurs when the educator is both physically and emotionally present and available to the children. This happens when the educator communicates with children in a friendly way, is attentive and shows an interest in each child. By providing rich learning opportunities the educator supports children’s curiosity and exploratory drive (Laevers, 2012). This nurturing pedagogy, Hayes (2013) confirms, contributes to young children’s happiness and psychological wellbeing.

### 3.2.3 Wellbeing in Early Childhood Education

Interest in children’s wellbeing has been steadily increasing across political, social and educational contexts. The importance of children’s wellbeing, particularly in relation to learning and development is undisputed, with children’s wellbeing seen as central to early learning, programme quality, public policy and children’s rights (Mashford-Scott et al., 2012). Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009) in Ireland describes young children’s learning and development through four interconnected themes. The themes are Wellbeing, Identity and Belonging, Communicating and Exploring and Thinking. The theme of wellbeing focuses on the child developing as a person. Wellbeing is defined in Aistear as having two elements: psychological wellbeing and physical wellbeing. The focus on children’s psychological wellbeing is on children’s relationships and interactions with their families and the broader ecological system (NCCA, 2009).

In their publication, *From Neurons to Neighbourhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*, Shonkoff and Phillips (2000) indicate that, what happens during the first months and years of life provides an indelible blueprint for adult wellbeing. Young children’s wellbeing has been cited as
one of the most important indicators of quality for educational settings (Laevers, 1997, 2000; Mayr and Ulich, 1999; Pascal and Bertram, 1999). The development of sound wellbeing has been found to be dependent on critical conditions. These conditions include; stable and loving relationships with a limited number of adults, who provide responsive and reciprocal interaction, protection from harm, encouragement for exploration and learning, transmission of cultural values and a safe and predictable environment that provides a range of growth promoting experiences (Shonkoff, 2000).

High levels of wellbeing indicate that a child is doing well emotionally. High levels of wellbeing also indicate that the individual has the necessary competence and attitudes to deal with their environment in a positive way as his or her basic needs have been met (Laevers, 2012). The level of children’s wellbeing, Laevers (2012) suggests, indicates how well the educational environment succeeds to help them to fulfil their emotional needs for affection, continuity, recognition and competence (Laevers, 1994, 1996). An environment where children’s rights are recognised and supported, where they have choice and can realise their full potential will, according to Ben-Arieh et al. (2014) support higher levels of wellbeing. Equally high-quality interactions and relationships within different levels of a supportive environment, as illustrated by the Bronfenbrenner model, results in children’s levels of wellbeing being increased (Ben-Arieh and Frønes, 2011). Hännikäinen (2014) goes further and confirms that sensitive, loving and caring relationships are essential for young children’s wellbeing. Laevers (1996) confirms that high levels of wellbeing maximise children’s learning potential and encourages their innate exploratory drive, encouraging a sense of agency and a desire to interact with others. Children who have high levels of wellbeing are more confident and open to enjoying life, Laevers (1994, 1996).

In early childhood education, wellbeing is conceived as an educational aim (NCCA, 2009). Children’s level of wellbeing has, according to Hännikäinen (2014), an important impact on their behaviour in the preschool and their attitudes to learning and their holistic development
A low level of wellbeing is a cause for concern that must be taken seriously. Low levels of wellbeing mean that in the present situation the child is unable to satisfy its basic needs (Laevers, 2017). Low levels of wellbeing will eventually according to Laevers (2017) affect the child’s emotional health, where the child becomes alienated from his/her own feelings and loses self-confidence. To support children’s wellbeing Laevers (2012) suggests that the following basic needs must be met. These include meeting children’s physical needs for food, drink, shelter, rest and sleep. However, there are other non-structural needs which must be met. These needs include the child’s need for affection, warmth and tenderness, love and attention.

The importance of the learning environment in supporting children’s wellbeing has also been highlighted by Mashford-Scott et al. (2012). They suggest that for children to have high levels of wellbeing they should have agency, autonomy, competence, self-esteem, belonging, connectedness, social responsibility and they need to feel valued. This is reiterated by Laevers (2012) who confirms the need for children to feel safe, secure and have their identity and belonging supported in the predictable, orderly learning environment. In this learning environment which is predictable and orderly Laevers (2012) suggests that children feel confident that they can trust and rely on the educator and others and as a result have high levels of wellbeing.

The role of the preschool educator, Laevers (2012) suggests, is to offer the emotional support and conditions for children to learn and interact with their environment. High levels of wellbeing empower children, ‘that is why we must invest in wellbeing, in favour of the child now and in aid of the future adult’ (Laevers, 2012, p.6). Wellbeing levels are increased when children are intrinsically motivated, enjoy and have high levels of involvement in the learning activities in which they are engaged. It is clear from the literature that to define wellbeing is difficult, and as Thomas (2009) highlights, it is even harder to measure. Wellbeing is a highly complex and multi-faceted concept situated in contexts and relationships and involves how people feel.
and function personally and in society and the value they give to their life (Ben-Arieh et al., 2014).

To experience wellbeing, Ryan and Deci (2017) suggest that the individual’s three basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness need to be fulfilled. This will occur, according to Ryff (1989), where the individual experiences positive relationships, has mastery over the environment and his/her life, has opportunities for personal growth, a clear purpose in life and self-acceptance. Within the early childhood education and care context, these elements are present in an active learning environment which supports young children’s identity, belonging, agency and active participation in their learning together with positive, responsive relationships. These elements, the active learning environment and relationships, have been identified as key indicators of quality which support the quality outcomes of wellbeing and involvement (State of South Australia, Department of Education and Children’s Services, 2008).

3.3 Involvement and Children’s Deep Learning

When describing the flow experience or involvement experience when writing poetry, poet and Fulbright alumni Mark Strand (1991) cited in Csikszentmihalyi, 1997, p.121) confirms.

“You're right in the work, you lose your sense of time, you're completely enraptured, you're completely caught up in what you're doing…. there's no future or past, it's just an extended present in which you're making meaning…” (cited in Csikszentmihalyi, 1997, p.121).

From birth, children are curious. When the learning environment supports this curiosity the child’s exploratory drive and intrinsic motivation to learn is stimulated. In this situation, the child exhibits extreme concentration and is totally absorbed in the activity. The child’s interest and fascination in the subject supports high levels of motivation and perseverance, with intense cognitive activity. The child is operating at the limits of his or her capabilities within the ‘zone of proximal development’ (Vygotsky, 1978). These characteristics of involvement are one of the most direct and reliable indicators for deep-level-learning (Csikszentmihalyi et al., 1979; Laevers et
al., 2012). The following literature review will explore the topic of involvement and deep level learning in preschool settings.

Involvement is what we observe when children are intensely engaged in an activity. It is a psychological state characterised by extreme concentration and uninterrupted attention where the child is highly motivated, fascinated, totally absorbed and unaware of time (Laevers, 2017). When children have high levels of involvement, they exhibit high levels of motivation, interest, fascination and perseverance or persistence. In this state there is evidence of intense mental activity, openness to stimuli, intrinsic motivation and an exploratory drive (Laevers et al., 2012). Laevers (1993) also suggests that when children are truly involved or engaged in their meaning making processes, they have high levels of energy and satisfaction and they operate at the limits of their capacity. These limits are what Vygotsky (1978) describes as the Zone of Proximal Development. The concept of involvement refers to a dimension of human activity; it is not linked to specific types of behaviour or to specific levels of development (Laevers, 2011). Csikszentmihalyi and Nakamura (1979) identify this as ‘the state of flow’. The optimal state of individuals within this state of flow, according to Csikszentmihalyi and Nakamura (1979), is where the individual concentrates intensely on the task at hand, he or she is deeply involved and there is a merging of action and awareness. The individual is in control of his or her own actions and is enjoying the activity, resulting in a distorted sense of time, where the time passes very quickly. With these characteristics, involvement can, according to Laevers (2017), be considered, to be one of the most direct and reliable signals for the occurrence of deep level learning.

Both Csikszentmihalyi and Nakamura (1979) and Laevers (2017) suggest that the child’s exploratory drive, particularly in play, is a great facilitator for involvement. The satisfaction which the child experiences stems from his/ her exploratory drive to make meaning through exploring and thinking and figuring things out in play. Laevers (2017) argues that when ‘deep level’ learning occurs, this results in changes in the underlying structure of fundamental developmental schemes. These schemes regulate the way that
incoming stimuli are processed, and understanding is gained (Winters, 2008). In ‘deep level’ learning, children have the time to interpret new situations and make decisions about their actions (Laevers, 1994, p.5). It is according to Laevers (2011) only when the child’s exploratory drive is activated will he or she engage in intense mental activity at the very limits of his or her capabilities. The child’s exploratory drive is activated when the child has choice and when the activity is meaningful and challenging (Laevers, 2011). Which confirms what Laevers, (2011, p.6) posits, ‘If we want deep level learning, we cannot do this without involvement’.

3.3.1 Involvement and Pedagogy

Children’s involvement has been promoted by researchers as a key indicator of curriculum quality and effectiveness (Ebbeck et al., 2012; Laevers, 1994; Siraj-Blatchford and Wong, 1999). The idea of correlating involvement with curriculum quality is based on the theories of effective teaching and learning of Rogers (1983) and Vygotsky (1978). Csikszentmihalyi (2014) and Nakakuma and Csikszentmihalyi (2008), suggest that for elevated levels of flow or involvement to occur, students must have freedom to choose activities. They expand on this and confirm that the activities should offer a challenge and the challenge should be balanced with the skills of the student, with clear meaningful short-term goals. Educators should provide environments where students are given time, where the activity is not constricted within a timetable and students have space to focus on the learning activity. When students are involved, Csikszentmihalyi (2014) suggests that they have sustained engagement with the task. As a direct result their feelings of wellbeing are increased, they enjoy the activity and seek out this optimal experience again. This ignites the child’s emergent intrinsic motivation to repeat the activity, resulting in a positive subjective learning experience (Csikszentmihalyi 2014; Nakakuma and Csikszentmihalyi, 2008).

Turner et al. (1998) found in middle schools, students experienced ‘flow’ when teachers provided scaffolded instruction, offered students choices and took students’ interests into account. This approach, where students engage
in activities which are freely chosen, where students learn through collaborative hands-on experiences, results in higher levels of ‘flow’ (Shernoff et al., 2014). Primary-grade students in Denmark were also shown to experience particularly high levels of flow in school compared to students in other countries. These findings, Andersen (2004) suggests, may be due to an emphasis on student autonomy, interest, and an appropriate balance between teacher-led and student-led learning activities. This confirms the findings of Rathunde and Csikszentmihalyi (2005) that students in non-traditional learning environments which emphasize active learning, tend to experience more flow in comparison to the experience of students in traditional schools.

In comparison where a traditional didactic approach to teaching is in place, where the curriculum is timetabled with long-term learning goals and students spend increased time at their desks, Schmidt (2010) suggests that there is a correlation with low levels of flow. These findings concur with Laevers (1994) who identified that an alternative to the traditional didactic approach of the teacher transmitting the learning to the student needs to be identified. Alternative teaching strategies such as showing an interest in the child’s activities, making suggestions on how play might be expanded, posing questions, offering provocations and encouraging discussion and dialogue are decisive factors in the overall quality of the curriculum and levels of involvement (Schmidt, 2010). Laevers (cited in State of South Australia, Department of Education and Children’s Services, 2008) confirms that where educators do not show interest in children’s activities, or the quality of resources or environment is poor and/or in disrepair, there is potential for boredom and conflict between children. The length of time children engage in an activity is also significant for children’s level of involvement. Children are less likely to be involved at a high level if the activity is constantly changing or timed (Laevers, 2017). Equally, according to Laevers, when children are forced to be involved in an activity, intense involvement is rare (State of South Australia, Department of Education and Children’s Services, 2008). Laevers concludes that high levels of involvement occur when the activity matches the child’s capacity; it
activates the child’s exploratory drive, is challenging and requires cognitive effort (State of South Australia, Department of Education and Children’s Services, 2008). Similarly, Csikszentmihalyi (1990) identified characteristics of flow; these also highlight the importance of providing activities which are challenging and require skills. The importance of clear goals with feedback and the benefits of merging the learning action with awareness of the learning are emphasised. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) also confirms the importance of the learner being in control of the learning situation and having the time and environment to concentrate on the task.

3.3.2 Importance of High Levels of Child Involvement

Raspa, et al., (2001, p.214) examined the relationship between the quality of the early childhood education programme and children’s involvement. She argued that children’s engagement mediated the effects of curriculum outcomes for children. The study concluded that the overall classroom quality was directly correlated to children’s ‘sophisticated engagement’. These findings related to children’s engagement with educator’s responsiveness and the educator/child relationships. The study identified that teachers who were responsive with affective interaction styles and who used high quality interventions such as sustained shared thinking, had fewer children engaged at lower levels of involvement. Bennett (2001, p.2) when discussing the infant toddler centres and preschools of Reggio Emilia observed that, ‘The tension in the classroom between teacher and children is likely to be lessened if children are more engaged’. Laevers et al. (2005) confirm that when educators observe deep levels of involvement, they are amazed and intuitively sense that they cannot disturb the play. Laevers (2012) goes further and suggests that when children are involved, they are learning at a deeper level and they become more competent. However, if involvement is lacking there is a reason for concern, there is a chance according to Laevers (2012) that the child’s development will stagnate.

It is therefore a primary responsibility of the educator to create learning environments where children can engage in a wide variety of activities (Laevers et al., 2005, p.11). When children are engaged in a variety of
challenging activities which are freely chosen, they exhibit higher levels of subjective wellbeing, according to Sandseter and Seland (2015). This corresponds with Csikszentmihalyi’s (2014) suggestion that Flow is the secret to happiness. In this case, Csikszentmihalyi (2014) defines happiness as when the child is not bored on the one hand but not feeling anxious on the other when confronted with a task, job, or other activity. This level of happiness, he believes exists, when individuals are in a state of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, 2014).

Pascal et al. (1998) also support the assumption that children who experience high levels of involvement and educator engagement in their learning will achieve enhanced learning outcomes. Laevers (2017) in agreement suggests that, considering children’s wellbeing and involvement is a universal way of looking at quality and it is the most economic and conclusive way to assess the quality of any educational setting (from the pre-school level to adult education). Laevers (2017) proceeds to suggest, that both wellbeing and involvement are the result of a complex interplay between two entities. The first entity is the child with its background and individual profile, the second is the pedagogical approach and all the characteristics of the learning environment (Laevers, 2017). Measuring the levels of wellbeing and involvement provides an estimation of the power of the learning environment and informs us about how the pedagogical approach impacts on children’s experience. As a result, Laevers (2017) suggests that, the process variables of wellbeing and involvement are the most ‘reliable’ indicators of quality provision and its impact on young children’s lives.

3.4 Self-Determination Theory

Accrued wellbeing across the life span is an important factor in supporting resilience and enabling competence, autonomy, purposefulness and personal power (Fattore et al., 2007). Abed et al. (2016) confirm that high levels of wellbeing enhance self-esteem, self-concept and self-confidence. While Laevers et al. (2012) confirms that high levels of wellbeing are essential for high levels of involvement and deep learning to occur. Csikszentmihalyi
(2014) posits the opposite that ‘flow’ or involvement when present is the secret to happiness or wellbeing. Ryan and Deci (2017) suggest that all children are born curious and ready to explore, think and make meaning. However, like Malaguzzi (1994), they confirm that for curiosity and intrinsic motivation to be sustained and supported a number of social and cultural elements must be present. This section will review the literature on Self-Determination Theory relevant to ECEC provision which support high levels of wellbeing and involvement.

Self-Determination Theory is based on the belief that young children are born with an innate curiosity to learn about their world (Deci and Ryan, 1985). Founders of the theory offer an image of the individual as being curious from birth, full of vitality, self-motivated, agentic and inspired, striving to learn, extend themselves, master new skills and apply their talents (Ryan and Deci, 2000). A core point underpinning Self-Definition Theory is that it examines,

“…how biological, social, and cultural conditions either enhance or undermine the inherent human capacities for psychological growth, engagement, and wellness both in general and in specific domains and endeavours”. (Ryan and Deci, 2017, p.77).

The theory is fundamentally one which focuses on the type of motivation individuals have for different activities and the behaviours and/or the social situations which enhance or hinder the different motivation types and subsequent impact on the person’s psychological health and wellbeing (Deci and Ryan, 2008). The primary motivators for activity, Deci and Ryan (2008) suggest, is the individual’s intrinsic motivation. This is the source of the energy for the active nature of the individual (Ryan and Deci, 2017). When individuals are intrinsically motivated, they become actively engaged solely for inherent satisfaction and enjoyment. Riley (2016) suggests that when an individual is intrinsically motivated, he or she is energized and passionate about the task being performed, and after it is done, feels a sense of satisfaction or fulfilment. There is recognition that while some individuals are competent, active, agentic agents, there are many individuals, regardless of their social or cultural circumstances, both children and adults, who have been diminished. This can result in children
being crushed, passive, apathetic and alienated (Ryan and Deci, 2000). These characteristics are, Ryan and Deci (2000) suggest, due to the social contexts which catalyse both within and between individuals, and the individual’s different levels of motivation and personal growth.

### 3.4.1 Environments Needed for Human Flourishing

The essential nutrients for human flourishing psychological health, wellbeing and vitality, according to Ryan and Deci (2017), depends on the individual experiencing feelings of competence, autonomy and relatedness. When these elements are present, curiosity, creativity, productivity and compassion are heightened (Ryan and Deci, 2017). Such an environment, according to Bindman et al. (2015), facilitates the development of integrated self-regulation, which includes the capacity to manage impulses, emotions, and motives which arise within the individual. Autonomy supportive environments are environments where individuals have choice and self-regulation is encouraged. In the preschool setting, this is reflected in the level of choice children have, to choose activities or friends and are trusted to negotiate and work out challenges in activities and/or relationships with peers. In an autonomy or competence supportive learning environment, the children are provided with clear structures and positive informational feedback which supports their feelings of competence.

The educator scaffolds the learning and supports the child to master challenging activities. In contrast, environments which are overly controlling, rejecting and critical or negative, according to Ryan and Deci (2017), hinder autonomy, relatedness and competence. As a result, Ryan et al. (2012) suggest that individuals become self-focused, defensive, demotivated and aggressive and exhibit anti-social behaviours (Ryan, Legate, Niemiec, and Deci, 2012). Ryan and Deci (2017) characterize environments in relation to being autonomy supportive environments versus demanding and controlling environments or effectiveness supporting environments, versus overly challenging, inconsistent or otherwise discouraging environments. The third environments described by Ryan and Deci (2017) are relationally supportive environments versus impersonal or
rejecting environments (Ryan and Deci, 2017). In relatedness supportive environments, individuals feel a sense of identity and belonging; they are valued, respected and cared for in a nurturing environment. When the individual’s need for autonomy, competence and relatedness are supported and met in environments which support all three basic psychological needs, high levels of self-determined and high-quality functioning, resilience and enduring psychological health are promoted (Ryan and Deci, 2017).

3.4.1.1 Autonomy

Autonomy is defined by Duda, (2013, p.3) as ‘Being authentic, acting with volition, and having input and choice’. It is further described as ‘independence, freedom or self-determination or governance’ (Collins, 2009, p.39). Ryan and Deci, (2017) identify the need for autonomy as being integral to intrinsic motivation, internalisation and integration of extrinsic motivation. Ryan (2017) suggests that autonomy is when the individual feels choice full, self-initiating and engaging whole heartedly in what he or she is doing. In autonomy-oriented classrooms children have opportunities to be curious, discover, explore and investigate; children are free to choose activities which interest and excite them (Deci et al., 1991). The child makes the decision to undertake the activity and as such his/her perceived locus of causality is internal, and the child feels autonomous. If the educator is an autonomy supportive teacher, he/she will follow the child’s emergent interests and will nurture and support the child’s inner motivational resources (Reeve et al., 2004). The educator will also support the child’s need for autonomy by ensuring that he/she knows the relevance of what they are being taught and that the activity is meaningful (Lietaert, 2015). As a result, Deci et al. (1991) suggest, when children perceive their classroom to be more supportive of autonomy, they become more intrinsically motivated and have higher levels of self-esteem. Children display markedly more positive classroom functioning and educational outcomes than do students of controlling teachers (Deci and Ryan, 1985; Ryan and Deci, 2000; Reeve and Jang, 2006; Reeve, 2009).
The opposite of autonomy supportive environments is controlled environments. In controlled environments children do not have autonomy or choice. There is a prioritisation of the teacher’s perspective over the students’ perspective (Reeve, 2009). Similar to Freire (1993) the teacher teaches, and the children are taught. The teacher decides on the curriculum with little or no input by the student. Teaching in this situation is the transfer of knowledge rather than the co-construction of knowledge (Bruner, 1996). Such non-supportive autonomy environments or controlled environments are correlated with reduced levels of physical and psychological wellbeing (Bartholomew, 2011). The third type of environment described by Ryan and Deci (2017) are relationally supportive environments. Relational supportive environments Ryan and Deci (2017) suggest are environments which encourage autonomy. In these environments’ children are afforded choice and self-regulation is encouraged. Children’s competence is supported through the provision of structure and positive informative feedback. The environment provides a secure relational base which is a distal support for intrinsic motivation which will support the child to flourish and function robustly.

3.4.1.2 Competence

Competence according to Bartholomew et al. (2011), concerns the degree to which individuals feel effective in their ongoing interactions with the social environment and experience opportunities in which to express their capabilities. In Self-Determination Theory, competence refers to the basic needs to feel effective and have mastery (Ryan and Deci, 2017). Ryan (2017) suggests that competence is essential to wellbeing. He suggests that individuals need to feel that they can operate effectively within their life situation. Individuals also need to feel effective and have a level of mastery over the things that are important to them. This need for competence according to Deci and Moller (2006), is met through curiosity and manipulation and a wide range of epistemic motives. However, competence can be deflated, when challenges presented are too difficult and the individual does not believe he or she can complete the task successfully (Ryan and Deci, 2017). This is in keeping with Csikszentmihalyi (2011)
flow theory and Laevers (2017) wellbeing and involvement theory. These theorists argue that for intrinsic motivation to occur there needs to be a balance between the skills of the individual and the challenge presented. If this is not the case, if the activity is too challenging the child will become deflated and will want to give up as he/she does not believe that they can complete the activity (Csikszentmihalyi, 2011; Laevers, 2017). Equally, if the activity is too easy with little challenge the child becomes bored and is not motivated to repeat the activity. All three theories, Self-Determination Theory, flow theory and wellbeing and involvement theory argue that social contextual events such as feedback, communications and rewards can enhance or thwart competence.

The learning environment is very important in supporting children’s competence. Lietaert et al. (2015) suggest that children require clear guidelines and structures. Educators should provide clear expectations to the students as when there are no clear guidelines or structures, students have a loss of autonomy and are effectively being forced into a situation where they have a significant potential to fail (Deci, 1976). Another important element when supporting children’s competence is that of positive performance feedback. Positive performance feedback has been found to enhance intrinsic motivation as it directly conveys positive competence information (Deci et al., 1999). In contrast, negative feedback where individuals feel undermined, criticised or compared negatively to others tends to undermine intrinsic motivation by thwarting students need for competence (Ryan and Deci, 2017). Csikszentmihalyi (1975) highlights activities which are autotelic, that is, when the purpose of the activity is the activity itself rather than the end result or outcome. These autotelic activities he suggests inspire ‘flow’ and individuals he posits will experience flow when the demands of the task are well matched to the individual’s capacity or competence. The need for competence which was initiated by White (1959) was embraced by Elliot, Mc Gregor and Thrash, (2002) who suggest that the need for competence is an innate drive by individuals. However, according to Duda (2013), competence will not enhance intrinsic motivation unless accompanied by a sense of autonomy.
It is therefore essential for intrinsic motivation to be fostered in preschool, where children experience, autonomy and competence and feel valued by others within a system of relationships (Laevers, 2017).

3.4.1.3 Relatedness

‘Relatedness is the intrinsically satisfying experience of being connected and mattering to another person or group’ (Ryan and Deci, 2017, p.293). Individuals need more than help, care and material provisions to survive and adapt; they need to feel a sense of identity and belonging. This need for belonging is critical for understanding people’s tendencies to internalize values and behaviours from their cultures to fit in and belong (Ryan and Deci, 2017). Relatedness in the preschool or educational institutions is associated with the child or student feeling that the educator genuinely likes, respects and values him or her (Niemiec and Ryan, 2009). Relatedness is, according to Pascal et al. (1998) the key to quality ECEC provision. Bronfenbrenner (1986) suggests that children need a relationship with one or more adults, where at least one person is crazy about them. According to Niemiec and Ryan (2009) children who experience high levels of relatedness are shown to internalize the values of the other, as a result they feel secure, valued and trusted. When children experience high levels of competence and autonomy, they also exhibit high levels of wellbeing and involvement and academic motivation (Niemiec and Ryan, 2009).

In contrast children who feel disconnected or rejected by the educator tend to move away from internalisation and thus respond only to external contingencies and controls (Niemiec and Ryan, 2009). This basic need to feel responded to, respected, and important to others is, according to Ryan and Deci (2017), a basic human need. Relatedness, which is one of the three basic needs, is about, ‘feeling connected with and cared for by significant others in the context at hand’ (Duda, 2013, p.312). Ryan and Deci (2017) further posit that relatedness is a reciprocal relationship of responsiveness and sensitivity, where the individual feels connected, valued, involved and has a sense of identity and belonging (Ryan, 1993; Deci and Ryan, 2000). The need for relatedness is satisfied when others show
concern toward the individual as well as when the individual has opportunities to be benevolent toward others.

It has been demonstrated that both directions of caring enhance a sense of connectedness (Deci, La Guardia, Moller, Scheiner, and Ryan, 2006; Weinstein and Ryan, 2010). Ryan and Deci (2017) suggest that individuals have a sense of relatedness when they feel that their presence is important or significant and they can contribute to the enhancement of others’ lives. This is confirmed by Caprara and Steca (2005) who suggest that all humans are evolutionarily wired to experience relatedness through helping others. Studies on attachment theory conducted with infants and young children has identified their heightened curiosity and intrinsic exploration when they feel secure in relation to individuals and environment. In early childhood education, relatedness is correlated to having a sense of identity and belonging (NCCA, 2009). This relatedness, according to Ryan and Deci (2017), is within a system of relationships beyond oneself in the wider social context. Niemiec and Ryan (2009) suggest that strategies to ensure relatedness include the educator conveying warmth, care and respect for students.

Fulfilment of the three basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness, according to Ryan and Deci (2017), is strongly linked to vitality and greater intrinsic motivation and autonomous types of extrinsic motivation (Ryan and Deci, 2008; Niemiec and Ryan 2009). Winnicott (1965) and Bowlby (1969) have both emphasized an inherent and basic human propensity to relate or ‘attach’ to others. Deci and Ryan (2017) suggest that it is ‘how’ people relate to each other that is important. Experiencing a shared sense of belonging within learning communities provides each child with membership, participation and acceptance within a democratic, inclusive environment (Siraj-Blatchford, 2010). Gambone, et al. (2002) suggest that a relationship with at least one caring adult is perhaps the single most important element in protecting young people who have multiple risks in their lives. For many very young children this adult is the preschool teacher (Sabol and Pianta, 2012). Teachers who are highly sensitive create an emotionally supportive climate in their classroom which
benefits the development of more positive dyadic teacher-child relationships, (Ahnert et al., 2006; Buyse et al., 2008).

Within Self-Determination Theory, relatedness is one of the three basic psychological needs. Relationship Motivation Theory proposes that the relatedness need underpins people’s intrinsic motivation to engage in close high-quality relationships with others. The theory posits that autonomy and relatedness are inextricably linked, where the fulfilment of one is intertwined with the fulfilment of the other and that being autonomously motivated is essential for securely attached relationships to occur (Deci and Ryan, 2017). Deci and Ryan (2012) suggest that people experience more high quality and satisfying relationships when they can satisfy their own basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness. This suggests that respectful reciprocal relationships support a sense of autonomy for each partner. Similarly, caring for one another will leave each person cared for and related (Caprara and Steca, 2005). Relationships and relatedness are a core value of Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009). The importance of children’s connections is at the heart of early learning and development (NCCA, 2009). Relationships play a key role in building children’s identities. Research verifies that when children have secure relationships or are connected with a particular group, they are emotionally strong, self-assured, and confident, they voice their opinions, make choices and actively participate in shaping their own learning (NCCA, 2009).

3.4.2 Self-Determination Theory in Educational Contexts

Self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan, 1985, 1991) when applied to the subject of education focuses on promoting student’s interest in learning, recognition of their own competences and attributes and a valuing of education. While Self Determination Theory is based on the premise that children are born competent, confident, eager and ready to learn, many schools fail to encourage or support children’s intrinsic motivation and often emphasise extrinsic motivators to motivate children (Ryan and Deci, 2017). Critical to motivation is the learning environment, and autonomy supportive
learning environments, according to Ryan and Deci (2017), support the active nurturing of the child’s capacities to be self-regulating. These environments take children’s perspectives into account as well as providing support and encouragement for self-expression, initiation and self-endorsed activities. Autonomy supportive environments support children’s intrinsic motivation through supporting curiosity, exploration and interest and providing the environment for active acquisition of knowledge through play and hands on experiences (Ryan and Deci, 2017). Within these environments, conditions for nurturance for holistic development are optimized. This occurs when children have autonomy, competence and relatedness and is correlated with positive learning outcomes (Ryan and Deci, 2017).

In comparison, environments which are controlling rather than autonomy-supportive can curtail young children’s intrinsic motivation and curiosity to explore, to think and to learn (Joussemet et al., 2008; Bernier et al, 2010). It is therefore critical to support young children’s intrinsic motivation to learn, as when the level of intrinsic motivation or interest in the classroom is low, children’s learning and levels of wellbeing are under threat. This was confirmed by a longitudinal study from early childhood to early adulthood conducted by Deci et al. (1981). The study demonstrates how autonomy-supportive environments versus controlling style teaching styles influenced young children’s, age 4-6 years, intrinsic motivation. Teachers exhibiting a controlling philosophy endorsed the use of rewards, punishments and controlling language to ensure that children behave as expected. Teachers who were oriented towards autonomy-supportive environments and self-regulation, listened to the children and tried to understand their point of view, providing choice and supportive feedback, (Deci et al., 1981). The children’s intrinsic motivation, self-esteem and perceived self-competence were assessed. Children in the classrooms which were autonomy supportive tended to be more intrinsically motivated, they perceived themselves as more competent and reported higher self-esteem.

In comparison, in classrooms where teachers were more controlling, intrinsic motivation levels, perceived competence and self-worth were all
lower (Deci et al., 1981). Deci and Ryan (2017, p.351) confirm that, ‘the manner in which teachers choose to motivate students, powerfully affects the student’s interest, engagement, self-concept, and wellbeing in the classroom’. There is a suggestion also that when children are in a controlled setting, their primary asset for learning, which is intrinsic motivation, is being switched off and so too are their feelings of confidence and worth (Ryan and Deci, 2017). This is particularly worrying when we know the learning, developmental and wellbeing benefits of intrinsic motivation (Ryan and Deci, 2017). It is therefore critical to ensure that preschool children can access autonomy supportive learning environments which will result in comparative high levels of wellbeing and involvement.

Self Determination Theory considers the basic psychological needs required by each individual to have high levels of wellbeing, be intrinsically motivated to learn with resulting high levels of self-actualisation (Ryan and Deci, 2017). James et al (1998) confirm that children are already competent agents who can act on, influence and change their life course trajectories. Children demonstrate competence from birth, they have the capacity to understand and act upon their world and they are active agents who construct their own cultures and environments (Corsaro, 2005). This image of the child with agency, rights, voice and capacity to understand, act upon, interact with, and actively change their world (Mayall, 2002) is the image of the child presented in the sociology of childhood (James and Prout, 1997). Self Determination Theory outlines how this agency which the child brings with them into the preschool setting can be supported and enhanced, by ensuring that the child’s basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness are met in the preschool setting. The attention and promotion of children’s rights to agency, has increased steadily at a national and international level. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, United Nations, 1989), was the first legally binding document to afford children the same level of human and citizenship rights as adults. The UNCRC positions children as entitled to autonomy, and to actively participate, have a voice and influence matters that concern or affect them (Coady and Page, 2005; Mashford and Church,
2011; Page, 2008; Tobin, 2005; United Nations, 1989). While Self Determination Theory (Ryan and Deci, 2017) considers how children’s basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness can be met by the adult, Bandura (2001, p.4) suggests that children are ‘agents of experiences rather than simply undergoers of experiences.’ This results in children in preschool settings determining their own control over adults’ rules through ‘secondary adjustment’ Corsaro (2005, p. 42). Learning environments which support children’s autonomy, competence and relatedness do not exist in isolation; there are several factors which influence the development of these environments from a macro to a micro perspective. These influences are dynamic and bidirectional as outlined in Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) Ecological Systems Theory.

3.5 Ecological Systems Theory

Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory (EST) is one of the most recognised and adopted theoretical frameworks for studying the influencing factors and the context or ecology of individual’s development. A passionate lifelong interest in how environments change, and the implications of this change for the human beings who live and grow in these environments was the catalyst for Russian born, Urie Bronfenbrenner to dedicate his life to theorising how the individual’s holistic development is influenced and directed. Bronfenbrenner’s (1977, 1979) Ecological Systems Theory has been widely adopted by developmental psychologists interested in understanding individuals in context. A refined theory based on previous study conducted by Bronfenbrenner was presented in his most influential book, The Ecology of Human Development Experiments by Nature and Design (1979) which described an understanding of child development based on an ecological model. This model recognises that individuals are embedded in and affected by different contexts. The macro contexts, which are the large-scale contexts or those which are at a distance such as national and international policy and the micro contexts which are the close by, immediate or local contexts, such as parents, guardians and family (Hayes et al., 2017). These contexts, the macro to the micro were presented by Bronfenbrenner (1979) as being a set of concentric circles, ‘a
nested arrangement of structures, each contained within the next’ (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p.22). The classic graph has become universally recognised and accepted as a useful framework within which to study child development. The visual model provides a very useful guide, which highlights the many influencing factors which Bronfenbrenner (1979) suggests affect children’s holistic development.

3.5.1 Ecological model

The initial ecological model of human development conceived by Bronfenbrenner (1979) identified the development of the child as being influenced and embedded within four broad systems. Placing the child at the centre Bronfenbrenner (1979) suggested that the child’s development was influenced by microsystem, which are the nearest and most direct influences on the child, such as family and friends. The second layer he suggested are the mesosystems which consider the interconnections between two or more settings, such as the connections between the child, the family and preschool. It refers to the way in which the complex structures within the micro-system interact. Keenan and Evans (2009, p.36) state, ‘one could think about the meso-system as the connections which bring together the different contexts in which a child develops’. Bronfenbrenner (1979) identified four types of inter-connection between the home and school settings. These include, multi-setting participation; indirect linkage; inter-setting communication; and finally, the inter-setting knowledge. He believed that the multi-setting participation was vital and a pre-requisite for the establishment of the meso-system.

The meso-system relates to the interaction a child engages in which occurs between more than one setting, i.e. home and school or child-care setting. Hayes et al (2017) speaking about the meso system suggests, that it is a very important and powerful concept as it highlights how behaviour within one setting such as the early years setting is influenced by other settings experienced by the child, such as the home setting. This is confirmed by Slesnick et al (2007) who suggests that individuals’ relationships in different settings have a direct impact on their relationships across different
In the context of early childhood education and care this may be reflected in the quality of relationships developed between the early years settings and the parents/guardians. Positive relationships between the two micro systems, the family and the early years settings may according to Neal and Neal (2013) support or facilitate greater recognition and understanding on the complexities of young children’s lives and the factors which influence or inhibit positive growth and development.

The third system identified by Bronfenbrenner in the original model is the exosystem. The exosystems are the systems in which children do not directly participate in; rather they influence the wellbeing of the adults in children’s lives. These less visible influences on children’s development include the quality of the parent/guardian’s workplace, social networks and parents’ levels of wellbeing which indirectly impact on children’s developmental trajectory (Hayes et al., 2017). The final system in the original Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) the macrosystem takes the broader view of the policy influences which impact on the individual’s development. These include the sociocultural values and beliefs about children and childhood and the policy influences, starting with the image of the child and pertaining to this study societal, cultural and contextual beliefs and values towards ECEC (Dahlberg et al., 2013). A further layer was later introduced by Bronfenbrenner (1986a, 1986b) the chronosystem. This system reflects change or continuity across time and how time interfaces and influences each of the other systems (Gray and MacBlain, 2015).

**Opposing views**

This model of human development while internationally acclaimed is not without its critics. Downes (2014) argues that placing the individual within a static system is limiting, this correlates with Christensen (2016) who suggests that by adding entrepreneurship to Bronfenbrenner’s Development Ecology model we would be provided with a wider understanding of the individual’s development and knowledge-based process. While Neal and Neal (2013) contest that by conceptualising systems as being nested within
each other emphasise is being placed on the importance of the setting context rather than focusing on the importance of the interactions and relationships. Neal and Neal (2013) suggested rather than being nested the ecological systems would be better represented if conceptualised as being ‘networked’ this they suggest would demonstrate further how the systems relate to each other at different levels in an overlapping model connected through direct and indirect social interactions rather than a nested manner. Further criticisms to the model include the lack of recognition for the resilience of the child within the current model.

Engler (2007) argues that Bronfenbrenner’s theory only describes the negative effects on how a child will develop if exposed to adversity and travesty. The model he suggests is lacking, in that it does not account for how a child who experiences a negative environment can overcome it, survive and even thrive. This is due he suggests to the child’s innate capacity or resilience to overcome obstacles as a result of positive-thinking, goal-orientation, educational aspirations, motivation, persistence, and optimism (Engler, 2007). It could however be argued that the revised model the Bioecological model, identifies that strong and supportive proximal processes with an important adult are essential to support resilience in children (Hayes et al., 2017).

3.5.2 Bioecological model

While the focus in the initial iterations of the theory were focused on contextual influences, as the theory was further developed more attention was paid to the role of the individual in his or her own development and the ‘central importance of proximal processes’ (Hayes et al., 2017). Proximal processes are the reciprocal interactions that exist between the child and his or her environment. Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) explained.

“Human development takes place through processes of progressively more complex reciprocal interaction between an active, evolving biopsychological human organism and the persons, objects, and symbols in its immediate external environment”. (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006, p.797)
This third and most up to date development of Bronfenbrenner’s theory is referred to as the bioecological model of development. Moving beyond the role of context in development this updated model recognises the active role of the child and the dynamic nature of development. In this model a distinction is made between the concepts of the environment and the processes which influence development. Individual characteristics Bronfenbrenner and Evans (2000) suggest in conjunction with aspects of the context, both spatial and temporal, influence what they refer to as, proximal processes or the “engines of development” (p.118). This new concept reflected a shift and a moving away from the traditional approach to studying children in isolation to looking at other aspects which influence development. The model highlights that children’s lives are best understood in the context of the wider sociocultural context where the child is recognised as an active participant in their learning and developmental processes.

The work of Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1995; Bronfenbrenner and Morris 1998, 2006) has contributed significantly to our understandings of the dynamic and integrated nature of learning and development. In Bronfenbrenner and Morris, (1998) bioecological theory, proximal processes are described as the reciprocal interaction between an individual and environments, which includes people, objects and symbols. The emphasis is on the reciprocal nature of the interaction. Griffore and Phenic (2016) suggest that the key to understanding proximal processes is to recognise the bi-directional nature of the relationships of people with the environments. These interactions they suggest are not only about social interactions where two people are interacting and communicating. Proximal processes are also the interactions that the individual has with objects or symbols which make up the context of the environment. The final phase of Bronfenbrenner’s work has captured the dynamic nature of child development in his Process- Person-Context-Time-(PPCT) model of development.

*Process*
Process is the defining component of the Bioecological model (Rosa and Trudge, 2013). The process of more complex and reciprocal interactions and the associated relationships were considered by Bronfenbrenner as the primary mode through which children develop. The importance of the quality of relationships in early childhood education and care settings has been highlighted as an essential component of quality (European Commission, 2014) with stimulating and supportive educator – child relationships resulting in better outcomes and higher levels of child wellbeing (Sabol et al., 2013). Core to the bioecological model the construct of process encompasses the interactions between the child and the environment, which is often referred to as the nature versus nurture debate (Hayes et al., 2017).

According to (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006) the effect of the process of sustained and ongoing reciprocal relationships is more powerful than the context in which they occur. He expands on this to confirm that when children have more progressively complex interactions, they become more autonomous and agents of their own learning and development (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). The bioecological model clearly confirms that relationships do not happen in isolation, rather ‘processes’ are impacted by the ‘person’, ‘context’ and ‘time’ factors within which the processes are situated and interact with. Hayes (2007) confirms that when the child is seen as an active participant of the learning process the pedagogical approach is based on a respectful pedagogy where ‘bidirectional, transformational interactions facilitate children in explaining their ideas to others, negotiating and clarifying their thinking’ (Hayes, 2007, cited in Hayes et al., 2017). When educators are attuned and sensitive to children’s ongoing and emergent interests and collaborate, together with the children to learn and develop an idea, skill or shared understanding, this is referred to by Siraj-Blatchford et al (2008) as sustained shared thinking. During this process of sustained shared thinking with children, Bruner (1996) suggests that the educator’s image of the child is that of a competent child, capable of making decisions and working things out using higher
order functions such as thinking about their thinking referred to as metacognition.

**Person**

Adults, Hayes et al. (2017) confirm have a profound impact on children’s learning experiences. Starting with the educator’s image of the child, Malaguzzi (1994) suggests that the educator’s image of the child is where teaching begins, while Bruner (1996) suggests that the educator’s choice of pedagogical approach is never ‘innocent’ or straight forward, it is always influenced by beliefs, values and the educator’s image of the child as a learner. This is further confirmed by Moss (2010) who suggests that the educator’s own educational history; the social and cultural context influences his or her image of the child and these, impact on the pedagogical approach chosen.

A longitudinal study by Runions (2014) identified the extent to which children’s gender influences the quality of the adult / child interactions and relationships in early years settings. The findings suggest that teachers are influenced by their image of the child and their beliefs about children’s specific behavioural tendencies, with boys being more at risk of higher levels of conflict and behaviour management issues. These findings support Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) opinion that certain characteristics such as gender can enhance or inhibit interactions, which has consequences for young children’s learning and development. Runions (2014) confirm that their findings suggest that educators’ relationships with children are differentially influenced by different characteristics and expectations and this information, informs and directs their pedagogical approach.

The bioecological model offers an image of the child as an active autonomous agent who both influences and is influenced by his or her environment or context. Children’s dispositions may influence the interactions and relationships they have with the ECEC educator. Bronfenbrenner identifies through the bioecological model that children’s characteristics do prompt certain reactions from others and, these reactions from others impact on the child’s future learning and development (Hayes et
al., 2017). This is similar to Mead’s; theory on Symbolic Interactionism and the concept of a ‘looking glass self’ which suggests that concepts of self-development from early childhood results from seeing how others respond.

**Context**

When considering the context of the early childhood education and care setting, the work of Bronfenbrenner is a most obvious theoretical position. Bronfenbrenner highlights the many contextual influences which influences children’s lives from a micro to a macro level. As confirmed by Hayes (2013) young children learn and develop through their social interactions all of which have a profound influence on their learning and development. Bronfenbrenner’s model confirms the importance of recognising that early years settings do not operate in isolation. By actively linking early years settings with other important environments which impact on children’s lives as well as acknowledging that all knowledge and learning has a history (Bruner, 1996) including that children bring their many ‘funds of knowledge’ (Moll et al., 1992) with them in the early years setting is essential when considering quality ECEC provision.

A significant critique of the bioecological model is its stance on culture. This can be challenged from major theoretical views, such as Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory, Barbara Rogoff’s transformation of participation perspective, and Thomas Weisner’s ecocultural theory. These theories propose to varying degrees that, “culture is not separate from the individual; it is a product of human activity” (Markus and Kitayama, 2009, p.423). The theories suggest that culture is not a separate system operating from a macro level, but it is within everyday action such as the activities, routines and the practices in the learning environment. (Velez-Agosta et al., 2017). As such it is suggested that culture should move from the macro level to the micro level as human development Velez-Agosta et al. (2017) posit that early learning takes place within a cultural system and the culture of the learning environment significantly influences the context and reality of the child’s learning and development in the ECEC setting.

*Time*
The final component of Bronfenbrenner’s PPCT model is the impact of time on children’s holistic development. In the bioecological model, (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006) time is conceptualised at three different levels, microtime, mesotime and macrotime. Microtime refers to what is happening in the moment, when the child is exploring, thinking and making meaning. The term microtime is connected to what is currently ‘happening’ and the affordances or opportunities available to the child in the learning environment. Hayes et al. (2017) suggest that rich learning environments taken from the concept of microtime emphasise and value children’s opportunity to explore, discover and respond to the affordances in their surroundings, without excessive or strictly structured timetabling. The context of mesotime refers to broader intervals, over days weeks and months where the proximal processes develop and become more complex as outlined in the bioecological theory. The value of time for educators to reflect on and plan to support children’s learning is essential in the provision of a rich learning environment which supports quality nurturing interactions and relationships (Hayes, 2007). As Rinaldi (2005) confirms that we give children time when we listen to them and hear their voice, she suggests.

“Listening is not only a pedagogical approach, it is a different way of thinking, it is a different disposition to the other...Listening is time. The best present that you can give a child is to give him/her time, your time, a time for themselves. To reflect, to think, to play, to communicate”.

(Rinaldi, 2005, p.57)

Macrot ime refers to the passage of time and the changes in lifestyles, beliefs and values. This is particularly relevant to ECEC where the concept of centre-based care and education in Ireland is a relatively new phenomenon. Equally from the beginning of the twentieth century up until the middle of the twentieth century the prevailing image of the child as a learner was that of a universal, passive child who could be moulded and shaped by the environment and by individuals in that environment (Hayes et al., 2017). The passage of time has changed how we think about and see children; the passage of time has also born witness to many social, political and cultural changes which have implications for children’s learning and development.
New focus of the Bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006) which respond to opposing views of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (1979)

Taking on board many of the criticisms of the original Ecological model (1979) Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) revised and further developed the original model. This revision was undertaken considering increased reflection and knowledge of the complex dynamic elements and processes which influence holistic development. There was a recognition that human development is not static or linear, it is influenced not only by special and temporal elements, as Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) suggests there are also a number of qualitative dynamic elements together with the previously identified elements in the original model which significantly impact on and are essential to positive holistic development. The revised ecological model, the bioecological model, moves away from a static approach to development. It moves beyond the role of context and focuses on the dynamic bi-directional elements which influence and impact upon children’s development. The new model is based on an image of the child who has agency to act on, influence and change their developmental trajectories. This can only occur according to Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) Bioecological model if the dynamics and interplay between the four key elements of child development, process, person, context and time (PPCT) are present and of high quality. This concept of dynamic and reciprocal relationships between individuals and their context is according to Hayes (2013) central to early childhood education and care pedagogy and practice. This has resulted in learning in early childhood education and care settings being recognised as, being complex, dynamic, interactive and transformative (Hayes, 2013).

While the Bioecological Model (2006) has answered many of the criticisms directed at the original Ecological Systems Theory (1979) it does not according to Engler (2007) address resilience. Resilience Engler (2007) suggests should have been integrated into the theory, because resiliency helps us to better understand an individual’s capacity. Resilience is manifested in having a sense of purpose and a belief in a bright future,
including goal direction, educational aspirations, achievement, motivation, persistence, hopefulness, optimism and spiritual charisma (Benard, 1995, as cited in Christensen, 2016). Christensen (2016) suggests that adding resilience to the Bioecology model is essential, Engler (2007) suggests, that this is not enough. An understanding of the individual’s entrepreneurial skills in a social context and how an individual act on the micro and macro levels is also needed Engler (2007) suggests. Adding resilience and entrepreneurship to Bronfenbrenner’s Development Ecology model Christensen (2016) suggests would provide a greater understanding of the individual’s development and knowledge-based process. Resilience according to Gillett-Swan and Sargent (2015) is a contributor and a result of wellbeing accrual, it may also be suggested that this model should also include the static and dynamic elements which impact and influence the individuals levels of wellbeing and accrued wellbeing levels across their life course trajectories.

3.6 Integrating Theory into a Tentative Conceptual Model

So far, the discussion presented in Chapters 2 and 3 has reviewed the key literature on the image of the child, pedagogy and child wellbeing and involvement. Now, four core messages emerging from that literature are used to construct a tentative conceptual framework for this study. The tentative model will be used as a basis for the discussion in Chapter 7.

3.6.1 Key Theoretical Messages

Message 1 - Opposing Images of the Child as a Learner

Bruner (1996) proposes two opposing images of the child as a learner, which educators hold; these are presented in Figure 3.2. The first image of the child presented by Bruner (1996) is when the educator sees the child as being competent and confident. This image of the child as a learner, based on the Sociology of Childhood (James and Prout, 1997) is based on seeing the child as competent and confident, a holder of rights, who actively participates in his or her own learning in partnership with the educator and peers. The child is seen as a subject who actively acts upon and transforms his or her world (Freire, 1994).
Alternatively, the educator may see the child as being ‘needy’, in need of care, protection and guidance. The traditional image of the child as a learner is that of a child who needs protection and guidance. The image of the child as a learner in this instance portrays the child as an object upon whom knowledge is foisted (Freire, 1993). The needy child is seen to learn by imitation, repetition, practice and didactic exposure. Skills are taught by the adult and the child is a passive learner, an empty vessel waiting to be filled. Knowledge is transferred by the more knowledgeable educator to the child in a ‘banking’ approach (Freire, 1993; Bruner, 1996). Bruner (1996) also posits that the educator’s choice of pedagogy is never innocent, that it communicates the educator’s conception of the learner and the learning process. Based on the image of the child the educator holds, Bruner (1996) suggests that this reflects the pedagogical approach of the educator. As demonstrated in Figure 3.2, the pedagogical approach taken by the educator is based on the opposing images of the child as a learner held by the educator, based on Bruner’s (1996) model.

3.6.1.1 Message 2 – Opposing Pedagogical Approaches of Educators

Bruner (1996) identifies four models of learners; he suggests that when the educator’s image of the child as a learner is an image where the child is considered to be competent and capable, then the pedagogical approach is based on internalist theories of teaching and learning. Internalist theories are where the focus of the teaching and learning is on what the child can do or what the child thinks he or she is doing. The image of the child as a learner in this instance is where the child is seen as a thinker and knowledgeable. The child’s knowledge is based on the internalised learning and knowledge the child has as a result of home, social and cultural experiences; what Thomson (2002) refers to as the ‘virtual school bag’. Seeing the child as a thinker, recognises the competence of the child to work things out and make meaning. Taking this image of the competent child, the child is seen as a subject of rights, not merely needs, who is transformed and can transform his or her world. In this instance, Bruner (1996) suggests that the pedagogical approach of the educator, based on the image of the child as a learner is an autonomy supportive environment. In an autonomy
supportive environment, the environment is an active learning environment which supports an emergent curriculum. The pedagogical approach is child centred and children’s intrinsic motivation to learn is supported. In this environment, children actively participate in their learning in partnership with the educators and their peers, which Hayes (2013) describes as a nurturing pedagogy.

Alternatively, when the educator considers the child to be ‘needy’, the pedagogical approach taken is a didactic approach where the more powerful educator transfers knowledge to the child. The teacher’s perspective and learning goals are prioritised over that of the child, as what the child learns is conceived in the mind of the teacher, not as an emerging interest of the child. Bruner (1996) also suggests that this pedagogical approach is based on externalist theories of teaching and learning, which focuses on what educators, can do for children from the outside to foster learning. This approach focuses on extrinsic motivational factors to manage children’s learning. The learning environment in this instance is controlled, directed and led by the adult. The competence of the child is not recognised, the child has little autonomy or choice.

Knowledge is transferred to the child in a didactic way, the child is taught by imitation, rote learning, repetition and practicing skills. Relationships between the educator and the child are controlling and authoritative, with a reliance on external motivation to manage behaviour, compliance and learning.

3.6.1.2 Message 3 - Wellbeing and Involvement of Preschool Children

Laevers (2017) has identified that levels of wellbeing and involvement are the most direct reliable signals of quality ECEC provision. The literature confirms that high levels of wellbeing and involvement are present when the three basic needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness are met in the active learning environment, within a nurturing, relational pedagogy (Laevers; 2012; Ryan and Deci, 2017). When children have high levels of wellbeing they act spontaneously and exhibit signs of increased vitality, are self-confident and happy (Deci and Ryan 2008; Laevers, 2015), they are like
‘a fish in water’ (Laevers, 2011). A study by Sandseter and Seland (2015) that identified that when preschool children enjoy what they are doing in the preschool this is correlated with higher levels of happiness or subjective wellbeing. Taking this study and listening to the voice of 4-6-year-old children, the children have identified the desire for choice and autonomy. The literature reviewed for this study suggests that children have high levels of wellbeing when their basic physical and psychological needs are met. These needs include basis physical needs for food, warmth, shelter and nurturing. The basic psychological needs for intrinsic motivation to be supported, according to Ryan and Deci (2000), are the need for autonomy, competence and relatedness.

In autonomy supportive learning environments, which are learning environments where children have choice, are active participants in their learning and the learning is meaningful and follows children’s emergent interests, Ryan and Deci (2017) and Laevers (2017) confirm that children have high levels of wellbeing. In contrast, when learning environments are controlling, there is an imbalance of power between the educator and the child, where the educator has the authority to make the decisions. Children do not have autonomy, voice or choice. The child’s interests or curiosities are not followed as the teacher’s perspective and learning goals are prioritised over that of the child. Educators who engage in a controlling pedagogical approach endorse the use of rewards, punishments and controlling language to ensure that children behave as expected. This results in intrinsic motivation levels, perceived competence and self-worth, wellbeing and involvement being lowered (Deci et al., 1981).

In comparison, high levels of involvement are characterised by high levels of concentration, deep concentration, intense energy persistence and determination and a high degree of satisfaction (Laevers, 1993). When children engage in deep learning and have high levels of involvement they become ‘mastery’ learners or ‘Learners who are challenge seeking, who persist in the face of difficulty, and who enjoy ‘exerting effort in the pursuit of task mastery’ (Dweck, 1986, p.1040). This is described by Dweck (1986) as having a ‘growth mind set’ where the focus is on holistic learning
or the process of knowing rather than knowledge (Zafuaurre, 2007). This approach to learning supports children’s creativity, curiosity, imagination, innovation and entrepreneurial skills, known as 21st century skills.

In comparison, imitative skill-based learning teaches children knowledge, but does not support metacognition (Flavell, 1976), in this instance the measurable outcome is the end goal (Bruner, 1996). This traditional teaching approach was developed to support an industrial age. However, as the political, social and cultural contexts change and progress, the image of the child as a learner is changing, children are seen as competent social actors within a complex cultural and social network, this network places children and the significant adults in their lives at the heart of contemporary educational processes (Wood, 2007).

3.6.1.3 Message 4 – Ecological Influencers on the Image and Pedagogical Approach

Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) Bioecological Theory reflects how dynamic personal and environmental interactions impact and influence development across the life course. Bronfenbrenner’s model places the child at the heart of a complex network of family social cultural and relational influences. The image of the child as a learner is that of an active participant who learns overtime through and from his or her interactions with the people, space and objects in the learning environment (Halpenny and Pettersen, 2013). The bioecological model starting at the microsystem confirms the value and importance in supporting children’s holistic development in building strong relationships between children, parents, teachers and educational settings. Brooker (2005, p.128) confirms that this relationship should be based on “serious and respectful listening”. This listening she suggests should not be biased where the home school dialogue assumes that the school is always right confirming the importance of supporting children parents and families as they engage with the ECEC service as an important role of the preschool educator.

There must always be recognition that each child is unique, and the context of children’s lives and experiences are different and this needs to be
incorporated into the approach to supporting children’s learning and development, in the preschool setting. Equally the values, culture and policies of ECEC provision impact and influence children’s daily experiences and as identified in numerous papers relating to quality ECEC (European Commission 2014, Melhuish 2015; Urban et al. 2011) the quality of the relationships in the ECEC setting are essential. Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) Bio Ecological Theory outlines how the proximal processes of person, space, context and time contribute to the quality of ECEC provision. This concept of dynamic, reciprocal relationships between individuals and their context is as Hayes (2013) confirms central to early childhood education and care, pedagogy and practice and supports a dynamic and transformative pedagogy. The key theoretical messages are presented in Figure 3.2.
Figure 3.2: A tentative conceptual model exploring the theoretical relationship between preschool educators' pedagogical approach and wellbeing and involvement of preschool children
3.7 Conclusion

This chapter was one of two chapters designated to present the literature reviewed which underpins this study. Section 3.2 provided an overview of the literature on wellbeing. This was followed by Section 3.3 which reviewed the literature on involvement and children’s deep learning. Section 3.4 presented the literature on Self-determination theory. Section 3.5 presented the literature on Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) bioecological theory. Finally, Section 3.6 looked at integrating the theory into a tentative conceptual model.
Chapter 4: Context

4.1 Introduction

The overall aim of this chapter is to provide an overview of the policy, legislation, regulation and practice underpinning early childhood education in both the Irish and Boston contexts. Section 4.2 will outline the context of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) of these components in Ireland, while Section 4.3 provides the context for ECEC in the United States. Section 4.4 provides a detailed context specifically for Boston. Section 4.5 will offer a comparative view of ECEC in Ireland and Boston.

4.2 The Context of Early Childhood Education and Care in Ireland

4.2.1 Policy Context: Defining ECEC in Ireland

ECEC is regarded as a ‘split’ system in the Irish context, embodying two different components, care and education (Kaga, Bennett and Moss, 2010). In Ireland, the care and educational elements of ECEC are the responsibility of two government departments: The Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) and the Department of Education and Skills (DES). Hayes (2008) suggests that the independent development of the educational and childcare sectors has been identified as one of the key difficulties facing the reform and development of early education in Ireland. This split system has led to a lack of clarity or clear identity for the Irish ECEC sector. The dual system is also reflected in the inspection of early childhood education and care settings. TUSLA- Child and Family Agency, inspects compliance with the Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016 (Government of Ireland, 2016). The curriculum content of preschools offering the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Scheme is inspected by the Department of Education and Skills Early Years Education Inspectorate (EYEI).

The most significant policy milestone in the history of early childhood education and care in Ireland was the introduction in 2010 by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) of a universal free preschool year. Currently all children aged more than two years and eight
months on the first of September in the relevant pre-school year are eligible for the scheme. The scheme, which was expanded in 2017, now provides for up to two years free preschool education per child. Children can avail of 15 hours of free preschool education per week, three hours per day, five days per week for 38 weeks of the year over two years. The most recent statistical age profile identifies that 331,515 children age 0-4 years live in Ireland, CSO (2016). *The Early Years Sector Profile Report 2017/2018* (Pobal Report, 2018) confirms that 96% of the eligible cohort are accessing the free preschool year in 2017/2018.

Childcare services taking part in the ECCE scheme must provide an appropriate pre-school educational programme which adheres to the principles of *Siolta*, The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (CECDE, 2006) and *Aistear*: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009). Conditions of funding include requirements for staff to hold minimum qualifications a level five vocational award in ECEC on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) and the preschool leader in the ECCE scheme room is required to hold a level six qualification (NFQ). A higher capitation is payable for employers employing ECEC graduates. The ECCE scheme is provided in both community and private early years settings with 4,242 early years settings under contract to deliver the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) scheme to 118,899 registered children (Pobal, 2018). There are two capitation rates payable to participating early years settings. The standard rate of €64.50 per child per week is paid when all staff working with the children meet the minimum qualification level. The minimum qualification is a vocational Level Six (NFQ) in ECEC for the room leader and all other staff are required to have a minimum vocational Level Five (NFQ) ECEC qualification. A higher capitation of €80.25 per child per week is paid when the preschool leader has a minimum Level Seven (NFQ) ordinary level degree qualification.

4.2.2 Investment

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2013) confirms that Ireland’s investment in early childhood education was
0.1% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) compared to the OECD average of 0.7% of GDP. In comparison, expenditure in Norway was 1.9% of GDP (OECD, 2013). International studies have used the figure of one percent of GDP as a benchmark for the level of annual investment required to achieve a high-quality system of early childhood education and care services (OECD, 2012). Figures from the EU Social Justice Index 2017 (Schraad-Tischler et al., 2017) indicate that Ireland continues to rank lowest among 28 EU countries for investment in pre-primary education. The figures from the OECD (2017) confirm that Ireland invests approximately 0.1% of GDP, which remains considerably lower than the EU average of 0.8%.

4.2.3 The Legislation and Regulation Context

The Children’s Act (1908) was a landmark piece of legislation for the care of children in Ireland. The Act introduced compulsory education and bestowed upon children a separate legal status, (Kiernan and Walsh, 2004). The 1908 Act legislated for the care of children in Ireland until 1991 when it was replaced by the Child Care Act 1991. The 1991 Act placed a specific responsibility or duty of care on the then Health Boards, since renamed as the Health Service Executive (HSE), in relation to the care and protection of children. This responsibility also extended under Part VII; of the Act to include the health, safety and wellbeing of preschool children attending preschool services. Irish ECEC settings were first legislated and regulated under the Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations 1996. The regulations were amended in 1997, and the first preschool inspections were conducted by preschool inspectors employed by the Health Board in 1997. In tandem with policy development and recommendations of the 1999 Report of the Partnership 2000 Expert Working Group on Childcare, the Children Act 2001 was introduced which was finally heralded as a full replacement for the 1908 act (Hayes, 2002). The Child Care (Pre-School Services) (Amendment) Regulations 1997 were revoked in 2006 and replaced with the Childcare (Pre-School Services) (No. 2) (Amendment) Regulations 2006 under Part VII; of the Child Care Act 1991. Following on from this, The Child and Family Agency Act 2013 amended Part VII of the
Child Care Act 1991. This resulted in a new agency TUSLA- Child and Family Agency, being established in January 2014.

TUSLA is now the dedicated state agency responsible for improving wellbeing and outcomes for children. All ECEC settings in the Republic of Ireland are now inspected by TUSLA Early Years Inspectors for compliance with the Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016 (Government of Ireland, 2016). The main change to the regulations in 2016 was the requirement for all ECEC providers who had previously notified the Health Service Executive of their existence to be registered with TUSLA before being permitted to operate an early years setting. A preschool service is defined under the regulations as a service offering a planned programme for preschool children for a total of no more than 3.5 hours per day.

The 2016 Early Years Services Regulations are presented in nine parts. The regulations encompass registration, management and staffing to include adult to child ratios. In the case of a preschool sessional service, the ratio is one adult to 11 children, age two years six months to six years, with a group size of no more than 22 children in a group. The regulations also apply to information and records in relation to the preschool children, information about the service and information for parents. The care of the child with regards to the child’s health, welfare and development and the safety of the premises including space requirements are all legislated within the regulations. The 2016 Regulations also introduced an outdoor space requirement, which was not previously required under the regulations. The remaining areas inspected under the regulations are notification and compliance and inspection and enforcement. Following inspection, Inspection reports are published on the TUSLA website.

In November 2015, the first ten early years education inspectors were appointed by the Department of Education and Skills (DES). The role of the DES inspectors is to evaluate the quality of education provision in early years settings participating in the ECCE scheme. The first early years education inspections were conducted in June 2016. The early years
education inspections (EYEI) evaluate key aspects of education provision in the preschool setting, such as the quality of the learning context and the quality of the processes which support children’s learning and development. The quality of children’s learning experiences and achievements and the quality of the management and leadership for learning are also assessed. Inspection reports are published on the DES and the DCYA websites.

4.2.4 The Practice Context

The Pobal (2018) report confirms that there are more than 4,543 early childhood education and care settings delivering government funded early years programmes in Ireland. Within these 4,543 ECEC settings, 185,580 children availed of at least one of the three government funded programmes in 2017/2018. The three, government funded childcare programmes are the Early Childhood Care and Education scheme (ECCE), the Community Childcare Subvention Scheme (CCS) and the Training and Employment Childcare scheme (TEC).

The breakdown of the management structures of the settings identifies that 68% of the settings were under private management and 32% were community managed not-for-profit settings. Geographically, 66% of all ECEC settings are in urban areas. The report estimates that there are approximately 29,555 staff working in the early years sector in Ireland, with 25,893 of those staff working directly with children. The gender profile of staff working in Irish early childhood education and care settings, highlights that 98% of staff who work with children are female and two percent are male. This gender breakdown of staff working in the ECEC sector is in keeping with the European average of two to three percent of male staff working in ECEC, which is well below the 10% recommended level to combat gender stereotyping (European Commission, 2013, cited in Pobal, 2016, p.72). A total of 94% of all staff working with children in Irish ECEC settings reported having a qualification equal to or higher than Level five vocational award on the National Framework for Qualifications (NFQ). A further 65% have a qualification equal or higher than NFQ level six vocational award and 21% have a level seven, primary degree or higher on
the NFQ. A total of 42% of settings state they provide a Montessori based approach to curriculum, with 59% stating they provide a play-based approach and 3% stating they offer an ‘other’ curricular approach (Pobal, 2018).

4.2.5 Pedagogical Approach to ECEC in Ireland

A total of 59% of ECEC providers who participated in the Pobal (2018) sector profile survey stated that their pedagogical approach is a Play-based approach. This is not surprising taking into consideration that Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009) is a play-based curriculum.

4.2.5.1 Montessori in Irish Preschool Settings.

Maria Montessori is recognised internationally as being a significant figure in the world of early years education with the Montessori approach to preschool education being practiced around the world (Whitescarver and Cossentino, 2008). Founded in Rome in 1907, the Montessori approach to ECEC is implemented in many preschools across the globe. In Ireland the Pobal (2018) report identifies that 42% of preschool providers have identified that they offer a Montessori curriculum in their preschool setting. Figures from the 2018 Pobal report highlight that in Ireland 56% of mainly private providers in urban locations offer a Montessori curriculum. St Nicolas Montessori Society of Ireland offers a degree programme on a fulltime and part-time basis. There is also a voluntary organisation Montessori and Early Childcare Professionals Ireland established in 2008. The group provides an online community of practice, which offers preschool educators a space for critical thinking, reflection, and discussions about practice. It promotes the sharing of ideas and resources to support ECEC professionals. The group has over 6000 members, Montessori & Early Childhood Professionals Ireland.

4.2.5.2 Aistear the Irish play-based curriculum

Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009) was developed by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
(NCCA). *Aistear* is the curricular framework for children from birth to six years in Ireland. The framework provides information for educators and parents to help them to provide enjoyable challenging learning experiences.

“The aspiration is that these early years experiences will support children’s learning so that children can ‘grow and develop as competent and confident learners within loving relationships with other’ (NCCA, 2009, p.6)

The importance of supporting children’s learning through partnership with parents, interactions, play and assessment is core to the early childhood curriculum framework. The framework is based on twelve principles of early learning and development. The principles are presented in three groups with the first group being, ‘children and their lives in early childhood’. It is pertinent that the first basic principle of *Aistear* ‘the child’s uniqueness’ recognises that each child has a unique life story, with his or her own set of experiences. The image of the child as presented in *Aistear* is that of an active learner within an ecological framework. *Aistear*: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009) presents children’s learning and development using four themes: wellbeing, identity and belonging, communicating and exploring, and thinking. This curricular approach, according to Neylon (2014) promotes a relational pedagogy and is rooted in both postmodern pedagogy and a rights-based perspective. Relational pedagogical approaches are, according to Dahlberg et al. (2004) more likely than traditional pedagogies to regard children as active democratic participants in their own learning in partnership with adults.

*Aistear*: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009) refers to play as a way of ‘doing things’ and the characteristics of play in *Aistear* are described as being, active, adventurous, communicative, enjoyable, involved, meaningful, sociable and interactive, symbolic, therapeutic and voluntary. In developing *Aistear*, the NCCA commissioned four research papers. ‘Play as a context for early learning and development’ (Kernan, 2007) suggests that play is a primary medium for learning. In agreement Bennett (2005) concludes that play is essential,
‘not just because children like to play, but also for its voluntary and experiential features (and) its importance for identity formation, expression and social learning’ (Bennett, p.29).

**Aistear:** The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009) recognises that children love to play; children play for many different reasons, sometimes they are exploring or learning new things, at other times they are consolidating their existing learning, practising new skills, interpreting situations or events or simply having fun. The *Aistear* curriculum provides information for all adults, early childhood educators and parents to help them plan for and provide enjoyable and challenging learning experiences, so that children can grow and develop as competent and confident learners (NCCA, 2009).

### 4.2.6 Workforce

“A well–educated workforce working directly with children, sensitive to the complexity of the role, will enhance the quality of early learning experiences for children and ultimately benefit everyone”.

(Hayes, 2010, p.69)

The workforce development plan for the early childhood care and education sector in Ireland was launched in 2010 by the DES. Workforce development has been identified as ‘central to the delivery of high-quality experiences and environments for young children’ (Government of Ireland, 2010, p.1). It is recognised and considered an important contributor and indicator of quality service provision (Sylva et al., 2010; Melhuish *et al.*, 2015).

**First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028** (Government of Ireland, 2018), the new strategy for babies, young children and their families 2019-2028 is committed to a new workforce development plan for the ECEC sector (Government of Ireland, 2018). The introduction of the ECCE scheme in 2010 stipulated that all staff working with children accessing the scheme were required to have a minimum childcare qualification. This was the first time that individuals working in ECEC settings in Ireland had a policy requirement linked to funding. As a commitment to supporting the upskilling of the
early childhood education and care sector in 2014, the DCYA launched the ‘Learner Fund’. The learner fund subsidised the cost of training for staff working directly with children in ECEC settings. The aim of the programme was to upskill staff to meet the requirements of the impending amended childcare regulations. To date a total of €5m funding has been committed to this initiative; more than 3,194 applicants were approved for funding (Pobal, 2016). In 2017, in recognition of the number of early years educators who had upskilled to Degree or master’s level since the inception of the Learner Fund in early childhood education, the DCYA provided a bursary of €750 per person. The Learner Fund is currently closed to applications.

With the publication of The Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016, (Government of Ireland, 2016) a minimum qualification level, NFQ level five vocational qualification, is now a regulatory requirement for all staff working directly with children in registered ECEC settings. For preschool settings funded under the ECCE scheme, room leaders must hold a minimum NFQ level six vocational major award as a requirement of the ECCE scheme contract. A higher capitation incentive was introduced in 2016 for settings with staff working in the preschool, ECCE scheme rooms, who have a staff member who holds a NFQ level seven primary degree qualification who is working with an assistant staff member who has achieved a minimum NFQ level five vocational qualification, (Pobal, 2016). The Pobal (2018) report states that the average hourly rate of pay for staff working in the sector is €12.17 per hour.

The inextricable link between the professionalisation of ECEC practitioners and quality provision has been a central debate on the European platform in recent years and countries are increasingly recognising the need to reform and reconceptualise the early childhood workforce (Urban, 2008; Urban et al. 2011, 2017). The European Commission in the CoRE report recommends that 60% of the early years workforce should be trained to degree level (Urban et al., 2011). A review of occupational role profiles in ECEC in Ireland by Urban et al. (2017) highlights the need to develop a competent system as outlined in the CoRE report. This competent system
requires a systemic approach which includes workforce development as a key ‘pillar of quality’ together with the implementation of the national practice frameworks, Síolta, The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (CECDE, 2006) and Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009).

4.2.7 Quality

Síolta, The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (CECDE, 2006), was developed to coordinate and develop ECEC in Ireland, as outlined in the objectives of the, ‘Ready to Learn White Paper on Early Childhood Education’ (Government of Ireland, DES, 1999). Síolta is based on international research which focuses on the overall quality of the early childhood setting (Hayes, 2013). The aim of the framework which was published in 2006 is to support the improvement of quality practice in all ECEC settings catering for children aged 0-6 years, including child minders, centre-based childcare and preschools. The objective of Síolta is to define, assess and support the improvement of quality in childcare settings (CECDE, 2006). All preschool settings participating in the ECCE scheme are required under their funding contract with the DCYA to commit to engage with Síolta, The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (CECDE, 2006). The framework comprises of three distinct but interrelated elements, Principles, Standards and Components of Quality. The 12 Principles provide the overall vision of the quality Framework and the 16 Standards and 75 Components allow for the practical application in the early childhood setting. Formal engagement with Síolta (CECDE, 2006) happens through a support and mentoring programme provided by the National Early Years Quality Development Service, Better Start, National Voluntary Childcare Organizations and the County Childcare Committees.

In May 2015, DCYA launched, Better Start, National Early Years Quality Development Service. The aim of the service is to establish a single, cohesive approach to quality across the ECEC sector in Ireland. The primary focus of the initiative is to provide quality early years mentoring support to childcare providers. The quality mentoring service is a resource
to support and drive quality improvement in the ECEC sector. Better Start provides skilled and experienced early years specialist teams to work directly in a mentoring capacity with early years services. The role of the mentors is to complement and support other quality resources such as training, continuing professional development programmes, networking, cluster-type support groups and individual or team-based development work provided by the City and County Childcare Committees and the Voluntary Childcare Organisations. The Better Start Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) was introduced in 2016. The programme is a model of supports which are designed to ensure that children with disabilities can access the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) scheme. The goal of the Access and Inclusion Model is to empower ECEC providers to deliver an inclusive pre-school experience, ensuring that every eligible child can fully participate in the ECCE scheme and reap the benefits of quality early years care and education.

4.2.8 County Childcare Committees and National Voluntary Childcare Organisations

City and County Childcare Committees were established in 2001 to support and assist families and childcare providers with childcare provision at local county level. The 30 City and County Childcare Committees which are funded by the DCYA are located nationwide. The role of the Childcare Committees is to coordinate the implementation of the national childcare policy and programmes at a local level on behalf of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs. An essential role of the Childcare Committees is to facilitate and support the development of quality, accessible childcare services for children and their parents. They do this under Better Start, The National Early Years Quality Development Service.

4.2.8.1 National Voluntary Childcare Organisations (NVCO).

The role of the National Voluntary Childcare Organisations (NVCO’) is to provide support services and represent the interests of Early Childhood Education and Care services and parents nationwide. The National Voluntary Childcare Organisations (NVCO’s) are funded by the DCYA,
they provide support to over 4,400 ECCE scheme service providers. There are seven NVCO’s funded by the DCYA. These include Barnardo’s, Childminding Ireland, Early Childhood Ireland, Irish Steiner Kindergarten Association, National Childhood Network, National Parents Council and St. Nicholas Montessori Teachers Association/Society of Ireland. The type of supports NVCO’s provide to the ECEC sector and parents include professional development, training, quality mentoring, guidance on funding programmes and through their work they inform policy with subsequent improvement in quality provision and standards.

4.2.8.2 Children and Young Peoples’ Services Committees.

The 27 locally based Children and Young People’s Services Committees are the strategic interagency structure that brings together the main statutory, community and voluntary providers of services for children and young people aged 0-24 years and families in the county or local authority area. The role of CYPSC is to enhance interagency co-operation and to realise the five National Outcomes for children and young people, as set out in Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures, the National Policy Framework for Children and Young People, 2014-2020 (DCYA, 2014).


First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028 (Government of Ireland, 2018) was launched in December 2018. The long-awaited strategy for the ECEC sector is a follow on from; The National Children’s Strategy; Our Children - Their Lives (2000) and, Better Outcomes Brighter Futures; The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014-2020 (DCYA, 2014). First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028 (Government of Ireland, 2018) sets out at policy level how a system of integrated, cross sectoral and high-quality supports and services will be prioritised to support an effective early leaning and care system. The strategy identifies four strategic goals. These goals include supporting families and communities, promoting young children’s optimal
physical and mental health, supporting positive play-based early learning and ensuring effective childhood systems.

4.3 The Context of Early Childhood Education in the United States

The policy, legislation, regulation and practice context as it relates to the United States will now be presented. This will be followed by a review of the Boston context. There is no statutory entitlement for children to early childhood education and care provision in the US. However, most States and school districts are obliged to offer kindergarten or preschool programs. As a result, forty-four States and the District of Columbia have a state preschool program or are piloting one. Governance and system management in the US is primarily at the state and local level, with some federal responsibilities shared between federal agencies such as the Department of Education, the Department of Health and Human Services and the Department of Defence (Barnett et al., 2015). During the 2013–2014 school year, 29% of four-year olds and three percent of three-year-olds accessed a state funded programme with more than 1.3 million children attending state-funded preschool, including 1.1 million at age four (Barnett et al., 2015). Early years settings are in private homes, centre-based settings or in schools. Opening hours vary depending on the need; some operate to meet the needs of working parents; others operate for half days. Responsibility for the regulation of early childhood services is concentrated at the state level. Staff qualifications, training and remuneration are complex due to the decentralized nature of the system. Early childhood education and care staff include lead teachers, teachers, assistant teachers and aides. Group sizes and staff to child ratios are set at the state licensing level. However, many states with ECEC initiatives set class size and ratio requirements that are consistent with standards developed jointly by the American Public Health Association (APHA) and the American Academy of Paediatrics’ (AAP) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) (Barnett et al, 2015).
4.3.1 Pre-Kindergarten and Preschool in the United States

The International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED 2011) (UNESCO, 2012) provides a comprehensive framework for organizing education programs and qualification by applying uniform and internationally agreed definitions to facilitate comparisons of education systems across countries. In the US Level 0 of the ISCED framework is the programme which facilitates care and education for children from birth to kindergarten age. Kindergarten age in the US is usually between the age of five and six years and the last year of ISCED 0 is the child’s year in kindergarten (Pre-primary or the Irish preschool equivalent). The preschool programme may be offered free or at a subsidised rate for low-income families. The alternative for families accessing private schools is costly in the US. The majority of ECEC settings catering for children age birth to five years are private fee-based schools. While there are some state or federally funded programmes, most of these programmes are not universally available to all age eligible, children in the US (Barnett et al., 2015).

4.3.2 State and Federally Funded Programmes in the United States

Head Start and Early Head Start are federally funded programs. Head Start is available to children age 3-5 years not yet enrolled in kindergarten from low-income families. The aim of the programme is to support school readiness. Early Head Start is a programme for 0-3-year olds. There are other grants available in the US such as Title 1, which is a federal grant programme which provides educational assistance to families living in high poverty areas. Over 600,000 children access preschool programs funded through federal Title I allocations to school districts and schools (Bertram and Pascal, et al, 2016). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) provides that all children with disabilities are entitled to a free appropriate public education. There is a further grant, The Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG), which provides low-income families with assistance in obtaining early education and care. Two new programs which aim to improve quality provision, the preschool development grants program, supports states to enhance quality preschool to children from low-
to moderate-income families. The Early Head Start-Child Care Partnerships support local programs to improve the quality provision. Other funding mechanisms to support children’s access to preschool programmes include tax credits, vouchers and reduced fees (Bertram and Pascal et al, 2016).

4.3.3 The Legislation and Regulation Context in the United States.

In the United States each state has its own licensing inspection, with programmes receiving federal government funding which is monitored and inspected by federal government officials. The results of inspections are made available widely. The following are some of the general regulatory requirements in the US. Staff to child ratios is generally one adult per 10 children for three to five-year-olds, and a group size of 20. The health and safety regulations are set at the state licensing level in relation to health and safety, child protection, and staff vetting procedures. There is no national curriculum; however, there is guidance or recommendations on elements that should be covered in a curriculum for under-threes and children aged from three to five years. There are accreditation and inspection processes to support quality assurance. Accreditation is voluntary and accessed through various bodies such as National Association for the Education of Young Children, (NAEYC), Head Start Renewal system, Montessori, Reggio Emilia Alliance, and the International Baccalaureate Primary Years Program (Bertram and Pascal et al, 2016).

4.3.4 The Practice: Workforce Context in the United States

The Early Childhood Workforce Index 2016 (Whitebook et al., 2016) suggests that high quality early care and education depends on teachers who are skilled at nurturing children’s curiosity and learning. In the US each state determines the levels of qualifications for educators. Exceptions to this are Early Head Start, Head Start, and Department of Defence childcare programs whose rules are established by the federal government (Whitebook et al., 2016, p.27). Bertram and Pascal et al. (2016) identified six main categories of staff to support children’s learning. These include staff who work with children in early childhood education development
programmes (ECED) (under the age of three years) and staff who work with children age three to six years in a pre-primary education programme (PPE).

In settings catering for children age three to six years, there is no requirement for the lead teacher to have a formal qualification unless the setting is receiving Head Start or Early Head Start funding. Kindergarten Teachers who work with children age 5/6 years in public or private kindergarten are required to hold an ISCED level 5 vocational qualifications. They are also required to undertake 15 hours CPD per year. Directors or managers are required to have a qualification in management to ISCED level 6 qualifications. The range of qualification of educators working in ECEC settings varies from individuals who have graduated from high school or less to master’s Level. It is suggested that the low qualifications which have been set at a State level for educators working with children age birth to five years results in teaching in early childhood education in the United States is considered low skilled work (Whitebook et al., 2016).

Barnett et al. (2015) identify that 55.2% of teachers and 26% of assistant teachers hold a degree or higher. Salaries for staff with a degree or higher in the US range from $30,000 to $50,000 per year. For other grades of staff at vocational level, salaries range from $15,000 to $30,000 (Whitebook et al., 2016). Interestingly, bachelor’s degrees in early childhood education in the US have the distinction of being ‘the college major with the lowest projected lifetime earnings’ (Whitebook et al., 2016, p.16).

4.4 The Context of Early Childhood Education and Care in Boston, Massachusetts

4.4.1 The Policy Context

Boston, the capital city of MA covers 48 sq. miles and has an estimated population of 673,184 people. There are 438,615 children, or 5.2%, (United States Census Bureau) aged between birth and five years, with 71% of these children living in households where all available parents are working. A total of 15% of all children living in MA come from low-income families (CSCCE, 2016, p.1). The 2015 statistics state that there are 14,249 3-4-
year-old children in Boston, with 7,990 children enrolled in preschool. A total of 52% of children or 4,151 children are enrolled in public preschools, and 48% or 3,839 children are enrolled in private preschools (United States Census Bureau 2016). There are approximately 275,000 children who participate in the estimated 12,000 licensed programs in MA as well as children and youth who participate in licensed-exempt programmes (Schilder et al., 2011). There are 31 Head Start programs for children age three to five years in Boston. Head Start programs offer free services to families who live in Boston and meet federal low-income guidelines. Families who receive public assistance or other benefits may also be eligible. Many of the Head Start Programs are located within Boston Public schools. Boston City Department of Human Services and Cambridge Department of Human Services also offer subsidized preschool to qualifying families. A total of 52% of children or 4,151 children are enrolled in public preschools in Boston (US Census Bureau, 2016).

The Economic Policy Institute (2016) states that childcare and preschool education in Boston is expensive and is ranked second out of 50 States for the highest cost of infant childcare. Childcare costs make up a substantial amount of the household budget in Boston. The average cost of childcare for a four-year-old in MA costs $12,781 annually or $1,065 per month. Childcare is one of the biggest expense’s families face, costing 15.3% more than the average rent. Currently 48% of children are enrolled in private preschools in Boston (US Census Bureau, 2016). Tuition fees for parents for a preschool child to access one of the preschools participating in this study is $18,950 per school year for a five day per week 20-hour Programme, paid over nine months (US Census Bureau, 2016).

4.4.2 Licensure or Approval of Large Group Programmes in Massachusetts.

In Massachusetts, a license is required to provide an early childhood education and care service which caters for 11 or more unrelated children on a regular basis. The license category, a large group license, is issued for early education and care centres, childcare centres, day care centres, nursery schools, preschools, child development programs, school age childcare
programs and before and after school programs by the Department of Early Education and Care State Office. Licenses are valid for three years from the date of issue unless revoked, suspended or made probationary (Massachusetts Government, 2012).

4.4.3 Standards for the Licensure of Large Groups in Massachusetts

The Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care was established in 2005,

“to provide supports for children in their development as lifelong learners and contributing members of the community, and to support families in their essential work as parents and caregivers”. (Massachusetts Government, ECE Standards and Curriculum Guidelines, 2012)

The Department of Early Education and Care is responsible for the licensing, monitoring and evaluation of early education and care programs in the state of MA. The Department is also responsible for providing financial assistance to support the provision of childcare services to low-income families, provide information and referral services, parenting support and professional development opportunities for staff working in early education and care settings (Massachusetts Government, 2019). Licensing standards were developed by the Department of Early Education and Care, MA to support quality early childhood experiences. The regulations apply to all programs in MA providing non-residential care to children under the age of 14 years outside of their own home regardless of the type of care setting (Massachusetts Government, Department of Education and Care, 2012).

There are fourteen standards for licensure of childcare settings. Preschool children are defined as being between 33 months and school age. Preschools operate for a half-day; the maximum group size is 24 children for this age group. The adult child ratio is 1:12 with at least one of the adults being a qualified preschool teacher. The health and safety regulations consider policies and procedures for child protection, accidents and incidents, administration of medication, infection control and emergency procedures. Details of the food and nutrition requirements are outlined in
standard 7.12. This standard also provides details of food handling and hygiene training required by staff and daily nutritional requirements for children attending the setting. Regulations in relation to transportation and insurance are also included.

The regulations outline that educators ‘must be’, nurturing and responsive to children’s individual needs and support their development of self-esteem, self-expression, autonomy, social competence and school readiness. A well-balanced curriculum of specific, planned learning experiences which support children’s holistic development is required. The Physical Facilities standard outlines the requirements for the indoor and outdoor environments and Standard 7.07 gives detailed requirements regarding family involvement. This includes direction regarding parent communication, parent input, parent visits, and enrolment meetings. An additional requirement for family childcare licensing is the notification in writing to the parents of the existence of a firearm in the family childcare home, (Massachusetts Government, Early Education and Care 2012).

The regulation on educator qualifications and professional development outlines the qualifications and experience required for each post and the legal requirement for in-service training of staff. The standard clearly states the number of hours of professional development required annually by staff with educators working more than twenty hours per week being required to have at least twenty hours of professional development activities per year. The regulations provide a list of recognised qualifications for lead preschool teachers. These include a minimum of a high school diploma in early childhood education and care studies and three years’ work experience, or a bachelor’s degree in early childhood education and nine months of work experience. Early childhood education settings with more than 27 children are required to employ an administrator for 50% of the opening hours, while settings with more than forty children are required to employ a full-time administrator. The administrator is required to have a minimum of a bachelor’s degree in Early Childhood Education and Care; in addition, the administrator must have six months of administrative experience or have
completed at least nine credits in management or administration from a higher education institution.

4.4.4 Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) in MA

The MA Department of Early Education and Care (EEC) began the development of a voluntary Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) in 2008. The QRIS was launched in December 2010 (Schilder et al., 2011). The aim of the QRIS is to assess, improve, and communicate the level of quality in early care and education and after-school settings (Mitchell, 2005). According to the Department of Early Education and Care, the QRIS was developed to help families, communities, and policymakers understand what constitutes quality, while also providing guidance and support to ECEC professionals. There are five key indicators of quality upon which the standards were developed. The five indicators include curriculum and learning; safe, healthy indoor and outdoor environments; workforce qualifications and professional development; family and community engagement and leadership and the fifth indicator, management and administration. The QRIS Standards are presented in terms of levels, which correspond to a QRIS rating scale. The levels are organized in a series of blocks that outline the indicators for quality within each category. There are four QRIS levels.

Early childhood settings which meet the minimum legal standards of licensing may create a QRIS application (Massachusetts Government, 2016). Quality evaluation is measured by self-assessment using the QRIS tool. Programs are granted level two through an online application and verification programme. This includes completing an environmental rating scale self-assessment using, The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised (ECERS) as part of their QRIS Level 2-4 application. Level two online self-assessment validation is valid for two years from date of issue. The requirements to achieve level three and four include onsite validation by program quality specialists. If the validation scores meet the requirements, the program will be granted a level four status. This status is valid for two years, with the option to extend an additional two years. A
report commissioned by the Department of Education, MA, and conducted by, Kagan, Reid and Scott-Little (2013), cited in Massachusetts Government, 2015) recommended that greater attention needed to be paid to children’s social and emotional development and approaches towards play and learning. As a result, a stand-alone standard for social and emotional learning and approaches towards play and learning was developed. The social-emotional learning standards present objectives in five areas: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision making (Department of Education, MA, 2015).

4.4.5 The Practice: Workforce Context in MA

There are 438,615 zero to five-year olds living in MA and 26,840 members of the early childhood teaching workforce (CSCCE, 2016). All licensed providers in MA must have a minimum of a Child Development Associate (CDA) which is an organised competency-based credential. A Child Development Associate qualification recognises the educator as having foundational knowledge and skills essential for early childhood educators. The vocational training diploma which can be completed over one or two semesters can also serve as an entry point into college (CSCCE, 2016). Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care published ‘Core Competencies for Early Education and Care and Out of School Time’ (Massachusetts Government, 2010). The document identifies eight core competencies required by early childhood educators, these include educators having an understanding of growth and development, guiding and interacting with children, partnering with families and communities, health safety and nutrition, creating learning environments and curriculum, observation, planning and documentation, programme planning and development and professionalism and leadership.

Preschool educators’ salaries are dictated by the school management type and school type, public, Head Start programmes and Public Pre-K programmes or private schools. The median hourly salary for kindergarten teachers in MA employed by the Department of Education is $32.29 per hour as opposed to $15.18 per hour for a preschool teacher and $12.01 for a
childcare worker. Because of low salary rates in MA, 39% of childcare worker families are in receipt of one or more public income supports at a cost of $35.6 million to the state of MA (CSCCE, 2016, p.2).

4.4.6 Pedagogical Approach: Context of Reggio Inspired Approach to ECEC in the US / Boston.

Two of the three settings participating in this study are Reggio inspired preschools, the third preschool was a play-based setting. The following is a brief overview of the Reggio philosophy to ECEC. Reggio Emilia, a city in northern Italy in the Emilia Romagna region, has become recognised internationally for its early years educational approach which has been described as a beacon of light in the context of education (Edwards et al., 1998). The infant toddler centres and preschools of Reggio Emilia question the current dominant discourses in early childhood and offer alternative narratives to an area which now encompasses a multitude of perspectives and debates (Cagliari et al., 2016). Loris Malaguzzi, the founder of the Reggio approach, had a vision for a new kind of school and educational system for young children. Malaguzzi wanted schools, ‘free from charitable tendencies, not merely custodial and not discriminatory in any way’ (Malaguzzi, 2012, cited in Cagliari et al., 2016, p.6). As a psychologist, Malaguzzi suggested that traditional schooling pushed pre-packed knowledge into children and was a stultified model of education. The vision for education in Reggio Emilia is an approach to education which provides.

“New ways to think about the nature of the child as a learner, the role of the teacher, school organization and management, the design and use of physical environments, and curriculum planning”.

(Edwards et al, 1998, p.7)

In this environment,

“Learning and teaching should not stand on opposite banks and just watch the river flow by; instead, they should embark together on a journey down the water. Through an active, reciprocal exchange, teaching can strengthen learning how to learn”.


This system of early childhood education and care is embedded in the history and culture of the Emilia Romagna region and the city of Reggio
Emilia which is described by Putnam (1993, cited in Edwards et al., 1998) as being,

“Found to have a very high level of civic community, citizens bound together by horizontal relations and social solidarity, reciprocity and co-operation as opposed to vertical relations of authority and dependency”.

(Edwards et al., 1998, p.8)

4.4.6.1 The history of the Reggio Approach to ECEC.

Following world war II in 1945, parents, particularly women, wanted a better life for their children and education was considered, ‘a tool, a weapon against poverty, ignorance, arrogance; education as a tool for freedom’ (Rinaldi, 2006, p.179). When socialism became more influential in Italy from the end of the nineteenth century, women became more aware of their rights and an increasing awareness of women’s rights was linked to an increasing awareness of children’s rights. As women became aware of their own rights they began to demand as a right a place to leave their children so that they could work, but it had to be, according to Rinaldi (2006) a public place and a quality place. The city of Reggio Emilia subsequently established an educational system. This educational system was established through the collaborative efforts of parents, teachers and the community under the guidance of Loris Malaguzzi, an early childhood educator and psychologist. Malaguzzi’s vision for education in Reggio Emilia was an approach to education which provides.

“….new ways to think about the nature of the child as a learner, the role of the teacher, school organization and management, the design and use of physical environments, and curriculum planning”.

(Edwards et al, 1998, p.7)

4.4.6.2 North America Reggio Emilia Alliance:

The North American Reggio Emilia Alliance (NAREA) is a membership-based organization which exists to connect early childhood educators and advocates together in discovering, interpreting, and promoting Reggio Emilia inspired education in America. The role of NAREA as, identified on their website is to mobilize educators, parents and policymakers to play a
collective role in moving the value of early childhood education to a position of priority. This happens through conferences, networking, and resource sharing. In undertaking this work the aim of NAREA is to advance, inspire and bring about innovative practices, which supports quality and excellence in ECEC. Boston Area Reggio Inspired Network (BARIN) is the regional group in Boston which supports professional growth and development of educators interested in expanding their knowledge of the Reggio Emilia Approach to early childhood education.

4.5 Comparison of ECEC in Ireland and Boston

There are similarities and differences between the two geographical locations. The land area of the island of Ireland is 70,283 sq. km. It has a population of 4.76 million, of which 387,000 are aged zero to four years old (CSO, 2016). In comparison, the land area of Boston is 27,430 sq. km. It has a population of 667,137 (2016) with 4.7 million living in the greater Boston Area (World Population Review, 2018) and there are 438,615 birth to 5-year olds living in Boston (CSCCE, 2016).

4.5.1 Policy

Both jurisdictions have a governing agency with responsibility for early childhood education and care. In Ireland the DCYA, DES and TUSLA-Child and Family Agency, have responsibility for registration, regulation and quality of ECEC provision. In Boston the Department for Early Education and Care in the Executive Office of Education MA Government has responsibility for ECEC. A total of 68% of preschools in Ireland are privately owned and managed with 32% managed by community board of management (Pobal, 2018). In Boston the ratio of public to private is 48% private and 52% public. In total 56% of the eligible cohort of children currently access preschool provision (CSCCE, 2016). In comparison, in Ireland 96% of the eligible cohort access their free preschool year (Pobal, 2018). This high number is primarily as result of the existence of two years universal free preschool in Ireland in both private and community preschools. In comparison, Boston is ranked second out of 50 States for the highest cost of infant childcare with the cost of preschool in private fee-
paying preschools in Boston being on average $1,065 per month. Funding in Boston is accessed by preschools within the Boston public school’s system. State funding is not paid to private preschool providers. In Ireland state funding for preschool education is accessible to both community and private providers. Both Ireland and Boston operate a split system of early childhood education and care, with childcare for children age zero to three years and early childhood education being identified as being for children age 3-6 years.

4.5.2 Legislation and Regulation

The quality of early childhood education and care is regulated in both Ireland and Boston. Preschool settings are required to register with TUSLA- Child and Family Agency in Ireland. Preschool settings in Boston are required to be licensed and comply with licensing standards of the MA Department of Early Education and Care. Many of the regulatory standards are similar, particularly in relation to adult to child ratios, health, safety and hygiene and space requirements. However, a notable difference in the regulations between Ireland and Boston is the legislative requirement in Boston for all staff to undertake specific continuous professional development, based on their employment contracts. There is also a greater emphasis in the Boston regulations on leadership, management and administration with a legal requirement for settings to employ qualified administration staff.

Both Ireland and Boston have voluntary quality programmes with many similarities. Síolta is the national quality practice framework in Ireland and Boston has the Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS). Both programmes are graded on a four-point scale. In Boston, ECEC settings can self-assess and register online to be graded at level two, while in Ireland; engagement with the formal Síolta programme involves engagement with a mentor and onsite validation only. Policy makers in Ireland and Boston have also identified the need to regulate settings to support children’s social and emotional development and approach to play and learning. This was introduced in Boston with the introduction of an additional standard, social
and emotional development and approaches to play and learning. Equally, *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*, together with specific emphasis on play in the preschool regulations and inspection of preschools by the DES, provides many similarities in Ireland to the Boston system.

### 4.5.3 Practice

Workforce development was introduced in Boston in 2005 and there is a clear professional path for ECEC professionals (CSCCE, 2016). In Ireland the workforce development plan introduced in 2010 is currently being redrafted following a review of the occupational profiles in ECEC in Ireland by Urban et al. (2017). Core competencies were identified by the Massachusetts Department of Early Childhood Education in 2010. In Ireland following on from the review by Urban et al. (2017), a consultation document on draft professional award criteria and guidelines for initial professional education (levels 7 and 8) degree programmes in early childhood education and care in Ireland was circulated by the DES in 2018. A working group was set up in 2019 to develop professional award criteria guidelines for initial professional education at degree and vocational level in Ireland. There are notable differences in the staff qualification levels between Ireland and Boston. At least one staff member working in each preschool in Boston has a bachelor’s degree in ECEC or equivalent, with 53% of kindergarten teachers in the US having a bachelor’s degree or higher (Barnette et al., 2015). In Ireland there are currently 21% of staff working in the sector with a level seven (ordinary level) degree or higher (Pobal, 2018). This contrasts with the recommended 60% degree-led profession identified in the CoRE report as a requirement of quality provision (Urban et al., 2011). Similarly, in both Ireland and Boston the workforce is primarily staffed by women. There are only 2% of male educators working directly with children in both Boston and Ireland. The most significant difference between both locations is the issue of access. In Ireland, preschool education is a universal provision and recognised as a fundamental right for all children, regardless of parents’ status. In Boston, only children from low-income families can access subsidised preschool
education. This results in a two-tier system, which was very evident during the fieldwork and data collection in Boston.

4.5.3.1: Qualifications and Salaries

Qualification standards:

The International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) (UNESCO, 2012) is a framework for assembling, compiling and analysing cross-nationally comparable statistics on education. ISCED is a member of the United Nations International Family of Economic and Social Classifications and is the reference classification for organizing education programmes and related qualifications by levels and fields of education (UNESCO, 2011). The revision of the ISCED (1997) levels in 2011, concentrated primarily on changes to the levels of education of programmes (ISCED-P) and introduced, for the first time, a classification of levels of educational attainment based on qualifications (ISCED-A).

Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), maintains the National Framework of Qualifications as a system of levels for relating different qualifications or awards to one another in Ireland. The levels for each award type are described in terms of indicators of a person’s knowledge, skill and competence which are required to obtain a standard or learning achievements. Award descriptors provide benchmark statements about the learning achievements required to attain an NFQ award-type such as an Honours Bachelor’s Degree or an Advanced Certificate. Figure 4.3 provides a comparison between qualification standards in Ireland and Boston.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Levels</th>
<th>QQI (Ireland)</th>
<th>ISCED (Boston)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level 4</td>
<td>Certificate vocational, secondary education</td>
<td>Post-secondary, non-tertiary education, vocational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 5</td>
<td>Certificate vocational, post-secondary education</td>
<td>Short-cycle tertiary education vocational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 6</td>
<td>Higher Certificate Vocational</td>
<td>Bachelor’s Degree or equivalent</td>
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<td>Level 7</td>
<td>Ordinary Bachelor’s Degree</td>
<td>Master’s Degree</td>
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<td>Level 8</td>
<td>Honours Bachelor’s degree</td>
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<tr>
<td>Level 10</td>
<td>Doctoral Degree</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
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Figure 4.3: Comparing Qualification standards in Ireland and Boston

Qualifications to work in preschool in the United States, Boston MA:

The Early Childhood Workforce Index 2016 (Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, 2016), states that ECEC is recognised as a public good which contributes to many economic and social benefits. The 50 states in the US and the District of Columbia each set their own qualification standards for early educators from entry to administrator level. The requirements vary widely not only across states, but within states depending on the setting and the sources of funding available. Typically, there may be one set of qualifications for teaching staff and site administrators in centre-based childcare and yet another for public preschools. There are other qualifications which are set by the federal government for military childcare, Early Head Start, and Head Start programs. Details from the Early Childhood Workforce Index (2018), clearly identifies the discrepancies between the salaries of preschool teachers and kindergarten and elementary school teachers (CSCCE, 2018).

In Boston Massachusetts, all teachers must have an Early Childhood Certification. Public school teachers must have a pre-K to grade 2 certifications. Non-public school teachers must be certified by the Department of Early Education and Care. Teachers must either be 21 years old or have a high school diploma and must complete a 3-credit college course in child growth and development (Barnett, 2015). Preschools catering for children age three to six years have no requirement for the lead
teacher to have a formal qualification unless the setting is receiving Head Start or Early Head Start funding. In these public schools there is a requirement for the preschool educator to have an ISCED level 5 vocational qualifications. Preschool educators are also required to undertake 15 hours CPD per year and directors or managers are required to have a qualification in management to ISCED level 6 qualification.

Qualifications to work in preschool in Ireland:

Qualifications to work in an Early Years service in Ireland are identified in the legislation in *The Child Care Act (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016* (Government of Ireland 2016) which confirms that; all staff working directly with children must hold a minimum of QQI Level 5 Major Award in Early Childhood Care and Education. QQI are the awarding body for Quality and Qualifications Ireland. The criteria for a Level 5, vocational award are outlined in the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). The NFQ is a formal system describing qualifications. Ireland is one of 47 countries who participated in the Bologna Process committed to producing a National Qualifications Framework. The only exception to the requirement to have a level 5 QQI award in Early Childhood Care and Education when working in an Irish Early Years service is where, an employee has signed a declaration (*grandfathering*) on/ or before June 30th 2016, to retire from employment before September 2021. Alternatively, if the staff member has received a letter from the Minister for the Department of Children and Youth Affairs confirming that this requirement does not apply to them, they do not require the minimum level 5 QQI, vocational qualification award. Qualifications required for funding purposes apply if the early years service provides the free preschool year or ECCE scheme. All ECCE scheme, room leaders must hold a minimum QQI Level 6 Major Award in Early Childhood Care and Education (or equivalent) as a requirement of the ECCE contract. A higher capitation is available to Preschool Services where the Preschool Leader has achieved a major award in early childhood care and education at Level 7 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) and where the assistants have achieved the minimum Level 5 Award.
4.5.3.2: Salaries: Living wage in Ireland:

The living wage is described by the Living Wage Technical Group as a wage which makes possible a minimum acceptable standard of living. It is an evidence-based rate of pay which is grounded in social consensus and is derived from Consensual Budget Standards research which establishes the cost of a Minimum Essential Standard of Living in Ireland. The living wage in the republic of Ireland based on one adult with no children is €12.30 per hour, the minimum wage is €10.10 per hour (Living wage technical group, 2020). The Annual Early Years Sector Profile Report, 2017/2018 (Pobal, 2018) identifies the average hourly wage in the early years sector in Ireland in 2017/18 as €12.17. Wages for early years staff varied across Ireland with the average hourly rate for early years assistants (both ECCE and non-ECCE), who constitute 48% of all staff working with children was €11.20 per hour, 70c below the living wage for Ireland in 2018 which was €11.90 per hour.

Salaries: Living Wage in Boston-Cambridge-Newton, MA

The living wage is the hourly rate that an individual in a household must earn to support his or herself when living in Boston and surrounding areas. The assumption is that the sole provider is working full-time (2080 hours per year). The state minimum wage is the same for all individuals, regardless of how many dependents they may have. Data is updated annually, in the first quarter of the new year. State minimum wages are determined based on the posted value of the minimum wage as of January of the coming year (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2019). The Living Wage Technical Group, (2020), confirm that the poverty rate reflects a person's gross annual income. The following is the minimum wage for individuals working and living in Boston, Cambridge, Newton, MA based on one adult with no children or dependents. The living wage is $14.70 (€13.43), the poverty wage is $5.84 (€5.33) and the minimum wage is $11.00 (€10.05), (The Living Wage Technical Group, 2020).
The increased investment in ECEC provision and the introduction of two years free preschool for all children before they attend primary school in Ireland has resulted in 118,899 accessing their free preschool year up to June 2018 (Pobal, 2018). The ECCE scheme according to the Annual Early Years Sector Report (Pobal, 2018), provides children with their first formal experience of early learning prior to commencing primary school. The DCYA stipulate that childcare services taking part in the ECCE scheme must provide an appropriate preschool educational programme with the minimum qualification for all preschool leaders delivering the ECCE programme is Level 6 (on the NFQ) (DCYA, 2017). The minimum qualification to work directly with children as outline in The Child Care Act (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016 (Government of Ireland, 2016) is Level 5 on the National Framework for Qualifications (Government of Ireland, 2016). The low salary scales and the terms and conditions of early years professionals in Ireland has been highlighted, as have the high cost of childcare to families accessing center based regulated early years provision.

The term preschool, which is used in Ireland, is it may be suggested, misleading as it refers to pre or before school or before entering the formal educational system. Therefore, preschool may be considered by some, parents included, as a preparation for primary school and as such expectations may be that children will engage with formal education in the preschool setting. The context of ECEC in Ireland is based on a market or business model (Moss, 2009), early years centers and preschools are referred to as ‘services’, Moss (2009, p, 10) refers to the ‘market model’ which is prevalent in English speaking countries as a product of neoliberalism thinking and the growing of capitalism. This terminology, Moss (2009) suggests, constructs a specific understanding of the world. People are divided into ‘purchasers’ or ‘customers’ and providers are viewed as ‘sellers’ of a commodity, where the emphasis is on individual consumer choice. In Ireland with the introduction of the free preschool year the Government purchases the commodity on behalf of the parents. While
the service of preschool education does not have a monetary implication for
parents, there is an expectation that the service provided will yield the
expected outputs, which is in many cases ‘school readiness’ as derived from
the word ‘preschool’.

The system of preschool provision is very similar in Boston, where a market
model exists. Parents in Boston have some choice to access, free, subsidised or private nursery school or kindergarten arrangements, depending on their socio-economic circumstances. Staff qualifications are agreed at a state level and all states with the exception of one has established a set of core knowledge and competencies identifying what, early childhood educators from novice to expert should have knowledge off and be able to practice in their role (CSCCE, 2018). However, this adoption of core competencies has not translated into a consensus in relation to the minimum education requirements for teachers working in nursery or early years settings (CSCCE, 2018). Staff salaries in funded early years settings are determined as a funding requirement. Staff terms and conditions in Boston are low as outlined in the Early Childhood Workforce index (CSCCE, 2018). The exception to this situation is in some private nurseries and kindergartens, where staff are employed, and their terms and conditions are negotiated with management. This was the situation in the Reggio inspired preschools participating in this study. Staff in the Reggio inspired preschools in Boston, identified that their terms and conditions were favorable and that there were opportunities provided for professional and personal development.

Parents in Boston, if they can afford to, or choose to may choose a nursery school which is based on a democratic experimentalism model (Moss, 2009) such as the Reggio inspired preschools participating in this study. Democracy, Moss (2009), suggests is about relationships and everyday practice, it is ‘primarily a mode of associated living embedded in the culture and social relationships of everyday life’ (Dewey, 1939, p.2). The provision of ECEC based on democratic experimentalism, is a term coined by the Brazilian social theorist, Roberto Unger, which refers to a way of living which is open-ended, open-minded and open-hearted (Moss, 2009).
The model is underpinned by different understandings, concepts, goals and values, compared to the market model. Moss (2009), confirms that within a democratic experimentalism model, early years settings are ‘understood as public responsibilities, places of encounter between citizens, children and adults (Moss, 2009, p. viii). The values of this democratic model Moss (2009) suggests are based on, participation, dialogue, trust and choice. The market model Moss (2009) suggests operates as a factory, producing predetermined outcomes, as a business.

The Reggio inspired preschools participating in this study employed staff who were highly qualified to degree and master’s level. Staff confirmed that they had good terms and conditions of employment. Staff in the Reggio inspired preschools work in pairs, they work as a team and co teach. In the participating preschools there were also pedagogues and specialist educators who supported the work of the preschool educators. These specialists included, an atelerista or artist and support teachers as required. On acceptance of a place in the participating Reggio inspired preschools, parents confirm their commitment to act as a parent helper one morning per month and to provide lunch for the group on that day. Prior to starting in the Reggio inspired preschool, a home visit is conducted by the preschool educator and one other member of the staff team. The attention to working in active partnership with parents supported the development of reciprocal and trusting relationships as identified through conversations with both educators and parents.

The Blue Reggio inspired preschool, highlights to parents on its website that they offer a pioneering curriculum, which celebrates the great potential of young children, with the goal of nurturing self-motivated, life-long learners. The staff in the preschool are identified as highly qualified and committed to continual professional development. The staff are referred to as ‘our faculty’ and they ‘spend an hour on research and development for every hour they teach.’ The Violet preschool identifies on its website that the preschool ‘benefits from a richly talented and experienced faculty’ who work closely with families to stimulate and nurture young children. Parents, who choose to send their child to a Reggio inspired preschool in Boston,
pay significant fees to access these preschools. The Reggio inspired preschools provide parents with clarity in relation to the quality of the provision and mutual expectations. The cost of sending a child to a Reggio inspired preschool in Boston is prohibitive for many families which is one of the criticisms of the Reggio approach (Johnson, 1999).

4.5.4 Pedagogical Approach

The Pobal (2018) report identifies that the two primary pedagogical approaches in Ireland are Play-based and Montessori programmes. While ECEC settings in Ireland identify primarily with one of two approaches, the reality is that preschool settings in Ireland choose to provide an eclectic mix of approaches, with some settings being inspired by the HighScope, Steiner or Reggio approach. Unlike the US there are no preschool settings in Ireland that identify as Reggio inspired preschools. In Boston, there are many pedagogical approaches including HighScope, Play-based, Steiner, Reggio Inspired and Montessori.

4.6 Conclusion

The overall aim of this chapter was to provide an overview of the policy, legislation, regulation and practice underpinning early childhood education in both the Irish and Boston contexts. Section 4.2 outlined the context of ECEC in Ireland under the headings of policy, legislation, regulation and practice. This was followed by section 4.3, which provided a brief context of ECEC in the United States, followed by 4.4, which outlined the Boston MA context under the headings of policy, legislation, regulation and practice. Section 4.5 compared the context of ECEC in Ireland and Boston under the headings of policy, legislation, regulation and practice.
Chapter 5: Methodology

5.1 Introduction

“The essence of research is that new findings and insights constantly force a reassessment of previous positions”.

(Sommer, 2012, p.7)

Methodology is the crux of any research study and can be conceptualised as a series of choices made by a researcher to address the research question (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The chosen methodologies embody a variety of assumptions regarding the nature of knowledge and the methods through which that knowledge can be obtained, as well as a set of core assumptions about the nature of the phenomena being explored (Morgan and Smircich, 1980).

Following this introduction, Section 5.2 recaps on the research question the rationale, aim and objectives of the study. Section 5.3 will outline the philosophical grounding for the study. This is followed by 5.4 which consider the study design and key theoretical and methodological considerations. In Section 5.5 the methods and sources of data will be described. Section 5.6 will outline the implementation of the study in the west of Ireland and Boston. Section 5.7 will outline the designing of the data collection tools. This will be followed by the data analysis in Section 5.8. Section 5.9 will outline the ethical considerations when designing and implementing this study.

5.2 The Research Question, Rationale, Aim and Objectives

The research question for this study is: How does the educator’s image of the child as a learner influence her/his pedagogical approach and how does the preschool educator’s pedagogical approach subsequently impact on children’s level of wellbeing and involvement in the preschool setting?

The rationale which inspired this study is outlined in Chapter 1 and will be briefly named here. The initial rationale for the study came from a media exposé by Prime-Time Investigates, a programme aired by RTE, the national broadcaster in Ireland, in May 2013. The programme highlighted poor quality practice in early years settings. Having viewed this programme
I wondered how the early years professionals viewed children and did the image that they had of the children influence the way they interacted with the children. The second influence was the UNCRC (1989) and a personal belief that children are rights holders. I had delivered several workshops: ‘Children’s Rights in Everyday Practice’, to the ECEC sector in my role as an Early Years Specialist with Early Childhood Ireland. This was part of the campaign for children’s rights and amendment of the Irish constitution in 2012. The workshops focused on the practice of working with children in ECEC settings from a rights-based perspective. Thirdly, having worked at a policy level for over ten years, I recognised the importance of having evidence to support the implementation of change at both policy and practice level. I was very aware that while there has been unprecedented investment in ECEC provision over the last decade, there has been no evaluation of the quality of the pedagogical approach being used in Irish preschool settings. Equally, there is no evidence to identify if the pedagogical approach being used in Irish preschool settings will equip children with 21st century skills, which include imagination, curiosity, creativity intrinsic motivation, collaboration and problem solving (Wagner, 2008). Finally, as a parent, grandparent and previous provider of a full day-care early years service, I have made a lifelong commitment to identifying approaches which will enhance young children’s early childhood experiences in ECEC settings. I am passionate about gaining further understandings about learning and I want to understand how the early childhood education and care sector can provide high quality early childhood experiences which support quality outcomes for children. I want to influence change and make a difference to young children’s earliest ECEC experiences.

As stated in Chapter 1, the number of young children attending out-of-home childcare and education settings before starting in primary school has been continually increasing since the 1960s and has become the norm for most children in Ireland and in developing countries (Melhuish, 2015). A growing body of research recognises that ECEC provides a wide range of benefits including social and economic benefits, better and more equitable
outcomes for children and increased intergenerational social mobility. As a result, ECEC is becoming a policy priority in many countries. A commitment by the Irish Minister for Children & Youth Affairs, Minister Fitzgerald in 2013, following the Prime-Time report, to improve the quality of young children’s ECEC experiences in ECEC settings has resulted in unprecedented investment and policy implementation in the ECEC sector in Ireland. Pobal (2018) reports that 96% of the eligible cohort of preschool children living in Ireland accessed free universal preschool education under the ECCE scheme in 2017/2018. The positive benefits of ECEC are directly related to the ‘quality’ of the ECEC provision, (Sylva et al., 2004; Litjens and Taguma, 2010; OECD, 2012; Melhuish, 2015) and this is particularly a factor for children at risk (European Commission, 2014). The European Council (2000) stated their aim to make the EU the most dynamic and competitive knowledge-based economy in the world. To achieve this aim, the future workforce will need to develop specific skills through the education systems starting in early childhood. These skills have become known as the 21st century skills.

The OECD (2009) suggests that educational systems should equip young people with 21st century skills and competencies which will allow them to benefit from the emerging new models of economic and social development. This, the OECD (2009) suggests should be the aim of the educational systems as opposed to a traditional model which was suited to an industrial mode of development. There were 4242 preschool settings contracted to provide the ECCE scheme, and 118,899 children enrolled in the ECCE programme in Ireland in 2017 / 2018 (Pobal, 2018). It is critical that with this level of investment that we have some understanding of the type of pedagogical approach which will result in the best outcomes for children’s holistic wellbeing and equip them with 21st century skills.

Considering these points, the research question was; How, does the educator’s image of the child as a learner influence her/his pedagogical approach and how does the preschool educator’s pedagogical approach subsequently impact on children’s level of wellbeing and involvement in the preschool setting. The overarching aim of this study was to ‘Explore the
preschool educator’s image of the child as a learner on the choice of her / his pedagogical approach, (Montessori, Play-based or Reggio inspired) and the subsequent influence on preschool children’s levels of wellbeing and involvement’.

To answer the research question and address the research aim, the objectives of the study are four-fold and are designed as follows:

- **Objective 1** - To explore the preschool educator’s, understanding of her/his role as an early childhood educator in a sample of preschool settings in the west of Ireland and Boston.

- **Objective 2** - To identify the preschool educator’s image of the child as a learner and explore how this influences the pedagogical practice in the preschool settings in the west of Ireland and Boston.

- **Objective 3** - To compare children’s level of wellbeing and involvement as a result of the quality of the relationships and the active learning environment in settings offering different pedagogical approaches, (Montessori, Play-based, Reggio inspired).

- **Objective 4** – To examine the implications for ECEC policy and practice as a result of the addition to knowledge of this study.

### 5.3 Philosophical Grounding

“We make our framework of inquiry incommensurable only when we allow ourselves to remain fixed within a closed system of human agency. We blind ourselves to the objective reality that more than one framework of inquiry may be used to strengthen the overall phenomenon being studied”.

(Oswick 2008, pp.425-426)

The foundation stones upon which research methodologies are built comprise of theories on how society operates, ontology, and how society should be studied, epistemology. Social ontology is concerned with, what “the form and nature of reality” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 108) is, and consequently what “can be known about it”. While concerned with the nature of reality, ontology also questions assumptions the researcher has about how the world operates and the researcher’s own commitment to
particular views such as, objectivism and subjectivism (Saunders et al, 2012). Accordingly, objectivism and subjectivism are specified as two important aspects of ontology. Objectivism “portrays the position that social entities exist in reality external to social actors concerned with their existence” (Saunders et al, 2012, p.131). Described by Bryman (2008), objectivism “is an ontological position that asserts that social phenomena and their meanings have an existence that is independent of social actors”. Subjectivism, which may also be referred to as constructionism or interpretivism in contrast, perceives that social phenomena are created from the perceptions and consequent actions of those social actors concerned with their existence. Formally, constructionism can be defined as an “ontological position which asserts that social phenomena and their meanings are continually being accomplished by social actors” (Saunders, et al, 2012, p.32).

How society should be studied, referred to as epistemology is the theory or nature of knowledge. Tuli (2010) suggests that epistemology is the relationship between the knower and what is known; it questions how we know and what we know, and what counts as knowledge. The researcher’s epistemological position is according to Creswell and Clark (2006) grounded in the relationship between the researcher and what is being researched, and whether the nature of knowledge can be communicated as being either positivist/objective or interpretivist/subjective (Creswell and Clark 2006). The epistemological debate in relation to conducting social science research according to Bryman (2001) is whether the social world can be studied according to the same principles as the natural sciences. Quantitative research according to Sarantakos (1993) sits within a positivist paradigm, while qualitative research methodologies are best placed within an interpretative paradigm. The difference between the two; quantitative and qualitative methods is that quantitative research is concerned with numbers while qualitative research is concerned with words (Bryman, 2008).
In order to answer the research question; How does the educator’s image of the child as a learner influence her/his pedagogical approach and how does the preschool educator’s pedagogical approach subsequently impact on children’s level of wellbeing and involvement in the preschool setting, it is important as a researcher to state my ontological perspective. My ontological perspective is based on a social constructionist perspective, which asserts that social phenomena and their meanings are actively accomplished by social actors (Bryman, 2008). The epistemological basis for this study is premised therefore on an interpretative paradigm underpinned by a social constructionist epistemology which recognises that knowledge is constructed through social participation, relationships, the activities in the environment and historical change (Packer and Goicoechea, 2000). In order to gain a greater understanding into the social phenomenon (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004) of the practices in preschool settings in the west of Ireland and Boston an ethnographic mixed methods study was considered the most suitable approach.

Ethnography where the researcher becomes embedded in the practices being studied is particularly suited to this study, as I spent considerable time in the participating preschool settings and engaging with children, educators, and parents. Ethnography is increasingly being used when researching a social phenomenon as it provides a clear picture of the reality of the social and cultural environment and context which is being studied (James, Jenks, and Prout, 1998). By taking a mixed methods approach, the quantitative methodologies take a social constructivist/ objective perspective which is based on individuals constructing knowledge through their cognitive processes (Young and Colin, 2004).

The use of a measurement tool, Reflect Respect Relate Observation Scales (State of South Australia, Department of Education and Children’s Services, 2008) to assess and measure quality indicators and outcomes, added an objective perspective to this study. However, while the measurement scales seek to measure quality indicators and outcomes, data collection using the scales was conducted through a qualitative lens, as it is the researcher’s
belief that all meaning is subjective in nature. The focus on qualitative methodologies and quantitative methodology viewed through a qualitative lens in this study, place the study within an interpretative paradigm based on a social constructionist epistemology, using a mixed methods approach. This epistemological perspectiverecognises that knowledge is constructed through social participation, relationships, the activities in the environment and historical change (Packer and Goicoechea, 2000).

5.3.1 Social Constructionism

Social constructionism is a term which is used to refer to theoretical approaches which emanate from the field of sociology and challenge the underlying assumptions and research practices of mainstream psychology and its socially decontextualized approach to understanding the person (Burr, 2015). Assumptions about truth, neutrality and objectivity are challenged, as well as the primacy of the individual as the unit of analysis for generating knowledge. Key writers in the constructionist movement were Berger and Luckmann (1966) their account of social life in, The Social Construction of Reality, argues that human beings create and sustain all social phenomena through social practice. Therefore, in constructionist ontology, the human is seen not as a natural entity but rather as a social and historical product. As Hyde (2015, p.296) suggests “the human person is made, and not simply born”. This confirms Berger and Luckmann (1966) position that all human beings share certain biological characteristics. However, these characteristics they suggest are not biologically fixed, but rather a sociocultural variable. Individuals they suggest are born into a world of social relationships, norms, culture and customs and these biological characteristics are developed within the context of the social world. This aligns with Mead’s (1934) theory of Symbolic Interactionism, which posits that people construct and, negotiate their identities for themselves and others through their use of language and their social interactions. These interactions influence thoughts, attitudes, beliefs and sense of self.
Constructionist inquiry seeks to understand how people come to describe, explain, or otherwise account for their world and the world in which they live (Gergen 1985). When taking a social constructionist approach to conducting research the epistemological position is subjectivist or relativist, this assumes that knowledge is created in the interaction between the inquirer and the inquired and that there can never be one objective, final and ‘true’ account of phenomena (Gergen 2001, 2009; Lincoln et al. 2011). In fact, there are multiple perspectives and different ways of understanding what exists and what we perceive exists. Therefore, rather than only looking at objective truth or quantitative facts, social constructionism suggests that one should question the ‘taken for-granted world’ (Gergen 1985, p.267) and interpret and interrogate the findings.

The epistemological position when taking a social constructionist position, assumes that knowledge is created in the interaction between the inquirer and the inquired, this leads to a methodological approach that recognises and allows for reflection on this interaction (Gergen 2001, 2009; Lincoln et al., 2011). The methods of enquiry used based on a social constructionist approach are according to Roller and Lavrakas (2015) as a result of a communal relationship, where the researcher describes the situation in a story or a case study. The language used in this instance provides a description or story in terms of the researcher’s understandings of the world and his or her intrinsic values and beliefs. Social constructionism and qualitative research recognise both the complexities of human experiences and the impact of the researcher’s interactions and embeddedness in the research process.

Roller & Lavrakas (2015) posit that the essence of constructionism is core to the qualities of qualitative research. This includes recognition of the absence of “truth”, which occurs in qualitative research where the researcher collects knowledge from the data rather than “the truth”. This knowledge is not collated in a vacuum, the knowledge is influenced by the context and situation at any given time. For this reason, Roller & Lavrakas (2015) suggests that qualitative researchers do not talk about the “truth” of their findings but rather the “plausibility” of their interpretations. The
importance of context is also a significant factor in the elusiveness of “truth” in qualitative data collection.

The main criticism levelled against social constructionism as a research methodology can be summarized by its perceived conceptualisation of realism and relativism. It is accepted that researchers themselves construct a social world rather than just representing an independent reality (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). By denying the possibility of a truthful, objective description of the world, Jovchelovitch (2001) suggests that our representations of the world are limited and partial. It is therefore preferable to use a combination of both quantitative and qualitative methodologies to gain a deeper understanding of human experiences (Punch, 2014). Roller & Lavrakas (2015) suggest that a constructionist view is one where the so-called “realities” are conceptual in nature; they are a product of the personal perspective’s values and relationship which the researcher has with the research topic and subjects. As a result, in qualitative research there is a tendency to adopt a relativist position which recognises the way the researcher constructs interpretations of the findings. This can lead to the conclusion that nothing can ever be known for definite, that there are multiple realities and none of the realities have precedence over the other in terms of representing the truth about a social phenomenon (Andrews, 2012). Social constructionism recognises that there is an objective reality, it is concerned with how knowledge is constructed and understood and focuses on the everyday interactions between people and how they use language to construct their reality (Andrews, 2012). The focus of enquiry in social constructionism is on the social practices people engage in, where society exists as both an objective and subjective reality.

5.4 Designing the Study: Key Theoretical and Methodological Considerations

Lincoln and Denzin (2003) propose a hierarchical model of thinking to guide the planning of research design. This starts from a paradigmatic framework, which includes the researcher’s ontological worldview, to a set of questions or epistemology, to a resulting choice in methodology, before finally answering the research questions. This idea suggests that ontology,
epistemology and theory are the primary influences on research design and methodology. However, Brannen (2004) suggests that the researcher’s biography, the prevailing political climate, the research environment and employment contracts influence certain research choices. Beginning with the theoretical framework, which Sekaran (2000) describes as a conceptual model of how one theorises or makes sense of the relationship between various factors identified as being important to a problem. Similarly, a research paradigm is a conceptual framework based on values and assumptions which provide a basis for how the world is understood. It is as Terre Blanche and Durrheim (1999) suggest an all-encompassing system of interrelated practice and thinking that defines the nature of enquiry along three dimensions: ontology, epistemology and methodology.

### 5.4.1 Theoretical Methodological Approaches

Ontology as outlined earlier refers to the nature of existence (Gray, 2013) while epistemology, refers to the relationship between the researcher and reality (Carson et al., 2001). Both ontology and epistemology provide a philosophical basis for deciding what kinds of knowledge are legitimate and adequate (Gray, 2013). Research in the social sciences has primarily been underpinned by three major philosophical traditions: positivism, interpretivism and critical theory. These three approaches contrast primarily because of their differing theoretical perspectives held about what defines social reality. A comprehensive account of all three approaches is outside the remit of this study, however both positivism and interpretivism are central to this study and an overview is provided.

#### 5.4.2 Positivism

Positivism advocates for the application of methods of the natural sciences to the study of social reality and beyond. A positivist approach to research has a long history within the philosophy of science and among researchers. Originating with Comte in a series of texts published between, 1830-1848, Comte was the first to describe the epistemological perspective of positivism. As the fore runner, Comte identified the important relationship between theory, practice and human understandings of the world by using
scientific methods to uncover the laws according to which both physical and human events occur. Described by, Neuman (1997) as.

“An organized method of combining deductive logic with precise empirical observations of individual behaviour in order to discover and confirm a set of probabilistic causal laws that can be used to predict general patterns of human activity”. (Neuman, 1997, p.63)

Research informed by positivism begins with a general cause-effect relationship; the scientific explanation of the phenomena involves accurate and precise measurement of observable facts. Positivist researchers apply strict rational thinking and systematic observation linking the abstract ideas of the relationships observed to precise measurements of the social world, while remaining detached and objective. Positivism according to Bryman (2008) entails the following principles, phenomenalism, where only phenomena or knowledge confirmed by the senses can be warranted as knowledge. Secondly the principle of deductivism, this is where the purpose of the theory is to generate hypotheses which can be tested allowing theories of law to be assessed. The principle of inductivism is that knowledge is arrived at, through the gathering of facts and that science must be conducted in a way that is value free or objective.

Positivistic approaches generally employ quantitative methodologies, based on ‘numeric’ information derived from statistical analysis of data. The benefits of taking a positivist research approach are identified as resulting in the provision of numbers and measures which are objective, scientific and credible. Quantitative methodologies which are well-designed and well implemented provide reliable information of the prevalence of certain characteristics within a group or society. Factual knowledge which is collated in this manner is capable of being replicated where any researcher can replicate the study and reproduce similar results (Bryman, 2008). There are limitations to using quantitative research, specifically as the research rarely captures all dimensions of a situation. The long-standing debate regarding the appropriateness of the natural science model, for the study of society continues as ‘the analysis of relationships between variables creates a static view that is independent of people’s lives’ (Blumer, 1958, p.685).
Equally it can be argued that the reliance on instruments hinders the connection between the researcher and the research environment.

5.4.3 Interpretivism

Dreyfus and Taylor, (cited in Lehman, 2011) argue that our relationships with the natural environment cannot be modelled with abstract instrumental and scientific neatness. Interpretations, they suggest are a vital ingredient and medium through which knowledge is constructed (Lehman, 2011). There is in effect a fundamental difference between the subject matter of the natural sciences and the social sciences. The difference resides in the fact that, ‘Social reality has a meaning for human beings and therefore human action is meaningful’ (Bryman, 2008, p.16). A sociological interpretivist approach can contribute to offer ‘a clearer or more adequate understanding of a social situation than existed before’ (Giddens, 1990, p.91). Sociology also allows for consideration of things that are not immediately visible in our ordinary lives and are often not neatly understandable. Macionis and Plummer (2012) suggest that taking a sociological perspective helps in challenging familiar understanding and assists in raising awareness of how society operates and allows for critical thinking about its operation. This is particularly true in relation to class, gender, age, disability, sexuality and other variables present in society. Interpretivism, according to Silverman (1998), gives value and recognition to human understanding, interaction and interpretation which define reality.

The study of the social world requires a research approach that reflects the distinctiveness of humans as opposed to natural order. Von Wright (1971) described this as a clash between positivism and hermeneutics or the theory and method of interpreting human action. Interpretivism therefore refers to the unique capacity of humans to make sense of their world and to make their world understood through the interpretive or participatory examination of social phenomenon and action. There is a growing recognition that individuals create their world by organising their understanding and attributing meaning to their world through their interactions, thus permitting the examination of multiple realities of any given issue within the context in
which it is embedded (Ambert, 1995). When taking a sociological perspective, the researcher tries to understand the complexities of human action within a social, cultural and political context. Weber (1947) referred to this as ‘Verstehen’, or to understand. Research, from a sociological perspective; ‘Attempts the interpretive understanding of social action in order to arrive at a causal explanation of its course and effect’ (Weber, 1947, p.88).

As a result, the interpretivist approach generally employs qualitative methodologies which seek to understand meaning. In seeking to interpret the meanings individuals ascribe to aspects of their lives and circumstances, qualitative research designs focus on small numbers of participants using onsite observation and semi-structured interviews. Those who support the use of qualitative data argue that qualitative research provides an opportunity to develop a descriptive insight into individuals’ attitudes, beliefs, concerns, motivations, cultures and behaviours. Taking an interpretivist approach the data is deep and complex as opposed to measurable and generic.

A suggestion by (Silverman, 1998) is that interpretivism refers to the individual’s unique capacity to make sense of the world, through the interpretive or participatory examination of social phenomena and action. Taking an interpretivist approach the researcher is seen to interpret their understanding of the data and attribute meaning to it, through his or her interactions with the data. Qualitative research permits the examination of multiple realities of any given issue within the context in which it is embedded (Ambert, 1995). In seeking to interpret meaning, individuals are concerned with depth of data as opposed to its generalizability. LeCompte and Goetz (1982) suggest that in order to ensure that the interpretation of the data is reliable, there must be a good match between the researcher’s observations and the theoretical ideas they develop. The primary criticism of an interpretive research approach is that it may lack objectivity and is ‘fiction not science’ (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000, p.8). Denzin and Lincoln (1998) expressed concern in relation to allegations that qualitative research may be considered as undisciplined, sloppy research, comprising of
subjective observations. While Guba, (1981, p.9), posits that qualitative approaches are very likely ‘to be tarred with the brush of sloppy research’.

Undertaking qualitative data collection is not always straightforward; it can be time-consuming and not allow for inferences to be drawn from the data. There are many issues in relation to reliability which are specific when taking an interpretivist approach. These include concerns in relation to whether the research can be replicated, validated and or generalised across social settings. Guba and Lincoln (1994) also voice concern in relation to the trustworthiness of research findings based on an interpretivist methodology this includes questioning if the findings are credible, transferable, dependable and confirmable (Bryman, 2008). While Warick and Liningerm assert that, ‘every method of data collection provides a different glimpse of reality and all have limitations when used alone’ (Warick and Liningerm, 1975, p.5-6). Taking a constructionist paradigm, the researcher reflects on how reality is developed through the meanings that people create, as a result of their actions and interactions in their social structures and environments (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). While taking an interpretivist perspective based on the data collated, Kikooma (2010, p, 41) confirms that ‘we know the world not by objectively observing an external reality, but by constructing how we understand it with others.’

This knowledge confirms that it is imperative when taking an interpretivist approach, we are cognisant that as ‘individuals all of our understandings are contextually embedded, interpersonally forged and necessarily limited’ (Neimeyer, 1993, p.1-2). This perspective recognises the personal predispositions of the researcher and the impact of the context in which he or she is positioned (Lock and Strong, 2010). The qualitative researcher is perceived as the research instrument, therefore he or she must ensure that the data which is collated is accurate and not oversimplified or misinterpreted. Creswell (1994) suggests that qualitative researchers should identify their biases and values, provide a clear and transparent report in relation to how the sample was selected, he or she should report any preconceived assumptions they might have to assist and support the reader in determining the reliability of the research and to enhance replication.
However, the issue remains as Lewis (2009) confirms, qualitative researchers continue to be burdened with redefining and justifying the reliability and validity of their research results.

5.4.4 Ethnography

Ethnographic research is increasingly being used when researching with children as it captures the reality of the social and cultural environment and context (James, Jenks, and Prout, 1998). Dahlberg et al. (1999) and James and Prout (1997) suggest that ethnographic research allows new voices to be heard, including the voice of the child, educator and parents. While Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1989) confirms that until we take seriously the challenge to study children in their own contexts, our knowledge of children will be severely limited. An ethnographic approach considers the habits and routines, symbols and meaning, goals, values and social structures (Angrosino, 2007). Therefore, by spending time in a social setting observing the relationships, speaking to children and adults, the researcher develops an ‘intimate familiarity’ with the social world being explored (Brewer, 2000, p.11). This results in a greater insight and understanding of the subject’s views and experiences which are not offered by a once off interview (Fetterman, 1989). Silverman (2004) posits that any study which involves observations in the original context may be described as ethnographic.

When undertaking ethnographic research, the researcher moves away from their adult-centred understanding and instead seeks to understand the ways in which children’s worlds are shaped and controlled by them (Emond, 2000). Using ethnography, the researcher becomes embedded in the daily life of the social setting taking on the role of participant-as-observer. The participant-observer is a functioning member of the social setting and the members of the social setting are aware of the researcher’s status as a researcher (Bryman, 2008). Equally the observer may take a non-participant observer role studying the participants in their natural setting from the outside of the group, observing without participating directly in the participants daily lives (Basset, 1999).
The role of the researcher undertaking ethnographic research is to become immersed in the social setting over an extended period. During this time the researcher observes the behaviour of the participants, listen and engage in conversations and interview participants to obtain further information to clarify issues identified in the observations. This approach helps the researcher to develop an understanding of the culture and behaviour of the group. It also enables the researcher to collect documentation about the group and write up a detailed account of the ethnographic research (Bryman, 2008). Grady (2007, p. 65) suggests that ethnographers, ‘Document how people manage their lives in natural settings and identify the meanings that those situations, events and places have for their participants’. However, Sandelowski (2000) argues,

“Such descriptions require the researchers to move farther into or beyond their data as they demand not just reading words and scenes, but rather reading into, between and over them”.

(Sandelowski, 2000, p. 336)

5.4.5 Case Studies

Case study methodology is frequently used when undertaking ethnographic research. Case studies are a popular methodology in the social sciences and have a long history in many disciplines (Creswell, 2007). As a methodology case studies have seen periods of intensive use and equally there have been periods when case study was not a popular methodological choice. A case study is described by Yin (1994) as.

“An empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context when the boundaries between phenomena and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used”.

(Yin, 1994, p. 13)

Approaches to case study methodology according to Stake (1995) and Yin (2009) are based on a constructionist paradigm. This assumes that meaning is subjective and based on the researchers own experiences and knowledge and influenced by interactions with others and historical and cultural norms (Creswell, 2009). Cases are studied in the context of people's lives and work, and are based on the participant's perspective (Creswell, 2009, p. 8). According to Tellis (1997) case studies incorporate the views of the actors
or individuals in the case being studied. Case studies are typically considered to be the choice when undertaking qualitative research, they are as such inductive. Ridenour and Newman (2008), suggest that the most significant strength of case study methodology is its reliance on multiple data collection techniques and data sources, which increase the validity of findings.

However, like all qualitative research methodologies, case study methodologies have been criticised as a “less desirable” strategy lacking systematic procedures and rigor and producing biased results (Yin, 2009, p.14). Bryman (2008) suggests that the central cause of concern in relation to case studies is the quality of the reasoning that the researcher engages in and the extent to which the data supports the theoretical arguments presented. Therefore Yin (2003) posits that the issue is not whether the findings can be generalised to a wider audience; the issue is in relation to how well the researcher generates theory from the findings. Williams (2000) suggests that when case studies are used in comparative research that the researcher is often able to generalise the findings based on the comparative case studies.

The use of case studies has become increasingly popular in educational research since the 1970’s. Denscombe (1998) suggests that case studies have the potential to deal with complex situations which allows the researcher to use a variety of sources of data and multiple methods to facilitate the validation of the data as the researcher explores the different relationships and processes. While there are criticisms of the case study approach with suggestions that it is invalid to generalise from one or a few case studies, Yin (1994, cited in Denscombe, 1998) argues that although each case study is unique, each case study belongs to a broader class or type. Generalisations, depends on how similar the case study sites are, including the profile and the number of similar features they share. Winter (2003) argues that it is reasonable to generalise if the case study is representative of others in a broader group and that undertaking case studies where commonalities and uniqueness can be identified can increase validity.
5.4.6 Mixed Methods Research

Brannen (2008, p.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. Mixed methods research (MMR) is an umbrella term which defines several approaches to research, methodology and interpretation. Using a mixed method approach according to Punch (2014) offers a deeper understanding of human experience through a synthesis of both qualitative and quantitative methods. Mayring et al. (2007, p.1) refers to mixed methods research as ‘a new star in the social science sky’. While Bryman states that, ‘The term ‘mixed methods research’ is used as a simple shorthand to stand for research that integrates quantitative and qualitative research within a single project’ (2008, p.603). The fundamental principle of MMR is the acknowledgment that through combining the strengths of qualitative and quantitative research, while also recognising the weaknesses of both methods, we gain a much greater understanding into a social phenomenon (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Quantitative research has been traditionally concerned with causality, prediction and the generalisation of findings, whereas qualitative research seeks to understand the complexity of the experience making links to other situations. Taking a mixed method perspective, the researcher aims to achieve a more complete and deeper understanding in several ways. Creswell et al. (2007) suggest that a mixed methods approach offers answers to questions where qualitative or quantitative methods alone cannot provide a satisfactory answer. There is also recognition that quantitative and qualitative research each has distinctive epistemological and ontological assumptions; however, the connections are not fixed and together can offer two compatible views and a more holistic picture.

Research approaches may be mixed at many stages of the research project. Approaches may be mixed at the level of the research question, during the data collection, using questionnaires and semi-structured interviews and during onsite observations. By using a combination of both qualitative and quantitative methods, a rich picture, of the realities of practice, are provided. This, Cohen et al., (2002), describe as triangulation; ‘The use of two or
more methods of data collection in the study of some aspect of human behaviour’ (p.112). While triangulation is usually associated with a quantitative research strategy, triangulation can also take place within a qualitative research strategy. Ethnographers often use triangulation by checking their observations with an interview or questionnaire to gain a deeper understanding and out rule the subjectivity of the researcher. A mixed method approach is well suited to a comparative study where the researcher sets out to examine issues or phenomena in different socio-cultural settings, seeking explanation for similarities and differences and to gain a greater awareness and deeper understanding of different social realities. Guba and Lincoln, (1994) argue that there can be more than one and possibly several accounts of a social reality. It is however the credibility of the account that the researcher arrives at which is going to determine its acceptability to others.

5.4.7 Establishing my research position as a reflexive researcher

“Ideologies and beliefs effect; not only what we think, but what we think about, what we feel, how we behave and the pattern of all our social relationships”. (Burr, 1995, p., 57)

Our individual understanding of reality is always seen through the lens of existing beliefs which act as a filter to how we interpret information and experiences (Fives and Gill, 2014). As such beliefs are an important consideration when considering the position of the researcher in the research and methodologies chosen to answer the research question. There is evidence (Cano, 2005; Schommer, 1998) to confirm that when individuals progress through education, they develop more sophisticated personal epistemologies or beliefs. This includes beliefs about the way to generate, understand and use the knowledge that is deemed to be acceptable and valid to answer the research question. This belief it is suggested further confirms the researcher’s ontological perspective in relation to how reality is perceived (Cano, 2005; Schommer, 1998).

When describing her ‘institutional ethnography’ approach to research Smith (2005), suggests that all individuals experience the social world from a standpoint or social position, located within the larger social structures. It is
therefore important that researchers disclose their individual standpoint so that the reader can further understand the researcher’s approach to the research and the methodologies chosen to conduct the research. By being explicit the researcher provides a description of their personal understandings of the social world. However, as Charmaz (2005) suggests, “all analyses come from particular standpoints" and "what we know shapes, but does not necessarily determine, what we 'find' ". This assertion by Charmaz (2005) reminds us that in any research study the researcher shares in constructing what is defined as data and this data is affected and influenced by many factors, including personal biographies and interests, researcher-participant relationships and experience in conducting field work.

I believe that my world view is inextricably linked to the personal and professional aspects of my life. As individuals we are all part of an evolving system which is constructed and designed within a specific political, social and cultural context, where the relationships between subjectivity and intersubjectivity shape who we are. As a result, when considering my ontological and epistemological perspective, I believe that these may be best understood in relation to my personal identity, my professional experiences and the theoretical lens through which I view and integrate them.

5.4.7.1 Personal Identity

As a parent, grandparent and an early years educator I am passionate and committed to highlighting the importance of children’s early childhood experiences and how these experiences influence children’s life course trajectories. I have committed the last twenty-five years to exploring, learning and trying to attain a greater understanding of theories of early childhood education and care. This learning journey has significantly influenced my beliefs and epistemological perspective. Over the years my beliefs have changed significantly, based on my increased knowledge and learning as identified by Cano (2005) and Schommer (1998). My beliefs and understandings have also been influenced by the sociological and

5.4.7.2 Professional Experiences

Having worked in the area of early childhood education and care since 1991 in practice, policy and research, I have lived experience of the unprecedented level of change in policy and practice in ECEC provision in Ireland and internationally. I have had opportunities to travel and to network with international colleagues in the ECEC sector. At a practice level I have worked in and undertaken further study in the three pedagogical approaches, Montessori, Play-based and Reggio inspired which are outlined in this study.

5.4.7.3 Theoretical Lens

As a researcher I hold a relativist ontology. I believe that no one true reality exists, that reality is constructed within the human mind and the reality is relative to each individuals’ personal experiences at a given time and place. Realities are I suggest based on historical and cultural contexts which are continually changing rather than being static and based on eternal truths. From a relativists perspective I concur with Everly et al, (2008) that individuals make decisions in complex, contextually dependent and often unpredictable ways as a result of their experiences, social norms, emotion, and or cultural background. This ontological perspective is recognised as often resulting in divergent interpretations of the same phenomena (Crotty 1998, p.64). From a social constructivist perspective, I consider knowledge to be actively constructed interpreted and experienced through our interactions with each other and with the wider social systems (Maxwell, 2006). Therefore, I accept that different individuals construct meaning of the same object or phenomenon in different ways based on their cultural, historical, and social perspectives and thus, meaning arises through an interaction with a human community (Crotty 1998; Creswell 2009).
It is important at this stage to clarify my philosophical perspective. Everly et al. (2008) describes the researcher’s philosophical perspective as the system of values to which people adhere. While Crotty (1998) suggests that it is important for researchers to be explicit and reveal their assumptions, as these assumptions lead to the researcher’s choice of methods. They are the “a basic set of beliefs that guide action” (Guba 1990, p.17). The researcher’s philosophical perspective is underpinned by his or her ontological and epistemological leanings and these influence how the researcher creates knowledge and derives meaning from their data (Moon et al., 2014). In this regard I believe that knowledge acquisition is inductive, acquired through exploration and inquiry. The purpose of this inquiry is to attempt to understand the phenomenon being studied not to generalise to a population (Farzanfar, 2005). Dewey (1980) posits that inquiry is a response to a felt ‘emotional’ encounter; it is a way to help define experience in a cognitive sense and create meaning from it. As a result, the emotional experience becomes a reflective experience which generates knowledge. This knowledge is value laden encompassing the researchers cognitive and emotional knowledge, it is contextually unique and as such all possible methods should be used, both quantitative and qualitative to answer the research question.

As a researcher, my theoretical standpoint aligns with the basic tenets of the theories of the Sociology of Childhood which views children not as passive subjects of social structures and processes, but as competent and contributing social actors. This image of the child recognises children as being capable of making sense of their world and actively affecting their own social lives. In order to understand how the educator’s image of the child as a learner influences her / his pedagogical approach and children’s subsequent level of wellbeing and involvement, it was essential to observe children and educators’ experiences as they naturally unfolded in the preschool environment.

Taking an ethnographic approach to the research I become embedded in the daily life of the preschool settings taking on the role of participant-as-observer and the children, educators and parents were aware that I was
conducting research (Bryman, 2008). By being situated in the preschool settings over a five-day period, I developed relationships with the educators, children and some parents. As a result, I gained a deeper understanding of both the Irish and Boston context. The observations: questionnaires and semi structured interviews provided rich data and a deeper understanding of the research phenomena based on the different contexts and pedagogical approaches.

While a positivist approach to researching young children’s, lives has certainly provided important quantitative information about young children. It is important I suggest, when researching children’s lives and their experiences in ECEC settings not to disregard the social, environmental and cultural influences or the contexts of their lives. As a social researcher I believe that using only quantitative data about children and childhood which fails to recognise the multiple realities of children’s lives as well as their active participation and contributions to their social worlds does not reflect their realities or contexts. As Dockett (2002, p.2) suggests, "Traditional child development theory fails to address issues of context, be it cultural, social, political or economic". The use of qualitative methods when conducting research with children and within early childhood education and care settings has increased. However, so too has the discussions between advocates of qualitative and quantitative research methods. Debates range along a bi-directional continuum, from the two methods being diametrically opposed, mutually exclusive and incompatible, to the two being iterative, where the methods build upon each other to provide data that neither can provide alone.

By applying a mixed methods methodology in this study with a focus on ethnography and taking an interpretivist constructionist perspective, the methodology aligns with my ontological and epistemological perspective. My perspective is that no one reality exists, there are multiple realities which may be attributed to data which itself is a snapshot of a moment in time. Ethnographic research in a preschool setting cannot be replicated as the context is constantly changing. There is nothing static or replicable when researching in a constantly changing dynamic environment such as a
preschool setting. The research question or focus of inquiry, I agree with Dewey (1980) is in response to a felt ‘emotion’, in my case the desire and passion to learn how as early years professionals we can increase the quality and support children’s early years experiences. When this felt ‘emotion’ was reflected on, taking all the data presented and through a process of triangulation, I was able to make sense of the collated data. The methodologies chosen to conduct this research recognise the dynamic elements of conducting research in preschool settings; however, there is also recognition of the importance of quantitative evidence to support the findings.

Therefore, some of the methods in the study were located in positivism, in order to make logical deductions and explain the findings particularly in relation to the four variables observed using the *Reflect Respect Relate Observation Scales* (State of South Australia, Department of Education and Children’s Services, 2008), but also in relation to the context of early childhood education and care in both Ireland and Boston. The evidence collated while undertaking the onsite observations from a positivist paradigm were gleaned through qualitative methods, where the analysis was inductive and value laden, based on the researcher’s subjectivity. However, the use of the scales provided a structure to guide the observations and, construct knowledge. The quantitative data when triangulated with the qualitative data provides some ‘hard’ evidence, which is sometimes more readily recognised by policy makers, and validators. In order to find the best match between the research method, and practices which influence preschool children’s experiences, I knew I needed both objectivity and subjectivity.

Having examined a range of philosophical and practical approaches to conducting research in preschool settings, I found no single methodological approach which was sufficiently broad or inclusive to embrace the complexities and different epistemological contexts of the research question and the research participants. As a result, I have taken a ‘methodological pluralism’ in constructing my research strategy. The advice offered by Howe and Eisenhart (1990) has provided reassurance with their assertion
that, research in the field of education uses a range of disciplines, such as psychology, sociology and anthropology to explore educational problems. Each of these three disciplines has different epistemologies and methodologies which may be drawn upon, multiplied and overlapped in the complexities of educational research.

5.4.7.4 Insider Research and Reflexivity

The researcher is a very important part of the research process, particularly when undertaking ethnographical research. The researchers ‘socio-historical location’ including the values and interests that these locations confer upon the researcher shapes the structure of the research study (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). The researcher’s assumptions and identities are also significant when making decisions in relation to the methodology, data collection tools, analysis and interpretation of the data (Chikkatur and Jones-Walker, 2013). Kincheloe and Mc Laren (2005, p305) suggest that researchers should place their ‘assumptions on the table’ from the outset to avoid any confusion pertaining to the ‘epistemological and personal baggage they bring with them to the research site’. Geertz (2008) suggests ethnographic data does not only describe what the researcher sees and hears, the data is he suggests the construction of other people’s constructions, of what they and their compatriots are up to. Chikkatur and Jones-Walker (2013) suggest that the researcher’s perceived, assumed and self-described identities can affect access into and within a particular setting. It is essential therefore that the insider researcher reflects with objectivity and makes ‘the familiar unfamiliar’ (Vass, 2017). This unfamiliarity occurs through reflection, field notes ‘working the hyphens’ of self and other (Fine, 1994, p.12).

Moloney (2010) suggests that there are two types of reflexivity which the research should consider, personal and epistemological. Personal reflexivity involves reflecting upon how one’s personal experiences, beliefs, values; social and professional identities shape the research. Whereas, epistemological reflexivity encourages reflections on the assumptions the researcher makes about the world, during the course of the research and the
implications for such assumptions. The situation regarding the researcher in the research specifically in early years settings also needs consideration. It is important that the researcher recognises that in a rapidly changing world an understanding of children’s new reality calls for ‘a new set of professional understandings’ as ‘childhood is not what it used to be’ (Sommer, 2012, p.4). Researchers have discussed the role of the adult researcher who conducts research, in early childhood settings (Thomas and O’Kane, 2000; Kellett and Ding, 2004; Mayall, 2008). Mandell (1988) suggests that adopting a ‘least adult’ role may minimise the power difference. Others consider this as a ‘naïve’ expectation given the structural and generational differences which exist between adults and children, particularly in educational settings where adults are typically perceived as figures of authority (Kellett and Ding, 2004, Mayall, 2008). Thomas and O’Kane (2000) suggest adopting the position of an ‘interested’ adult friend (2000, p.826). While Darbyshire et al. (2005) and Mayall, (2008), suggest that adult researchers should request assistance from children to help them to understand children’s experiences.

Reflexivity is according to Etherington (2004) a process of interaction within and between the researcher, the research participants and the data which informs the decisions, actions and interpretations at all stages of the research process. A reflexive researcher engages in continuous self-questioning and critique (Dowling, 2006) and is acutely aware of his or her relationships with the research, the research participants, political, social and cultural biases which he or she holds and whether these are overtly or covertly held. As an insider researcher, one who may be seen in a position of power in my role with a National Voluntary Childcare organisation and as a person who was once an ECEC provider. I was very conscious of my situation as an, insider researcher described by Brannick and Coghlan (2007, p.60) as ‘actors immersed in local situations generating contextually embedded knowledge that emerges from experience’. I was acutely aware of my bias towards quality rights based ECEC provision and this was one of the reasons that I used the Reflect Respect Relate Observation Scales (State of South Australia, Department of Education and Children’s Services,
2008), to guide my interpretations of the qualitative data observed during the onsite observations.

My experience as a quality mentor and validator provided invaluable experience when analysing the qualitative findings based on the semi structured interviews, questionnaires, onsite observations and field notes. Reflecting on fairness and transparency increased my awareness of new insights whilst reading and re reading the findings which emerged from the data. My interactions and relationships with the research participants during the data collection phase, was the catalyst to ensure a process of personal reflection which was employed throughout the entire research process to ensure that I was aware of and reflected on my biases, beliefs and the possible power relationships which may have existed. I have consistently reflected on my role within this research project and have made every effort to ensure that my role in the research process was reflected on throughout.

5.5 Methods and Sources of Data

5.5.1 Studies Measuring the Educator’s Image of the Child as a learner and Children’s Wellbeing and Involvement

Published research on the educator’s image of the child as a learner is limited, there are several studies which link the educator’s beliefs about children and how they learn, with the educator’s pedagogical approach. Table 1 below provides detail of the methodologies used in six similar studies. These studies influenced the methodologies which were applied when conducting this study.

Stipek and Byler (1997) questioned if early childhood educators’ practice what they preach. They explored the educator’s image of the child as a learner, the educator’s understanding of how children learn and the role of the educator in children’s learning. This study was conducted using a mixed methods ethnographic approach which included semi-structured interviews and questionnaires of educators and parental questionnaires, followed by on site observations using Stipek’s Early Childhood Programme Observation measure (Stipek et al., 1992). Findings concluded that there were
correlations between the educator’s image of the child and the pedagogical approach. Findings also confirm differences between educator’s espoused beliefs and their pedagogical practice.

Carter and Roe (2013) using only a quantitative self-reporting approach investigated if a positive image of the child is aligned with an authoritarian paradigm of teaching and learning in Montessori preschools in Brisbane South Australia. The findings concluded that a positive image of the child is aligned with an authoritarian paradigm of teaching and learning. The limitation identified in this study was the fact that only a quantitative methodology was used. Therefore, the espoused beliefs of the preschool educators based on a questionnaire were accepted as evidence to present the findings of this study. Winter (2003) who used a mixed methods ethnographic approach to evaluate the first phase of the South Australian Curriculum framework also found inconsistencies in the rhetoric and the reality of the educators’ image of the child as a learner, their understandings about how young children learn and their pedagogical approach. The observation scales Assessing for Learning and Development in the Early Years using Observation Scales Reflect Respect Relate, was developed by the State of South Australia, Department of Education and Children’s Services (2008) based on a study by Winters (2003).

Johansson (2004) also used educator questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and onsite observations, which were videoed, to explore the interactions between the educator and children, when she explored learning encounters in preschools and examined the interaction between the atmosphere, the image of the children and learning. Similarly, Brownlee et al. (2011) who examined the relationships between educators’ epistemologies and pedagogies used on site video observations followed by recall interviews to support educators to reflect on their beliefs and their pedagogical practice. In 2010, the Department of Education and Skills (DES) in Ireland commissioned research to examine pedagogy in early childhood education and care settings (Walsh et al., 2010). The aim of the research was to identify the nature and effectiveness of pedagogy in ECEC in Ireland. This mixed methods study used semi-structured interviews,
practitioner focus groups, questionnaires and onsite observations to assess the quality of the learning experiences using the *Quality of Learning Instrument* (QLI) (Walsh et al., 2006). A professional development module was developed from the findings of this study, which was piloted in seven preschools in Northern Ireland.

It was clear from previous research, to gain an understanding of the educator’s image of the child as a learner that a mixed methods approach and triangulation of the findings would provide the most reliable evidence. Table 5.1 provides an outline of the above studies conducted, methods and tools used.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Methods</th>
<th>Quest</th>
<th>Interview</th>
<th>Obs</th>
<th>Child</th>
<th>Educator</th>
<th>Parent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stipek and Byler (1997)</td>
<td>Preschool educators’ practice / beliefs</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carter and Roe (2013)</td>
<td>Image of the child/ pedagogy</td>
<td>Quant</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
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<tr>
<td>Brownlee et al. (2011)</td>
<td>Epistemologies and pedagogies</td>
<td>Qualitative</td>
<td>Recall</td>
<td>Y Video</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DES (2010)</td>
<td>Nature and Effectiveness of pedagogy</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
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</table>

Measuring children’s wellbeing and involvement has been conducted using a variety of instruments in childcare settings. A number of observation tools have been developed to measure process quality in early childhood education and care programmes. The initial inspiration for this study came from the work of Winter (2003) who developed an observation tool to evaluate the quality of the South Australian Curriculum Standards Framework, as observed through children’s involvement and wellbeing. Other studies where observation tools have been used to measure quality
include the Early Childhood Environmental Rating scale-Revised (ECERS-R), Harms et al. (2005), the Infant/Toddler Environmental Rating Scale-Revised (ITERS-R), Harms et al. (2003) which originated in the US. From a European perspective, The Environmental Rating Scale-Extension, (ECERS-E) (Sylva et al., 2010) measures, the physical, social and emotional environment as well as assessing pedagogical and curricular practices. The Effective Provision of preschool Education (EPPE) longitudinal study (Sylva et al., 2004) indicated the importance of evaluating children’s outcomes. This resulted in the concept of ‘sustained shared thinking’ (Siraj-Blatchford, 2010).

The Assessing Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care, Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Wellbeing (SSTEW) scale for 2-5-year-olds provision was published by Siraj et al (2015). A study to raise the levels of wellbeing and involvement in 53 preschool settings in Milton Keynes 2009-2010 used the Leuven wellbeing and involvement scale to measure the baseline levels and post intervention levels (Laevens and Declercq, 2010). The Leuven scales were also used in 129 settings in: Raising the quality of Foundation Stage provision, Kent PSA project 2005-2008 (Laevens and Declercq, 2009). The State of South Australia, Department of Education and Children’s Services (2008) developed a scale to measure children’s wellbeing and involvement; Assessing for Learning and Development in the Early Years using Observation Scales Reflect Respect Relate. The Reflect Respect Relate Observation Scales (State of South Australia, Department of Education and Children’s Services, 2008) was adapted from the original tool developed by Winter (2003) which was an adaptation of the work of Mayr and Ulrich (1999) and Laevers (1994). Having attended training in Leuven to become a certified Leuven Scale observer in 2016, I became aware of a further scale, the teacher style rating scale (see Appendix B). All the above instruments were considered for their potential use for this study. Each instrument had useful elements; however the State of South Australia, Department of Education and Children’s Services (2008) observation scales provided a source to guide the onsite observations from both a quantitative and qualitative perspective.
5.5.2 Deciding on my research position

After reviewing the theoretical positions above, as well as the possible methodological options for examining children’s wellbeing and involvement, a decision had to be made on the methods which would be best suited to this study. The purpose of this research was to answer the research question; How, does the educator’s image of the child as a learner influence her/his pedagogical approach and how does the preschool educator’s pedagogical approach subsequently impact on children’s level of wellbeing and involvement in the preschool setting. Therefore, based on the theory presented above, my research position revolved around the following components, mixed methods research (MMR) focussing on Ethnography.

It was agreed that a mixed methods study which included questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, onsite observations and case studies would best answer the research question. The findings, from each of the data collection tools was expected to provide both quantitative and qualitative data. It was decided that the tool; Assessing for Learning and Development in the Early Years using Observation Scales; Reflect Respect Relate (State of South Australia, Department of Education and Children’s Services, 2008) would be used to guide and support the onsite observations. This observation scales, in combination with researcher field notes, was used during the onsite observations in preschool settings to assess through a quantitative and qualitative lens the quality of the active learning environment, relationships and children’s wellbeing and involvement levels. The observation scales together with field notes was used to develop seven case studies, one case study per participating preschool. The same data collection methods were used, in both the Irish and the Boston preschool data collection sites. By using both quantitative and qualitative methods it was hoped to discover how reality was experienced by the preschool educators and the children in their natural environment in the preschool setting. The use of multiple paradigms was chosen because of the different orientations of the research question, but also based on my own ontological, epistemological and philosophical position.
As a social researcher I have a preference towards a qualitative approach, however the use of quantitative methods was considered important for this study to increase validity in a field where positivism continues to dominate. The use of the *Reflect Respect Relate* Observation Scales (State of South Australia, Department of Education and Children’s Services, 2008) was initially used to observe objectively for evidence and to make logical deductions and explanations about the levels of quality, based on the four quality indicators or variables as identified in the observation scales. The observation scales were used to provide quantitative data which measured the quality of the active learning environment and relationships as quality indicators and the levels of children’s wellbeing and involvement as quality outputs. On reflection it was recognised that while there were clear indicators of quality and a rating scale for the four variables, observing children in the natural environment of their preschool setting cannot be an objective activity. The researcher’s subjectivity, knowledge, experiences and philosophical beliefs and values result in the interpretation of the observations being value laden and reflected through a qualitative lens. The use of the *Reflect Respect Relate* Observation Scales (State of South Australia, Department of Education and Children’s Services, 2008) in this study was influenced by a sense that policy makers and examiners of the research often, require quantifiable evidence to support claims about impacts of pedagogical practice. As a result, this observation scales were used to provide evidence from a positivist paradigm gleaned through a qualitative lens. The scales, guided the onsite observations and by using the scales and my associated reflections my attention was drawn to the detail of what was happening in the settings, rather than a superficial overview. The parent and educator questionnaires measured, both quantitative and qualitative data, providing evidence in relation to educator demographics and parental expectations.

In this study I did not seek to test a hypothesis or prove a theory. I was motivated by a desire to explore and gain an in-depth understanding about how the educator’s image of the child as a learner, influenced her/his pedagogical approach and the subsequent influence of the chosen
pedagogical approach on children’s level of wellbeing and involvement. In order to do this, it was important to conduct the study in the preschool settings where children and educators construct and interpreted their worlds. Taking an ethnographic approach which Bow (2002) suggests is the approach most closely linked with participant observation allowed me to study the educators’ pedagogical approach and the relationships in the preschool settings, while also reflecting and interpreting children’s daily experiences and their levels of wellbeing and involvement. Bow (2002) noted.

“Participant observation is one of the most flexible techniques or set of techniques for doing research . . . [It] not only potentially combines a number of techniques, such as interviewing, focus groups, observation, and questionnaires, but also has the flexibility to emphasise some techniques over others, and to leave some techniques out altogether”.

(Bow, 2002, p.267)

5.6 Implementation of the Study in Ireland and Boston.

5.6.1 Preparation to Undertake the Study

As an ECEC specialist with many years of experience I felt confident about evaluating, the quality of an ECEC setting. I was delighted when I was awarded the opportunity to undertake a travel bursary to South Australia by UNESCO Child & Family Research Centre. When in South Australia I was introduced to the Reflect Respect Relate Observation Scales (State of South Australia, Department of Education and Children’s Services, 2008) and contacted Dr Pam Winters who was the main author of the tool on behalf of the South Australian Government. To ensure that I could be confident in the reliability of my observation of children’s wellbeing and involvement, I participated in May 2016 in an intensive training seminar to become a Certified Leuven Scales for Early Years (0-6) Observer. The programme was facilitated by the Centre for Experiential Education (CEGO) in Leuven, Belgium under the direction of Professor Ferre Laevers.

In May 2016, I was awarded a Fulbright Scholarship to extend my research to conduct a comparative study in Reggio inspired preschools in Boston (see Appendix C). My Fulbright scholarship was based at Project Zero, Harvard
Graduate School of Education, my placement was sponsored by Professor Howard Gardner and I was supervised by Professor Benjamin Mardell (see Appendix D). The four-month study placement from Sept 2016 to January 2017 offered an important opportunity to undertake data collection in English speaking Reggio inspired preschools in Boston, thereby adding another pedagogical approach to be included in the study.

There are no identified Reggio inspired preschools in Ireland; therefore, this was a welcomed opportunity, which was made possible through my connections with the Reggio Children International Network in Boston (BARIN). The research subsequently became a comparative study between three pedagogical approaches as opposed to two. The data collection undertaken, in Boston MA was the same as the study conducted in the west of Ireland, it involved ethnographic research in two Reggio inspired preschools and one Play-based preschool. The field work replicated the Irish research process, using the same data collection tools and methodology. As a student, the Fulbright scholarship also offered an opportunity to engage in a post graduate module on play at Lesley University. All my personal and professional learning and experiences on this PhD ‘Aistear’, or journey, have provided a rich tapestry to conduct this study. These experiences and my experiences in policy and practice in Irish ECEC settings have provided many advantages but also challenges when conducting this research.

5.6.2 Sampling and a Profile of the Preschools

Selecting a sample of individuals to participate in a study is an important decision. There are many different sampling techniques. Sampling techniques are classified under ‘probability sampling’ and ‘non-probability sampling’. Probability sampling which may involve simple random sampling where every unit in the sampling population has an equal possibility of been chosen. Systematic sampling involves selecting every nth person (quasi-random). Stratified random sampling involves the population being stratified or grouped according to criteria and cluster
sampling involves taking multistage random samples in each of several levels.

Non-probability sampling may include convenience sampling; in convenience sampling the researcher uses a sample, from a sample who are accessible. In quota sampling, the researcher selects individuals based on one or more criteria, but the sampling is not carried out randomly. Purposeful sampling is recognised as an acceptable kind of sampling for special situations it uses the judgement of an expert in selecting the cases or selects cases with a specific purpose in mind. In purposeful sampling the researcher never knows if the cases selected represent the population, it is used primarily in exploratory or in field research, (Neuman, 1997).

5.6.2.1 Sampling and Profile of West of Ireland Preschool Settings

To select settings for inclusion in the study, preschool settings were specifically rather than randomly chosen. Using purposeful sampling the settings were chosen because they were ‘information rich’ offering valuable information and insights to the phenomenon of interest (Patton, 2002, p.46).

The period between 2015/ 2016 was a particularly busy and stressful time for ECEC providers in Ireland with a lot of change at policy and practice level. Specifically, the DCYA introduced mandatory qualification requirement for educators working with children accessing the ECEC programme. The Learner Fund, which was a government funded initiative to support upskilling of staff, was introduced. This resulted in preschool educators working in settings and undertaking training in their own time in the evenings and weekends outside of their working hours. The impending introduction of the 2016 preschool regulations, which introduced registration of all early years settings as opposed to the existing notification process, was a further change and challenge. There was significant apathy and fatigue in the ECEC sector.

When identifying the criteria for participation of preschools in the west of Ireland, the following criteria were considered. Firstly, preschools which I as the researcher had no previous direct professional engagement with, which were located within a twenty-mile radius of my base, were identified
from the local city and county childcare committee website page. It was important to include preschools where the educators had different qualification levels. Preschools, which were in receipt of the higher capitation payment indicated that the preschool educator had a level seven qualification on the National Framework for Qualification, therefore the preschool leader had a degree in ECEC. Preschools which offered a Play-based or a Montessori programme were also prioritised. The type of preschool was also important. Consideration was given to whether the school was attached to a primary school, or if it was a stand-alone preschool or part of a full day-care service.

There were 43 preschool settings within a twenty-mile radius. Information gained from the County Childcare Committee web site, identified if the preschools were Play-based or offering a Montessori Programme. By accessing the individual preschool websites, I could identify the staff qualifications and ascertain if the setting was in receipt of the ECCE scheme higher capitation funding.

Twelve preschool settings were identified which met some or all the criteria. Invitation emails were sent to each of the twelve settings (see Appendix E). I followed up the emails with a phone call. Four of the twelve settings did not respond to email or accept a phone call. I offered to meet with the remaining eight owners and managers. Seven meetings were conducted to discuss the study with the owner and or manager of the preschool setting and four of the preschool settings welcomed the opportunity to participate in the study. The manager in one setting decided following the meeting that she did not want to participate in the study. A further two settings advised that they would participate, however data collection would have to take place between October and December 2016. As I was undertaking fieldwork and data collection in Boston from Sept 2016 to January 2017, this time scale was not suitable. These settings were identified as the substitute settings if any of the four participating preschools withdrew from the study. Table 5.2 below provides a breakdown of the sampling of preschools in the west of Ireland.
Table 5.2: Sampling of West of Ireland Settings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Invited</th>
<th>Resp</th>
<th>Accept</th>
<th>Reject</th>
<th>Mgt</th>
<th>FD</th>
<th>Sess</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>Qual</th>
<th>Pedagogy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
<td>Pri</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td>Mont</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
<td>Pri</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td>Mont</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
<td>Pri</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
<td>Play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
<td>Comm</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
<td>Play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
<td>Pri</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td>Mont</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
<td>Pri</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
<td>Play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
<td>Pri</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
<td>Play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
<td>Comm</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td>Play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
<td>Pri</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td>Mont</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Pri</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td>Mont</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y*</td>
<td></td>
<td>Pri</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td>Play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y*</td>
<td></td>
<td>Pri</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td>Mont</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Accepted on condition that data collection to take place October-December 2016.

5.6.2.2 A Profile of the Preschool Settings in the West of Ireland

In total, seven preschool settings participated in this research study, four of the settings were west of Ireland based settings and three settings were based in Boston. The preschools are identified in the study by the colours of the rainbow as rainbows are often used in preschools to provoke conversations, imagination and support preschool children’s curiosity to explore and think. The following is a profile of the four-participating west of Ireland preschool settings.

5.6.2.2.1 The Yellow Playschool

The Yellow playschool was a privately-owned playschool on the grounds of a primary school in a town in the west of Ireland. There were twenty-two children attending the setting. One child who attended five days per week had an additional need and had a special needs assistant. All children attended for a maximum of fifteen hours per week. The environment had many interest areas and there was a large variety of toys. There was an
absence of natural materials in the environment with most toys being plastic. Children accessed the outdoor areas and used the facilities of the primary school in a very flexible manner. There were two preschool educators, the lead educator had a level nine master’s qualification in education on the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). The second educator had applied to undertake a level six (NQF) vocational qualification. The special needs assistant had an NQF, level five vocational qualification. Coding for this site; Ireland, (I), Play, (P), Educator, 6, 7, 8, (I, P, 6), (I, P, 7), (I, P, 8).

5.6.2.2.2 The Green Playschool

The Green playschool was situated in a full day care community service in a rural setting. Twenty-two children were registered in the preschool. Some of the children stayed for a full day care after the preschool session was finished at 12md. The preschool room was spacious and bright, opening out onto an enclosed outdoor area. This preschool was originally a Montessori school and the Montessori materials were accessible to children in the setting. There were clearly defined interest areas for the children to play. Two early childhood educators worked in the preschool room. The lead educator had an NQF level eight honours degree in early childhood education and care and the second preschool leader had a level five NQF vocational qualification. This centre provided early childhood education and care to children from 14 countries. Coding for this site; Ireland (I), Play (P) Educator 9, 10, (I, P, 9), (I, P, 10)

5.6.2.2.3 The Red Montessori Preschool

The Red Montessori preschool was a standalone privately-owned preschool in an urban housing estate in the west of Ireland. There were twenty-two children attending the setting and two preschool educators. All the children attended for 15 hours per week where they accessed their free pre-school year. The environment was structured as a traditional Montessori prepared environment with all the Montessori equipment presented according to five areas of learning: practical life exercises, sensorial materials, mathematic materials, language materials and cultural materials. There were limited
play materials other than the Montessori equipment within the structured environment. Children accessed the outdoors according to the timetable. The two Preschool educators both held an NQF level six vocational Montessori qualifications. Coding for this site; Ireland, (I) Montessori, (M) Educator (1), (2) (I, M, 1) or (I, M, 2).

5.6.2.2.4 The Orange Montessori Preschool

The Orange Montessori Preschool was a privately managed preschool on the grounds of a primary school in rural Ireland. There were twenty-two children registered to attend the setting daily. One of the children attending had an additional physical need and attended two days per week with a special needs assistant. All the children attended for a maximum of fifteen hours per week. The environment was structured with clear interest areas, such as a reading corner, art area, small world materials and home corner. There was a mixture of natural and manmade materials. The Montessori equipment was displayed on shelves in one area of the room. Children accessed the primary school outdoor area based on the timetable in collaboration with the primary school. There were three educators, two of whom had a level six vocational qualification in early childhood education. The third educator who worked part-time was undertaking a level six vocational programme. Coding; for this preschool; Ireland (I), Montessori (M), Educator 3, 4, 5 (I, M, 3) (I, M, 4), (I, M, 5).

5.6.3 Sampling and profile of Boston Preschool Settings

In the Boston study, preschools were identified based on their membership of Boston Area Reggio Inspired Network (BARIN) as each of the preschools in the network offered a Reggio inspired pedagogical programme. I contacted a colleague from Reggio Children International Network based in Boston and I received an email to confirm collaboration from a board member of the North America Reggio Children Alliance (NAREA), (see Appendix F). The representative from Boston Area Reggio Inspired Network (BARIN) who was my contact in Boston forwarded the letter of invitation which I had prepared, to the preschools in the network inviting them to participate in the study (see Appendix G). Two preschools
expressed interest in participating in the study. I subsequently followed up and answered questions relating to their proposed involvement in the study. Both preschools forwarded confirmation of their preschool’s participation in the study and forwarded details of their preschool services within two weeks. A third ECEC educator who worked in a Reggio inspired setting in Boston and expressed an interest in participating in the study contacted me to advise that she had taken up employment in a Play-based preschool in Boston. The initial expectation was that research would be conducted in nine preschools, three play-based, three Montessori and three Reggio inspired preschools. The data was collected in Ireland in four preschool settings with the option to collect data in a further two settings, one play-based and one Montessori in Ireland in spring 2017. Prior to leaving for Boston, two Reggio inspired settings in Boston had consented to participate in the study. While undertaking the fieldwork in Boston, I met with the manager, who now worked in a Play-based setting and she confirmed that the Play-based setting, the Indigo play school would like to participate in the study.

5.6.3.1 The Indigo Play School

The Indigo playschool was a private fee-paying playschool in urban Boston based in a primary school. The playschool opened at 8.30am. Children attending playschool were received each morning in the outdoor area, regardless of the weather. The children then spend forty minutes in the outdoors before going into the preschool room each morning. The preschool room was an enclosed room with little natural light; it was divided into interest areas, some of which were more defined than others. Children in this playschool had access to a large assembly area and the school employed specialists to provide art and music groups. There were twenty children registered to attend the group and three staff. All the staff had a level seven, International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) master’s level qualification. Coding for this site; Boston (B), Play-based (P), educator, 13, 14, 15 (B, P, 13), (B, P, 14), (B, P, 15).
5.6.3.2 The Blue Reggio Preschool

The Blue Reggio preschool was a parent cooperative fee-paying preschool based in urban Boston. The school opened at 8.30am and preschool finished at 12.30pm, this was identified as a half day programme. Parents could choose an extended day programme which finished at 3.30pm. Only a small number of children stayed until 3.30pm and this was more of an irregular arrangement. Many of the children were collected by a childminder and spend the remainder of the day in an alternative care arrangement. The preschool room was spacious, bright with several static interest areas. Every day new interest areas with different provocations were set up by the educators. Children accessed the outdoor area every day. There were two educators, both of whom had a level 7 ISCED master’s qualification in early childhood education and care related areas. The nursery school also employed additional educators to provide extra supports to children on a one to one basis. Coding; for this site; Boston (B), Reggio Inspired (R), Educator, 11, 12 (B, R, 11) (B, R, 12).

5.6.3.3 The Violet Reggio Preschool

The Violet Reggio preschool was a parent co-operative fee paying preschool, in an urban area of Boston. The preschool accepted children from one year and ten months to five years. Children were allocated a place in the preschool according to their age. The preschool was situated in an old church building and the preschool room was situated in the basement, where there was little natural light. Children could access a large gross motor play space and the atelier or art room. Assess to the outdoors occurred daily in the outdoor play space in the preschool grounds or in the nearby public park. Children in this preschool were actively involved in community events and visited local places and spaces regularly. There were twenty children registered in the group with two educators. The lead educator had a master’s qualification ISCED level seven and the second educator had a bachelor’s degree ISCED level six. Coding; for this site; Boston (B), Reggio (R), Educator 16, 17 (B, R, 16), (B, R, 17).
5.7 Designing the Data Collection Tools

5.7.1 The Data Collection Tools

The selection of appropriate tools is fundamental to meeting research objectives and must be informed by theory. Table 5.3 shows the types of methods used to collect the required data from each of the participants, educators, parents and children. Taking the position of Yardley (2000) the following four criteria for qualitative analysis were considered: this included sensitivity to the context and giving attention to the relevant theoretical positions and ethical issues. Commitment and rigour, through substantial engagement with the subject matter where, as an early years specialist and Doctoral student I had the experience and necessary skills to conduct the data collection and analyse same. I had a clear rational for the tools selected and I was reflexive throughout the research process. The final criteria were in relation to the impact of the data collection tools used and how they would support the findings, thereby adding to knowledge. Four tools were used to collect and analyse the data.

The tools which were developed specifically for the preschool educators’ participation consisted of an information letter, an educator questionnaire and a semi-structured interview guidance template, which guided the interview questions and prompts, (Appendices G, H, and I). These tools measured both quantitative and qualitative data. An observation tool; *Assessing for Learning and Development in the Early Years using Observation Scales; Reflect Respect Relate* (State of South Australia, Department of Education and Children’s Services, 2008), was used to measure the onsite observations. The tool was used to measure the quality of the active learning environment and relationships as quality indicators and children’s wellbeing and involvement as quality outcomes. I chose to use this tool, having reviewed other observation tools outlined previously. The *Reflect Respect Relate Observation Scales* (State of South Australia, Department of Education and Children’s Services, 2008) provided a method of quantitative evaluation undertaken through a qualitative lens to measure the levels of the quality indicators identified in the tool, relationships and the active learning environment and quality outcomes, children’s wellbeing
and involvement levels. The findings of the onsite observations based on the data obtained using the observation scales and field notes were used to develop seven case studies, one case study from each of the participating preschools. An information letter and parental questionnaire were designed which measured both quantitative and qualitative data (Appendix J, K).

5.7.1.1 Methods and Sources of Data Collection for Participants of the Study

Table 5.3: Methods and Sources of Data Collection

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Objectives</th>
<th>Educator</th>
<th>Parent</th>
<th>Children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. To explore the preschool educator’s understanding of her/his role as an early childhood educator in a sample of preschool settings in the west of Ireland and Boston.</td>
<td>Questionnaire. Semi-structured interview, onsite observations, Observation tool.</td>
<td>Questionnaire</td>
<td>Onsite Observation. Field notes. Case studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. To identify the preschool educator’s image of the child as a learner and explore how this influences the pedagogical practice in the preschool setting.</td>
<td>Questionnaire. Semi-structured interview, onsite observation, Observation tool.</td>
<td>Questionnaire</td>
<td>Onsite Observation tool. Field notes. Case studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. To compare children’s level of wellbeing and involvement as a result of the quality of the relationships and the active learning environment in settings offering different pedagogical approaches, (Montessori, Play-based, Reggio inspired).</td>
<td>Onsite observations. Observation Tool. Field Notes</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Onsite Observation Tool. Field notes. Case studies.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.7.1.2 The Preschool Educator Questionnaire

A self-administered paper questionnaire was developed to offer the preschool educators an opportunity to reflect on their beliefs about their role as an educator and their understanding and knowledge about how young children learn. The questions in the survey were based on Bruner’s (1996) models of mind and models of pedagogy. The aim of the questionnaire was
to collate quantitative data in relation to the educators’ age range, gender, number of years working in the preschool, highest level of early childhood qualification, professional development history and beliefs regarding same. This information was necessary to collate as the qualifications of the preschool educator together with the level of continuous professional development has been correlated with the quality of practice in early years settings (Urban et al. 2011; Melhuish, 2015). Understanding the length of time, the educator worked in the participating preschool, was expected to provide data on how embedded the pedagogical practice was in the setting. The quantitative questions were followed by several qualitative questions to identify the preschool educator’s image of the child as a learner, the educator’s understanding of how children learn and the role of the educator in children’s learning.

The first four questions were questions which provided quantitative data relating to the educator, age, qualifications and experience. Question five to question nine provided scenarios of Bruner’s (1996) four models of pedagogy, seeing children as imitative learners, seeing children as learning from didactic exposure, seeing children as thinkers and seeing children as knowledgeable. Educators were requested to grade their responses based on the level to which they agreed or disagreed with the scenarios. This information aimed to provide an understanding of the educator’s image of the child as a learner. Questions ten to eighteen established the educator’s, understanding of her/his role as an educator. Question 18 requested educators to identify the challenges they have encountered, while working as a preschool educator. Research has identified that educators cite challenges in relation to childcare regulations and legislation, parental and policy expectations as barriers to practice in preschool settings (MacNaughton and Hughes, 2011).

Questions 19 to 26 provided scenarios relating to teacher-led and child centred practice. Using a Likert scale, educators provided answers which revealed their espoused pedagogical approach. The final question ascertained from educators their opinion on the level of children’s wellbeing, in the preschool setting. This question was included to provoke
reflection prior to the semi-structured interview. The preschool educator questionnaire measured both quantitative and qualitative questions. The questionnaire together with the semi-structured interview provided a frame to compare the educators espoused beliefs about children and learning, with the observed practice in the preschool setting.

5.7.1.3 Educator’s Interview

The educator’s interview followed the questionnaire. An interview schedule was developed to gain qualitative data with prompts included in the guide to support the interviewee. The interview schedule was developed based on the educator questionnaire. The purpose of the interview was to explore more fully in a qualitative way, the educator’s understanding of her/ his role, the educator’s image of the child as a learner and the educator’s knowledge and understanding of how young children learn. The purpose of the semi-structured interview was to gain an understanding in relation to how the research participants and the preschool educators’ view their social world. In preparing and formulating the interview guide I considered Kvale’s (2006) ten criteria of a successful interviewer. Suggestions by Bryman (2008) in relation to balance and ethical sensitivity were also respected.

The semi-structured interview questions were divided into four sections; the image of the child as a learner; the preschool educator’s role; interactions, and wellbeing. The interviews provided both quantitative and qualitative data. The qualitative data provided evidence of educators' beliefs about professional development and their understanding of the role of the preschool educator. Following on from the questionnaire, the semi-structured interviews provided data in relation to the educators’ beliefs about what constitutes quality preschool provision and a pedagogical approach which supports young children’s learning. The interview also explored further; educators perceived challenges while working in a preschool setting.
5.7.1.4 Parental Questionnaire

Parents are the most important people in their children’s lives and children learn about the world and their place in it through their parents or guardians (NCCA, 2009). Parental involvement in early childhood education and care is regarded as essential to successful development outcomes for young children (Decker and Decker, 1992). In Ireland, the preschool regulations and the two National Practice Frameworks, Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009) and Síolta, The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (CECDE, 2006), identify and confirm young children’s right under the UNCRC (1989) to play, Article (31), to a voice in matters that affect them, Article (12), to participation Article (31) and protection Article (19). Article (29) UNCRC expands on children’s rights ‘through’ education to include respect for the child’s parents and culture, as well as the country in which they are living.

In recognition of the essential role of parents in their child’s educational experiences, the aim of the parental questionnaire was to collate quantitative details in relation to each child, these included details on, gender, date of birth, and start date in preschool. The child’s nationality and the parents’ nationality were included to ensure inclusivity and diversity in the findings in relation to parental expectations and parental partnership. Parental partnership is a fundamental element of quality ECEC experiences which influences children’s levels of wellbeing, it was important therefore to understand the level of parental partnership in each of the participating preschools. The data collection in Ireland took place in 2016 prior to the second free preschool year being introduced. The question was posed specifically for the Irish parent participants regarding their reason for sending their child to preschool. The researcher wished to explore if parents sent their child to preschool as a result of policy changes where their child now had an entitlement to a free preschool year, or if there were other reasons for sending their child to preschool. However, the question was also applicable to the Boston participants as this question also identified the parents’ expectations of the preschool for their child’s holistic development.
It was also important to use the questionnaire to explore parents’ understanding of how their child learns and the role of the educator in the child’s learning processes. These questions provided information in relation to parents’ reason for sending their child to preschool, whether it was for care or education or a combination of both. By asking parents their understanding of how their child learns and providing some scenarios, parents identified their expectations of the pedagogical approach which they felt met their needs and the needs of their child’s learning and development. Participating parents were asked about the evidence or documentation they received from the preschool in relation to their child’s learning. This was important as quality pedagogical documentation involves a partnership between the educator, children and parents which gives visibility to children’s competencies and meaning making processes (Rinaldi, 2005). The parental questionnaire was developed based on studies by Glenn-Applegate et al. (2011) on parent selection factors when choosing preschool programmes, Bararin et al. (2008) who considered parental conceptions of school readiness and Walsh et al. (2010).

5.7.1.5 Observation Scales

Assessing for Learning and Development in the Early Years using Observation Scales; Reflect Respect Relate

(State of South Australia, Department of Education and Children’s Services, 2008).

Reflect Respect Relate Observation Scales or the 3R’s observation scale as it is referred to in Australia was developed by the South Australian Government in 2008 as a support to early childhood educators. The scale is described as providing a reference point for reflective practice, respectful connections and relationships between educators, families and children for improving learning outcomes for all children (State of South Australia, Department of Education and Children’s Services, 2008). The scales can be used formally for research to critically examine the interactions which take place between adults and children, educators’ pedagogy, children’s wellbeing and children’s involvement. It can also be used less formally for
self-assessment to develop a deeper understanding of curriculum quality or as a guide to reflecting on current practice. The Observation Scales was circulated to all registered ECEC settings in the region by the South Australian Government.

The observation scales critically examine the interactions which take place between educators and children, educators’ pedagogy and children’s wellbeing and involvement in their learning. The theoretical basis for the observation scale is that the key determinants of children’s successful learning outcomes and wellbeing are as a result of the pedagogical relationships and practices of educators (Winter, 2003; Bennett 2004; Laevers and Heylen, 2004). The scales were developed as research instruments based on international research (Vygotsky, 1978; Rogers, 1983; Laevers, 1999 and 2000; Mayr and Ulich, 1999; Pascal, 1999) and the underpinning philosophy of the South Australian Curriculum and Accountability Framework (2003). The observation scales focus on four variables of quality in early childhood education and care settings. The two indicators of quality variables; relationships and the active learning environment and the two outcomes of quality variables; wellbeing and involvement. The variables are based on research that identifies that relationships are of fundamental importance to young children’s learning and that the most supportive learning environment is one which respects young children as active, competent learners. The variables also identify that children’s levels of involvement and wellbeing are two of the most conclusive indicators of how well an educational setting is meeting the learning and developmental priorities of children (State of South Australia, Department of Education and Children’s Services, 2008).

The Reflect Respect Relate Observation Scales (State of South Australia, Department of Education and Children’s Services, 2008) as outlined in Figure 5.4 is based on the premise and underpinning research that the highest levels of learning and wellbeing occur when children receive high quality care and teaching.
Quality care and teaching are dependent on the quality of the educator / child relationships and the pedagogical practice. When these two elements are of a high quality, children will experience high levels of wellbeing and will have high levels of involvement or engagement in their learning. Children will be intrinsically motivated, curious and driven to learn. This level of quality will only occur when reflective practitioners have clear teaching and learning objectives (State of South Australia, Department of Education and Children’s Services, 2008). The basis for the Observation Scales was an adaptation of a tool developed by Winter (2003).

The Reflect Respect Relate Observation Scales outlines below the links between the responsibilities of educators (the environment and relationships) and outcomes for children (wellbeing & involvement) (Adapted from Winter, 2003).
5.7.1.5.1 Using the Observation Scales

The *Reflect Respect Relate Observation Scales* comprises of two predictors variables; these are relationships and the active learning environment. These variables measure the quality of the relationship between the educator and the child and the level of the educator’s engagement in children’s learning, as predictors of process quality. The two outcome variables, wellbeing and involvement, are considered to be quality outcomes. Structural quality is assessed by the observation scales when considering the physical learning environments this includes consideration of the materials which are available to the children. Each variable is measured using the signals and indicators provided in the observation scales. It is recommended that a minimum of four children, or 25% of the total number of children, are randomly selected in each group for onsite observation. It is also recommended that there should be a gender balance in the children selected, and that all children selected to be observed should be attending the preschool setting for five daily sessions. Guidance on selecting children for onsite observation suggests that children, who are new to the setting, or attending on a part-time basis, should not be included for observation.

There is a six-step process to conducting the observations which is replicated across the four observation scales, relationships and the active learning environment as quality indicators and wellbeing and involvement as quality outcomes. Figure 5 identifies the six-step process undertaken to conduct the onsite observations. A total of six, five-minute observations were conducted on each of the target children for the variable relationships as a quality indicator and wellbeing as a quality output. The active learning environment scales were measured by observing each of the educators six times for five minutes each time. The involvement variable was measured by conducting six, two-minute observations on each of the target children. Following each observation time was taken to make notes. The notes were used to complete the scoring sheets in the *Reflect Respect Relate* Observation Scales, immediately after the preschool session and before I left.
the preschool setting. This was a deviation from the guidance notes as outlined in the scales, which suggest that the observations be conducted, and the indicators scored while undertaking the observation. Fidelity in using the observation tool will be discussed following this section.

Following the onsite observations which were recorded using a narrative observation, the observation scoring sheets were completed. The Indicator observations recorded if the signal assigned in the rating scale occurred and whether this was a positive occurrence, a negative occurrence, a missed opportunity or no opportunity. Using the indicator observations, a judgement for the global quality for each of the signals was assigned, low, medium or high, and a rating was assigned from 0-5 using the description ratings (see Appendix L). Step four involved calculating an individual mean score for each child based on the calculation of the scores for the six observations. Each of the child’s observation scores were added and divided by six, the number of observations, to calculate the child’s individual mean score (see Appendix M). To calculate the mean score for the setting under each of the four variables, the total number of mean scores from the children and educators who were observed was then divided by the number of children or educators in the setting (see Appendix N). When the mean score for each setting across the four variables was collated this was then compared to the lowest acceptable score as identified in the observation scale for a supportive environment across the four variables; Relationships, The Active Learning Environment and the level of Wellbeing and Involvement in the setting. Figure 5.5 provides a picture of the observation and data collection process.
5.7.1.5.2 The Relationships Scale

The Relationship Scale (Appendix O) was developed based on the findings of the Effective Early Learning Project (EEL Project) which posits that the process of the relationships between the educator and children is the key to quality (Pascal, 1999). Observation schedules which were developed and tested by Pascal et al. (1998) guided the development of the Reflect, Respect, Relate Relationship Scale. The Relationship Scale was developed based on the understanding that relationships in the preschool setting are immensely complex and many behaviours and emotions are happening simultaneously. The Relationship Scale measured the style and quality of the relationships through the interactions between educators and children. There are four signals with associated indicators of quality relationships, identified in the scale. The indicators are, responsiveness, positive interactions, the quality of the verbal exchanges and appropriateness. Based on the onsite observation of practice, I identified using the scales if the indicator observed was observed positively, negatively, if the opportunity was missed or if there was no opportunity to observe the indicator.
Following this I recorded a rating for each indicator. The rating scale for relationships has five levels identified in Table 5.4.

Table 5.4: Indicator and rating descriptions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Rating Description:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>+</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Indicator observed occurring positively</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>x</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>Indicator observed occurring negatively</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-</td>
<td>Missed Opportunity</td>
<td>Indicator not observed through missed opportunity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o</td>
<td>No Opportunity</td>
<td>Indicator not observed through no opportunity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Rating Descriptions:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Environment</th>
<th>Observation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>Absent</td>
<td>No interaction with educator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Totally non-supportive</td>
<td>Negative, restricting, controlling, dominating interactions, social bids or cues for comfort go unnoticed or are rejected, discounted, avoided or ignored.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Mainly non-supportive</td>
<td>Detached, delayed or brief interactions, minimal social or emotional involvement or direct contact / affection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Neither supportive nor non-supportive</td>
<td>Functional; interactions are routine, technical, mostly organisational or in response to physical need; superficial contact.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Mainly Supportive</td>
<td>Social bids and cues are responded to quickly and sensitively; some intense, reciprocal interactions, but with interruptions, educator initiates contact, not all signals are present.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Extremely supportive</td>
<td>Securely attached, special togetherness and reciprocal warmth, invites and shares positive reciprocal, sustained interactions, all signs are present.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Conducting the observation:**

When observing for the responsiveness of the educator I considered if the child had physical and emotional access to the educator and received reliable and consistent responses. The focus of the observation was to assess the quality of the relationships in the preschool setting based on the educator’s interactions with the child. By observing the educator’s interactions with the child, I was, guided by the signals and indicators in the Reflect Respect Relate Observation Scales to assess the quality of the
educator / child relationships. When conducting the observation, I considered if the educator was welcoming and if his or her communications with the child were happy, respectful, caring and positive. I also reflected on the level of interest the educator took in the child and the child’s emerging interests. I observed the pedagogical approach of the educator and noted if and how the educator facilitated and scaffolded the child’s learning and play. When observing the quality of the verbal exchanges, I assessed if the dialogue went beyond instruction to sustained two-way turn taking where the child’s language and conversation was extended. The appropriateness of the educator/child relationship was also observed, and I noted if each child was being treated fairly or if there was favouritism shown to some children over other children.

How the educators spoke with and to the children and managed transition times, by explaining to the children what was happening and preparing them for what was about to happen next, was also observed. I observed the manner in which educator’s spoke to children, advising them of what was possible for them to do, rather than what they could not do in the preschool setting. While undertaking each observation I took note as to whether there was evidence of children’s efforts rather than attributes being acknowledged and if children received support and guidance when overwhelmed. The Relationship Scale Observation Sheet, *signals with indicators*, was used as a guide in making an informed decision of the rating to be applied to each of the four signals based on the 45 indicators identified on the observation sheet (Appendix O).

Figure 5.6 below identifies the six-step process of conducting the observations and recording and calculating the mean scores for relationships in each of the preschools.
5.7.1.5.3 The Active Learning Environment Scale

“Educators beliefs about children’s learning and what motivates children to learn very much determine the learning environment that educators establish and maintain and the role they take in children’s learning processes”.

(State of South Australia, Department of Education and Children’s Services, 2008, p.12)

The Active Learning Environment Scale (Appendix P) is based on a social constructivist theory of learning, where the learner actively constructs knowledge and understanding within a system of reciprocal, respectful, relationships (State of South Australia, Department of Education and Children’s Services, 2008) The Active learning Environment Observation Scale assesses teaching or pedagogical approaches. As with the Relationship Scale, I firstly identified if the indicator was positively or negatively observed or if there was a missed opportunity or no opportunity to observe the indicator. The rating description for the Active Learning Environment Rating Scale is based on three domains, social constructivist pedagogy, play, and enabling learning dispositions. Each of the three domains identifies signals with indicators. Under domain 1; social
constructivist pedagogy, the observation focus is on how the preschool educator creates a learning environment, co-constructs meaning with the children and reflects and plans. There are 38 indicators to be considered under this domain. (Appendix P). The following Table 5.5 outlines the rating descriptions for the Active Learning Environment Scale.

Table 5.5: Active Learning Environment Rating Descriptions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Environment</th>
<th>Observation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Totally non-supportive</td>
<td>No signals evident</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Mainly non-supportive</td>
<td>Very few signals evident</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Neither supportive nor non-supportive</td>
<td>Some signals evident</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Mainly supportive</td>
<td>Most signals evident</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Totally supportive</td>
<td>All signals evident</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conducting the observation:

I firstly considered, based on my observation of practice how the preschool educator fostered a sense of belonging and autonomy in the learning environment. I observed if children had choice and access to a variety of materials, both natural and open ended. When observing the physical environment, I considered if the children had opportunities to play, explore, experiment and be creative and I also reflected on the opportunities afforded to children to interact and co-construct meaning together and/or with the preschool educator in the learning environment. I looked for evidence to demonstrate that the learning process was based on a reciprocal and respectful relationship and evidence of how the educator listened to children and demonstrated that she/ he valued their opinions. The preschool educator’s teaching strategies were observed to consider how the educator facilitated dialogue and learning together with the children. The type of opportunities or provocations which the preschool educators provided for children to explore, construct, create, experiment and follow their curiosities
and emerging interests were also observed and assessed based on the Active Learning Environment Rating Scale.

When observing the pedagogical approach, I considered how children’s voice and emergent interests were reflected in the curriculum. This occurred when the educator took time to reflect on his or her practice and was reflected in the use of pedagogical documentation to give visibility to what was happening in relation to the child’s meaning making processes. Play is considered to be the natural way that children learn (Bruner, 1996; Singer, 2013; Gray, 2015). The Active Learning Environment Scale measures the level to which children can engage in sensory and physical play, exploratory play, social play, pretend and symbolic play. When observing children’s play, I considered and reflected on how the fundamental element of play being freely chosen was present in the preschool learning environment.

When considering how children’s learning dispositions were enabled, I reflected on how the educator encouraged and provided for children’s exploration and curiosity in the learning environment. I also reflected and observed the level of autonomy children had to make decisions about their learning and if these decisions were respected by the educator. When children have autonomy to make decisions about their learning they can decide when they are ready to finish, move on or change direction in their play. Educators in this instance respect children’s attention and concentration and recognise the child’s capabilities and accomplishments. In order to enable children’s learning dispositions; educators must be flexible and open to different possibilities. The role of the educator in this instance is to provide different provocations where children can test their theories and hypothesise. I sought evidence through my observations and using the observation tool to assess the quality of the active learning environment across the three domains. The Active Learning Environment Observation Sheet, signals with indicators, was used as a guide in making an informed decision of the rating to be applied to each of the three domains, social constructivist pedagogy, 38 indicators, play, 37 indicators and enabling learning dispositions 42 indicators. The signals within each
domain based on a total of 120 indicators are identified on the observation sheet (Appendix P). The signals for the three domains assessed when conducting onsite observations for this study, while observing the active learning environment are identified in Table 5.6.

Table 5.6: Active Learning Environment signals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educators</th>
<th>Domain 1: Signals Social Constructivist Pedagogy</th>
<th>Domain 2: Signals Play</th>
<th>Domain 3: Signals Enabling Learning Dispositions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Educators</td>
<td>Create an environment</td>
<td>Creates and participates in an environment that encourages</td>
<td>Educators model enabling learning dispositions and provide an environment that encourages children’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Co-Construct meaning</td>
<td>Sensory and Physical Play</td>
<td>Curiosity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reflect and Plan</td>
<td>Exploratory Play</td>
<td>Communicability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Social Play</td>
<td>Purposefulness/Persistence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Pretend / Symbolic play</td>
<td>Openness/Risk Taking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Activity, Invest Energy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Cooperation/Collaboration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Reflection</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 5.7 identifies the six-step process of conducting the observations and recording and calculating the mean scores for the Active Learning Environment in each of the preschool settings.
5.7.1.5.4 The Wellbeing Scale

“High levels of wellbeing maximise children’s learning potential, encouraging the positive development of children’s innate exploratory drive, a sense of agency and the desire to interact with responsive others”.

(State of South Australia, Department of Education and Children’s Services 2008, p.12)

The Wellbeing Scale (Appendix Q) was developed based on the work of Mayr and Ulich (1999), Laevers (1997) and Pascal and Bertram (1999). Pascal and Bertram (1999) also developed an instrument based on the work of Laevers (1994) to measure children’s wellbeing through their interactions with their educators for the Effective Early Learning (EEL) project (1998). The Wellbeing Scale has three domains: happiness and satisfaction, social functioning and dispositions. The observation focus in this scale is on the child’s behaviour, their activities and the educator and other children’s interactions with the child. There are 40 indicators to be considered under this domain. (Appendix Q). The following in Table 5.7 is the rating descriptions for the Wellbeing Scale.
Table 5.7: Rating Descriptions Wellbeing Scale

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Environment</th>
<th>Observation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Totally non-supportive</td>
<td>Emotionally uncomfortable, displays of negativity symptoms e.g., crying,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>hurting, withdrawn, unhappy, tense, easily overwhelmed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Mainly non-supportive</td>
<td>Seldom displays enjoyment, signs of level 1 about half the time, alternating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>with neutral and some positive signals, may take pleasure in disrespectful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>ways e.g. hurting others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Neither supportive nor non-</td>
<td>Occasional signs of emotional discomfort, generally appears ‘quite happy’,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>supportive</td>
<td>reasonable self-confidence and enjoyment without intensity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Mainly Supportive</td>
<td>Generally happy with few signs of emotional discomfort, adequately</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>succeeds in meeting and regulating their own needs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Totally Supportive</td>
<td>High levels of trust and confidence, initiates positive connections with</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>others, radiates vitality and self-esteem, shows initiative, curiosity and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>pleasure in activities, receptive, communicative, self-guided and flexible.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Conducting the observation:**

When observing children’s happiness, I observed how the child portrayed confidence and self-esteem; I also observed the level of the child’s vitality and the level of enjoyment and sense of humour the child exhibited. Note was taken as to whether the child had the ability to take time out, to rest and relax in the preschool environment. While observing individual children, I took note of how the child interacted and socialised with friends in the preschool setting. This included observation of the child’s initiative to reach out to others, accept help, negotiate differences and attract friends. When observing the child’s level of wellbeing I considered how assertive and confident the child appeared to be and how flexible the child was to cope with confrontation. I also looked for evidence which demonstrated how open the child was to be comforted and his or her ability to reach out for physical contact, warmth and closeness. When observing children’s dispositions using the wellbeing scale, I considered how open or flexible the child was to exploratory and sensory experiences and reflected on how the child exhibited levels of persistence, pleasure and optimism, as when these characteristics are present, they indicate high levels of wellbeing (Laevers,
The signals for the three domains assessed when observing children’s levels of wellbeing were, Happiness and Satisfaction, Social Functioning and Dispositions they are identified in Table 5.8.

**Table 5.8: Wellbeing Scale Domains and Signals**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Child</th>
<th>Domain 1: Signals Happiness and Satisfaction</th>
<th>Domain 2: Signals Social Functioning</th>
<th>Domain 3: Signals Dispositions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Vitality</td>
<td>Social initiative</td>
<td>Openness and receptivity/pleasure in exploring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Enjoyment Sense of humour</td>
<td>Assertiveness</td>
<td>Pleasure in sensory experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ability to rest &amp; Relax</td>
<td>Coping/ flexibility</td>
<td>Persistence / Robustness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Positive Attitude towards warmth and closeness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 5.8 identifies the six-step process of conducting the observations and recording and calculating the mean scores for wellbeing in each of the preschool settings.

![Figure 5.8: Wellbeing Observation Scale](image-url)
5.7.1.5.5 The Involvement Scale

Children’s involvement, often referred to as engagement, or by Csikszentmihalyi (1979a) as ‘a state of flow’, is based on the theories of effective teaching and learning of Rogers (1983) and Vygotsky (1978). Laevers (1993) suggests that involvement is characterised by concentration, persistence, openness to stimuli, interest, fascination, intrinsic motivation, intense experience and exploratory drive with a flow of energy and high levels of satisfaction (Government of South Australia, 2008) (Appendix R). A totally involved person, Vygotsky (1978) suggests operates at his or her highest level of capacity, that is, within a Zone of Proximal Development. It is within this high level state of involvement that ‘deep level’ learning occurs. Children process and make meaning and are autonomous and competent (Laevers, 1999). The involvement scale is based on the work of Laevers (1994). There are 9 signals to be considered when assessing involvement (Appendix N). The following Table 5.9 is the rating descriptions for the Involvement scale.

Table 5.9: Rating Description for Involvement Scale

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Observation</th>
<th>Aimless, absent minded</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>No activity</td>
<td>Tinkering/ daydreaming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Frequently interrupted activity</td>
<td>Busy but routine actions without much devotion, few signals of involvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>More or less maintained activity</td>
<td>Strong involvement with interruptions/ involved but not all signals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Activity with intense moments</td>
<td>Involvement with essential signals (concentration, energy, complexity/ creativity and persistence)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Sustained intense activity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Conducting the observation

The scale has nine signals for involvement, accompanied by indicators. As outlined in Table 5.10 the signals are, concentration, or the level of the child’s attention when engaged in the activity. The level of energy the child displays and how this is exhibited is the second signal. The third signal, according to Laevers (1994), is the level of complexity and creativity of the involvement. When observing the level of engagement, I observed the child’s facial expression, posture and verbal utterances. The child’s level of persistence was observed and the level of the child’s attention and focus of energy was also observed. When observing and assessing the involvement level I considered the child’s level of precision and attention to detail and reaction time. Children’s verbal utterances and language, explaining what they were experiencing or discovering and their pride in sharing, demonstrating or displaying their efforts were all considered when assessing children’s levels of involvement.

Table 5.10: Involvement signals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Involvement Scale signals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Concentration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facial expression &amp; Posture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reaction Time</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 5.9 identifies the six-step process of conducting the observations and recording and calculating the mean scores for the levels of involvement in each of the preschool settings. The observations to measure Involvement were of two-minute duration as outlined in Table 6.
5.7.1.5.6 Inter rateable reliability

The Government of South Australia (2008) using the methodologies described by Wiersma (1995) and Aubrey et al. (2005) confirm that an expert trained in the use of the scales spent 20 hours jointly observing three children and their educators to check the consistency and reliability of the data collection process. Eighty-five percent consistency was achieved between the expert observer and the project observer in the use of the observation schedule. Three of the variables used in the development of this tool were developed and tested for inter rateability by other researchers (Laevers et al. 1994; Mayr and Ulich, 1999; Pascal et al., 1998; Bertram, 1995; Bertram and Pascal, 1997; Ramsden, 1997; Mc William, 1991; McWilliam et al., 1998). The fourth variable the active learning environment was tested for inter rateable reliability, with an eighty-five percent consistency achieved (State of South Australia, Department of Education and Children’s Services, 2008). Equally the Milton Keynes study identified rateable reliability based on observers being a Certified Leuven Scales for Early Years (0-6) Observer. This certification was received by
the researcher following a three-day intensive seminar in Leuven University. The certificate demonstrates that the researcher has proficiency in observing and coding early childhood observations using the Leuven Scales for Early Years (0-6 years), i.e. Leuven Involvement Scale, Leuven Wellbeing & Involvement Scales and the Leuven Adult Style Observation Schedule.

5.7.2 Fidelity in using the observation tool

There are several rating scales which have been used to measure quality in early childhood education and care settings. The first environmental rating scales were developed in the US; examples of these are the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale (ECERS) and the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale Revised (ECERS-R) (Harms et al, 2005). These scales were closely linked with the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale – Extension (ECERS -E) (Sylva et al., 2010) and followed by the Sustained Shared Thinking Emotional Well-being (SSTEW) scale, (Siraj et al., 2015). The rating scales including the Reflect Respect Relate Observation Scale (State of South Australia, Department of Education and Children’s Services, 2008) all have similar scoring frameworks. Over the years the various scales have been adapted and extended as research has improved and increased knowledge on what constitutes effective practice (Siraj et al., 2015).

The guidance on how to conduct observations using the most recent rating scale Sustained Shared Thinking Emotional Wellbeing (Siraj et al., 2015) differs from the guidance given on how to conduct observations in the ECERS-E (Sylva et al., 2010) and the ECERS-R (Harms et al., 2005, p.3) scales and the Reflect Respect Relate Observation Tool (State of South Australia, Department of Education and Children’s Services, 2008). The guidance in these scales suggest that all rating should be conducted during the observation. There has been a shift in thinking based on the work of Siraj et al (2015) in relation to guidance when observing process quality, namely interactions, relationships and the active learning environment. This shift in thinking is in relation to the use of tick box exercises to score
interactions, relationships and the active learning environment. Based on increased knowledge the use of a tick box exercise or a quantitative approach is not considered best practice or the most appropriate way to measure process quality, which is inductive by its nature.

The guidelines for conducting onsite observations using the *Sustained Shared Thinking Emotional Wellbeing* observation tool (Siraj et al., 2015) suggests that scoring observations should only be done after the observer has allowed sufficient time to make a reasoned judgement and that the observation is representative of the practice observed. Siraj et al. (2015 p.11) suggests that ‘it is often best to make notes and rate everything at the end of the observation session’. This advice provided by Siraj et al., (2015) also confirms that the observer when conducting the onsite observations should be careful not to interrupt or interfere with the practice in the setting. Siraj et al., (2015) further suggest that the non-participant observer should adopt a ‘fly in the wall’ role and avoid interacting with children, who may be inquisitive about what the researcher is doing, as in the case of this study, completing a tick list observation sheet. By adopting a ‘fly on the wall’ (p.11) approach the observer remains neutral and is Siraj et al., (2015) suggest as inconspicuous as possible. This would not be the situation if while undertaking the onsite observations I was completing a checklist of 234 indicators for a minimum of four children in a room of on average twenty preschool children. Scoring the observations onsite, while conducting the observations would certainly attract the children’s attention and curiosity, thereby interrupting the flow of children’s natural processes and engagement.

Adapting the tool from conducting onsite observations using the formal check list approach to scoring the onsite observations, to taking narrative observations and scoring the observations immediately after the observation session was also informed by the research practices of Groeneveld et al. (2016) and Goldspink and Foster (2013). Groeneveld et al (2016) used video to conduct onsite observations with childminders and scored the observations based on the video footage following the observation session, thereby adapting the observation tool to score the observations having
viewed the video footage. Similarly, Goldspink and Foster (2013) adapted the Winters (2003) and Laevers (1997) observation scales to develop a new set of instruments to measure student’s engagement in their learning. While it may be suggested that even a very small change can destroy the validity of a tool Juniper (2009) suggests that, modification or adaptation of a validated tool may increase the band of uncertainty surrounding a score but does not necessarily invalidate the score.

When a measurement tool is not appropriate for a population or needs to be modified, Stewart et al., (2007) suggest that the researcher may wish to develop a new measuring tool which may be fraught with many challenges, including time, expertise and testing. Another option which Stewart et al (2012) suggest is to modify or adapt an existing measure. Adapting or modifying an existing measure is done primarily to improve the ability of the measure to answer specific, contemporary research questions (Stewart et al., 2012). Thus, modifications Krause (2006) suggests may be made to reflect historical or cultural contexts or changes as a result of increased knowledge. Modifications in this case Krause (2006) posits can be an integral part of the evolution of a concept or measure, with modifications improving an existing measure for use by other researchers. There is an expectation that when measures are modified that the modified measure is an improvement over the original measure in the new context or population (Hays et al., 2002).

Consistent with the concept of measurement evolution, is the perspective that the validity of the measure is not a property of a test or measure, but of a measure tested under a particular set of conditions (Messick, 1995; Sechrest, 2005). This perspective holds that because validity pertains to understanding the meaning of scores, construct validity can only be established incrementally based on the accumulation of evidence on how the measure relates to other measures (Sechrest, 2005). Therefore, Stewart et al. (2012) suggest that well-designed and thought out modifications thus contribute to enhancing the validity of measures in new and diverse populations. When I undertook the certified Leuven Scale training for Early Years (0-6 years) at the Centre for Experiential Education the process of
scoring the tool was adapted to meet the context. Observations were scored using video following the observation sessions, this allowed for reflection by the observer. Stewart et al. (2012) suggest that there are three sources of information used to decide why and how to modify or adapt a measuring tool, these include literature review, examples of other research in the specific field, and investigator experience.

A decision was made under supervision based on the increased knowledge and research in relation to conducting onsite observations of young children (Siraj et al., 2015) and my knowledge and experience of working with children in ECEC settings to take guidance on conducting the onsite observations from Siraj et al. (2015). The process of observation was adapted, narrative observation notes were taken onsite and scored immediately after the observation session, thereby informed as recommended by a deeper reflexive and reasoned judgement. The Reflect Respect Relate observation tool (State of South Australia, Department of Education and Children’s Services, 2008) was used primarily to guide my interpretation of the quality of the active learning environment, and relationships as quality indicators and the levels of wellbeing and involvement as quality outputs. The validity of this study is based on the triangulation of evidence as outlined by Sechrest (2005) of both the quantitative and the qualitative data collated, taking into consideration the changing contexts, subjectivity and dynamic nature of the preschool settings.

5.7.3 Implementing the Study

This section outlines how the study was implemented in the west of Ireland and in Boston. The potential sources of data, the names, setting type and dates of data collection, the tools used to collate the data as relevant to the objectives of the study and the number of questionnaires returned, interviews and onsite observations conducted are outlined in Tables 5.10 and 5.11. These data sources were used to answer the research question; How, does the educator’s image of the child as a learner influence her/his pedagogical approach and how does the preschool educator’s pedagogical
approach subsequently impact on children’s level of wellbeing and involvement in the preschool setting? To answer the research question; the objectives of the study are four-fold and are designed as follows:

- **Objective 1** - To explore the preschool educator’s understanding of her/his role as an early childhood educator in a sample of preschool settings in the west of Ireland and Boston.

- **Objective 2** - To identify the preschool educator’s image of the child as a learner and explore how this influences the pedagogical practice in the preschool settings in the west of Ireland and Boston.

- **Objective 3** - To compare children’s level of wellbeing and involvement as a result of the quality of the relationships and the active learning environment in settings offering different pedagogical approaches, (Montessori, Play-based, Reggio inspired).

- **Objective 4** – To examine the implications for ECEC policy and practice as a result of the addition to knowledge of this study.

### 5.7.3.1 Implementation of the Study in the West of Ireland

Table 5.11 below provides the framework for the implementation of the study in the west of Ireland. A total of four settings, two Play-based and two Montessori preschools, located in the west of Ireland participated in the Irish study. The number of preschool educators in the west of Ireland participating in the study was ten, of which five worked in a Play-based preschool and five worked in a Montessori preschool. There were eleven preschool educators working across the four settings, however one preschool educator did not consent to participate in the study.

A total of 10 educator questionnaires were completed followed by 10 educator semi-structured interviews. A total of sixty-one parental questionnaires (69.31%) were completed from a possible full data set of eighty-eight parents in the west of Ireland settings. Of a possible 88 children, 17 children were randomly selected for onsite observation using; *The Assessing for Learning and Development in the Early years Using*
Observation Scales, Reflect Respect Relate (State of South Australia, Department of Education and Children’s Services, 2008). In total, six observations were conducted on each of the 17 target children and 10 educators across four scales: relationships, the active learning environment, wellbeing and involvement. The total number of child observations conducted in preschool settings in the west of Ireland was 102.

Table 5.11: Implementation of the Study in the West of Ireland

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Objective</th>
<th>Source potential</th>
<th>Setting</th>
<th>Date/ Time: 9am - 1pm</th>
<th>Tools</th>
<th>Quest</th>
<th>Interviews</th>
<th>Obs.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. To explore the preschool educators’ understanding of her/his role as an early childhood educator in a sample of preschool settings in the west of Ireland and Boston</td>
<td>x11 Preschool Educators</td>
<td>X4</td>
<td>June 2016</td>
<td>Questionnaire semi structured interview, onsite observations. Observation tool.</td>
<td>x10 Educators</td>
<td>x10 Educators</td>
<td>x102 child obs. (17 x 6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. To identify the preschool educator’s image of the child as a learner and explore how this influences the pedagogical practice in the preschool setting.</td>
<td>x11 Preschool Educators</td>
<td>x88 Parent/ Families.</td>
<td>Questionnaire, semi structured interview, onsite observations. Observation tool.</td>
<td>x61 Parents</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. To compare children’s level of wellbeing and involvement as a result of the quality of the relationships and the active learning environment</td>
<td>x88 Children</td>
<td></td>
<td>Onsite observations. Observation tool.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5.7.3.2 Implementation of the Study in Boston

This section outlines how the study was implemented in Boston. Table 5.12 provides the detail of implementation of the study in Boston. A total of three settings, one Play-based and two Reggio inspired preschools, located in Boston participated in the study. In total, seven preschool educators worked in the three preschools in Boston. There were two educators in each of the Reggio inspired preschools and three educators worked in the Play-based preschool. A total of seven educator questionnaires were completed, followed by seven educator semi-structured interviews. A total of twenty-six parental questionnaires (43.33%) were completed from a possible full data set of 60 parents/families in the participating Boston settings. Of a possible 60 children, 12 children were randomly selected for onsite observation, using The Assessing for Learning and Development in the Early Years Using Observation scales, Reflect Respect Relate (State of South Australia, Department of Education and Children’s Services, 2008). In total, six observations were conducted on each of the 12 target children and 7 educators across four scales: relationships, the active learning environment, wellbeing and involvement. The total number of child observations conducted in preschool settings in Boston was 72.

Table 5.12: Research Study Implementation Boston

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Objective</th>
<th>Source potential</th>
<th>Setting</th>
<th>Date/ Time: 9am - 1pm</th>
<th>Tools</th>
<th>Quest</th>
<th>Interview s</th>
<th>Obs.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. To explore the preschool educators understanding of her/his role as an early childhood educator in a sample of preschool settings in the west of Ireland and Boston</td>
<td>x7 Preschool Educators</td>
<td>x3 Indigo Play school, x3 Blue Reggio Play School, x3 Violet Reggio Play School</td>
<td>Jan 2017, Dec 2016, Nov 2016</td>
<td>Questionnaire, semi structured interview, onsite observations. Observation tool.</td>
<td>x7 Educators</td>
<td>x7 Educators</td>
<td>x72 obs. (12 x 6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. To identify the preschool educator’s image of the child as a</td>
<td>x7 Preschool Educators</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Educator, parental Questionnaire, semi</td>
<td>x26 Parents</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
learner and explore how this influences the pedagogical practice in the preschool setting.

3. To compare children’s level of wellbeing and involvement as a result of the quality of the relationships and the active learning environment

| Learners/Parents/Families | x60 | Structured Interview, Onsite Observations, Observation tool. | x60 | Children | Onsite Observations, Observation tool. | 12 x Children |

5.7.3.3 The Preschool Settings

Following convenience sampling of the preschool settings, an introductory email was sent to six preschool managers in Ireland and three preschool managers in Boston inviting the setting to participate in the study. The email was followed up within a week by a phone call to the preschool manager. When / if interest was ascertained in the preschool setting, participating in the study, I agreed with the manager in the Irish based settings a date and time to meet to discuss the proposed study and then I visited the preschool. This happened in all cases in Ireland when the preschool was finished for the day outside the managers’ work hours as agreed with each manager.

In Boston, the introductory visits occurred during the preschool day as the managers did not work directly with children and were not counted in the adult/child ratio. During the visit to the preschools I outlined the study and brought a sample of three packs, a pack for the setting, a pack for each educator and a sample parent/family pack to the meeting. The manager was asked to consider giving consent for the preschool to participate in the research. I requested that the manager speak to the preschool educators and together as a team that they would make a decision regarding participation in the study. A two-week timescale was agreed to ensure an informed decision regarding the settings participation or not being agreed by the team. Each setting was asked to confirm by email their decision to participate, or
not to participate in the study. A total of four preschool settings in Ireland and three preschool settings in Boston consented to participate in the study. Following the decision to participate in the study in consultation with the manager, I delivered the appropriate number of parent/family packs and educator packs required by each setting. The manager or educator distributed the prepared packs to parents.

5.7.3.4 The Packs

Each preschool setting received a setting pack, preschool educator packs for each preschool educator in the preschool room and parent packs, one for each child attending the preschool. The setting packs contained the following contents: an invitation to participate, consent form for the preschool setting (Appendix E), a list of introductory materials for the first meeting and children’s assent forms (Appendix S), there was one assent form for each child in the preschool. Each educator in the preschool setting also received a pack. The educator packs contained an information sheet for the educator, educator’s consent form (Appendix T), the preschool educator’s questionnaire (Appendix H) and one copy of the children’s booklet (Appendix U) which the educator was asked to read with the children in the setting prior to the data collection taking place.

Parent packs were also delivered to the preschool setting for distribution to all parents of children in the preschool room. The parent packs contained a letter from the owner/manager explaining the research and the commitment of the setting to participate. The parents also received an information sheet about the research, a parent consent form for their participation in the study to complete the parental questionnaire, a parental questionnaire, a parent/child consent form (Appendix K) and a copy of the children’s booklet to read with their child at home.

5.7.3.5 Implementing the study with; Educators

On receipt of an email to confirm participation, I made an appointment to meet the preschool educators. I met each educator at a one-to-one meeting and answered their questions in relation to the study. The biggest concern
educators had was in relation to confidentiality and anonymity in the research findings. Educators were given the educator pack following the one to one meeting with them. Educators were requested to complete the consent and questionnaire and leave same in the questionnaire box which was provided for each setting. A two-week time scale was given for educators to make an informed consent to participate or not. Educators were advised that even if the manager agreed to the setting’s participation in the study, the research would not be conducted in their preschool room without their informed consent. A total of 18 consents were circulated with 17 returned. The educator semi-structured interview was conducted on one of the final two days of the onsite observations in the setting. At this stage I had developed a trusting relationship with the educators.

5.7.3.6 Implementation of the study with; Parents & Families

A separate meeting with parents was offered in all settings. In one setting the parents meeting was organised by the manager in a local coffee shop. Eight parents, both male and female, attended the meeting. In the other preschools I made myself available for one hour on a designated day in the preschool. The aim of this meeting was to outline the research to parents and answer any questions before the parent made their decision regarding their child’s consent or their own consent to participate in the parental questionnaire. Parents were requested to complete the adult and child consent forms and the parental questionnaire and to place same in the envelope provided in the questionnaire box in the setting. A two-week time scale was allocated for parents to make an informed consent.

5.7.3.7 Implementation of the study with; Children

When I visited the preschools to meet with the educators prior to data collection I was introduced to the children in the preschool room. Each child in the participating preschools had received a pack to take home. These were distributed by the preschool educators. The pack contained a picture book explaining the research to the child. Parents were asked to explore the book with their child at home. The educators also explored the book and had some discussion about the research study with the children.
prior to the start of the study. On arrival at all the preschools, the children knew me by sight and by name. The children were curious and interested; they commented that they knew my name. I asked the children if they knew what I was doing in the preschool, I explained that I was a researcher. The children started to say the word researcher, it was clear it was a new word to them. I asked if they knew what a researcher does. There were different answers, some relating to my picture on the children’s booklet with a Koala bear. The children made a connection with the picture and perhaps a researcher works with animals?? Then a preschool boy suggested that as a researcher ‘you search for things’?? I agreed that I search for answers to questions. I asked the children if they had questions. ‘I have questions about train and why they crash’ (boy, age 3 years). Many of the children had questions, it was agreed that we were all researchers as we all ask questions every day.

5.7.3.8 Onsite Observations

Prior to the onsite observation, I collected the questionnaire box from the setting on the week prior to data collection. All parent /child consent forms were checked. Six children were selected from each group, based on the child’s gender to ensure a gender balance, length of time the child has attended the preschool, whether this was the child’s first or second year as this should be considered in relation to the adult/child relationships. The child’s citizenship and specific needs were also taken into consideration to ensure diversity and inclusion. Prior to undertaking onsite observation, I had identified the educators for whom permission to participate had been obtained and the four (min) or 25% of children who would be observed to calculate the mean quality indicators and outcomes for the setting. I also identified two additional children in each setting to participate, in the event of any unexpected change of plan. In a preschool in Boston one parent who had not provided consent for her child’s participation, did so following a day the parent spent as a parent helper in the preschool where she gained a greater understanding of the study. A response rate of 72.66% from parents to consent to their child’s participation in the research can only be attributed to the trust that parents have in the preschool management and educators.
The six children selected by the researcher in each group was made by the researcher, taking into consideration: consent, gender, ethnicity, age, and length of time attending the preschool, e.g. first or second year. Only children attending for five days per week were considered. The children were selected before the researcher visited the setting as advised by the Graduate Research Committee NUI Galway. This was a significant piece of advice as the children who were randomly selected in all cases were not children who would otherwise identify themselves in the group. The observation tool guidance suggested conducting 6x5 minute observations of each child over a period of one week. Each observation was separated by at least fifteen minutes and covered a variety of activities.

In total 29 children were observed in their preschool setting. Six individual observations of each child were observed for three of the four variables, relationships, wellbeing and involvement. Each child was observed six times with each observation focusing on the three variables. A total of 174 individual observations were conducted focusing specifically on the 29 children participating in this study. All the 17 preschool educators were observed across the seven settings participated in this study; six individual observations were conducted on each of the 17 preschool educators, which resulted in 102 observations focused on the active learning environment (pedagogical approach). The preschool educators were observed to measure the variable, the active learning environment, which equates to the pedagogical approach. In total 276 onsite observations were undertaken in this ethnographic study as outlined in Table 5.13.
Table 5.13 outlines the process of onsite observation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Observed</th>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Total Educ Obs.</th>
<th>Total Child Obs</th>
<th>Observation Focus</th>
<th>No. of Obs/Per Person</th>
<th>Total No. of Focused Obs</th>
<th>Total Educ Obs.</th>
<th>Total Child Obs.</th>
<th>Total Obs.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Educator</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Active learning Environment</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>102</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preschool child</td>
<td>29</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>174</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preschool child</td>
<td>29</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Wellbeing</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>174</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preschool child</td>
<td>29</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Involvement</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>174</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Educ Obs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Child Obs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Obs conducted</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>276</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The onsite observations of the children and preschool educators provided, rich data to measure the four variables, the active learning environment, relationships, wellbeing and involvement from a quantitative perspective using the observation tool. The findings from the onsite observations and field notes, was then used to develop seven case studies, one for each of the participating settings.

5.7.3.9 Case Studies

This study provides seven case studies to give further visibility to the quality indicators of the active learning environment and relationships and quality outcomes of wellbeing and involvement. There is one case study from each of the seven participating preschools included in the study. The ‘case’ in this research is based on one observation which encompassed each of the four variables, the active learning environment, relationships, wellbeing and involvement as outlined in the Reflect Respect Relate...
Observation Scales (State of South Australia, Department of Education and Children’s Services, 2008) and the researchers field notes. The sample was the research participants and the preschool educators and children were the unit of analysis. A case study approach as part of a qualitative methodology was particularly suited to this study as the data was collected in the natural setting of the preschool room. Taking a case study approach, as the researcher, I was able to provide a more in-depth and holistic view using multiple sources of data. The goal in a case study is to gain deep understanding of a small number of cases rather than broad knowledge of data about variables drawn from many cases’ (Vogt et al.).

From a social constructionist perspective, the data was firstly constructed by the social actors participating in the study, the children and the preschool educators, through their interactions and relationships. The observations were then interpreted based on the signals and indicators as outlined in the Reflect Respect Relate Observation Scales (State of South Australia, Department of Education and Children’s Services, 2008), children and educators’ voices, onsite observation and field notes. Hughes (2001, p.36) suggests that in the interpretivist paradigm, knowledge is valid if it is authentic, where the research includes the voice of the participant. The preschool educator’s voice was captured for the case studies based on the field notes and onsite observations.

While the children’s voices were captured using their own voice in the case studies and inferred through observations of their wellbeing, involvement and relationships. By using case studies to add value to the social situations and experiences of the preschool children and educators in this study, children and educators’ voices were captured, and the dynamic elements of quality which are difficult to measure are presented in a story format. The data was constructed through the observation of participants, their interactions and relationships, the interpretation of the findings and the triangulation of both the quantitative and qualitative data.
5.7.3.9.1 The role of the researcher as observer in case study research:

The role of the researcher as an observer in case study research can vary along a continuum from being a fully active participating observer to be a passive non-participant observer. An active participant observer becomes embedded in the lived experiences of the world of the researched where they experience first-hand the social and emotional context of the research. The non-participant observer studies the participants from the outside of their group, without actively participating in their daily lives. For this study I was guided by the work of Bassey (1999) who advised that case study researchers should try to remain as unobtrusive as possible in order to observe the ordinary daily experiences and not create experiences to test hypothesis. By freeing oneself from the “doing” of early childhood education and care the non-participant observers are, Bassey (1999) suggests free, both physically and psychologically to collect rich observational evidence of how young children experience the educational programme. Being determined to be a non-participant observer, I made every effort not to participate within the groups being observed and I tried to maintain a neutral position. However, like Bergen (1997) it was difficult at times to maintain an unobtrusive role as both educators and children at different stages-initiated engagement. I found that ‘observers are unavoidably participant observers to a certain degree, however passive and non-interventionalist a role they try to take’ (Rustin in Elfer and Selleck, 1999, p.71).

5.7.3.9.2 Observer effects

When observing participants in the natural setting Hart and Risley, (1999) suggest that adults have been shown, to do more, and behave within the expected norms when they are aware that they are being observed and their actions are being recorded. However, he also confirms that after repeated observations the observed become habituated to the observer. The observations took place in the usual environment in which the children spend their time at the preschool setting. I used the observational approach of being inactive but known to the group. The educators were aware of my
presence, but I avoided active participation with the educators and children as much as possible (Newby, 2014). On the first day in each setting I spent the morning observing the environment and the context, getting to recognise the children who had been randomly selected to be observed.

I did not conduct the observations based on the *Reflect Respect Relate Observation Scales* (State of South Australia, Department of Education and Children’s Services, 2008) until mid-way into the first day. The following days were allocated for onsite observations as the educators and children had become more accustomed to having me in the setting, sitting in a corner observing. I was as unobtrusive as possible which I hoped would ensure that my presence did not impact on the pedagogical approach of the preschool educators. I expected and my expectations were confirmed that my presence would not be of concern to the children, as children in preschool settings are increasingly being exposed to visitors. This view is supported by Bergen (1997) who suggests that children make good subjects for observation in their natural environment, in that their behaviours are less likely to change when they know they are being observed. While children did show initial interest or requested assistance in some cases, to seek assistance to help them to close their coats or to help a child to get up on a climbing frame, they returned quickly to their initial activity.

Each case study in this research study was conducted in the preschool setting using the four variables identified in the *Reflect Respect Relate Observation Scales* (State of South Australia, Department of Education and Children’s Services, 2008). These variables include the active learning environment, relationships, wellbeing and involvement. Three of the preschool settings offered a Play-based pedagogical approach, two of the settings offered a Montessori approach and two of the settings offered a Reggio inspired approach. Four of the settings were in the west of Ireland, three were in Boston. Therefore, there were several commonalities and a number of unique variants in each setting. A significant variable was the qualification levels of the staff in each of the preschool settings.
In support of a case study approach for this study I was guided by the work of Pellegrini (1998) who suggests that by observing young children and their educators in their natural authentic settings undertaking their daily routines, that inferences about the quality of their competencies and understandings can be observed. He argued that the case study approach offers increased validity as opposed to making inferences and generalising from indirect measures of performance in test environments. In that regard Pellegrini (1998) argued that case studies improve validity when researching the behaviour of young children and the educator / child interactions and relationships. The advice of Bassey (1999) was also incorporated into the methodologies used to conduct the case studies. The data collated from a total of 274 onsite observations was trustworthy, valid and reliable it enabled me to, interpret the observations and to convey a convincing argument and an authentic trail for others who may wish challenging the findings of this study.

5.7.3.10 Field Notes

As the research was exploratory, ‘thick descriptions’ of qualitative data were made in the form of field notes. Guided by the work of Taylor (1993) I spent time unobtrusively listening and observing in the preschool settings in the west of Ireland and in Boston. In order to narrow down the focus the four variables of the Reflect Respect Relate Observation scales (State of South Australia, Department of Education and Children’s Services, 2008) were used to make both analytical and descriptive notes, for recording context, events, activities, interactions, conversations and body language. In addition, I recorded my own personal reflections and my perceived emerging patterns, based on my observations in the field notes. The field notes recorded details of the physical learning environment and materials in the environment for children to access, the timetables and routines were also recorded as were outings and visitors to the preschool settings. Data was recorded about aspects of the preschool educators’ practices that were not observed but were provided through conversations with parents, and casual conversation with them. Photographs, the policies and procedures of the preschools and the curriculum planning documentation were also used to
inform thinking and answer the research question. How, does the educator’s image of the child as a learner influence her/his pedagogical approach and how does the preschool educator’s pedagogical approach impact on children’s level of wellbeing and involvement in the preschool setting?

5.7.4 Challenges and limitations

5.7.4.1 Two different contexts and cultures

Undertaking this study in two different geographical locations brought a richness to the research which would not have been possible if the study was based solely in Irish or US preschools. The research process in preschools in the west of Ireland and in Boston MA did however bring challenges, particularly in relation to the different social, cultural and ECEC contexts in each location. From a policy perspective, in Ireland there is universal access for all children to a free preschool place for two years before starting in primary school (Pobal, 2018). In Boston, access to free or subsidised preschool provision is means tested and as such there is a two-tier system. Children from low socio-economic backgrounds access publicly funded preschools with middle- and higher-income families paying fees for their child to access a private preschool place. The cost of the preschool provision varies and is influenced by a market model. The cost to access a Reggio inspired preschool in Boston, would be prohibitive for many families.

Therefore, the contexts of the provision for this study in Ireland and in Boston were significantly different. In Ireland and in Boston early years educators have highlighted the poor terms and conditions of staff working in early years settings. However, the staff working in the private Reggio inspired preschools participating in this study in Boston, were all highly qualified, they were supported in their ongoing professional development, there was allocated paid time for staff to conduct research and undertake professional development. In one of the two settings, staff are given one hour paid noncontact time for research and development for every hour they teach. This valuing of the preschool educator is an underpinning value and
principle of the Reggio approach. Staff are valued as professionals and they are supported in their ongoing learning and development, their terms and conditions are reflective of their critical role in supporting children’s quality early play and learning experiences.

High levels of quality (structure and process) provision, comes at a cost, which some parents in Boston choose and pay for. From a rights-based perspective, all children have a right to quality early years experiences (UNCRC, 1989). The research (European Commission, 2014; Melhuish, 2015; Urban et al, 2015) identifies the core requirements of quality ECEC provision, which includes the qualification and ongoing professional development of staff as an essential component of quality provision. The challenges and limitations in this study were that there were significant differences in the contexts of the Irish Montessori and Play-based settings as opposed to the Reggio inspired settings in Boston. This was further reflected in parents’ expectations and values of the preschool provision in the two geographical locations. Therefore, it is important to confirm that the study explored pedagogical approaches and how a pedagogical approach supports children’s quality experiences and their subsequent levels of wellbeing and involvement.

5.7.4.2 The Reflect Respect Relate Observation Scales

A significant limitation of this study was the need to adapt the observation scales in the context of updated knowledge in relation to conducting observations in preschool settings (Siraj et al., 2015). The tool was developed and validated in 2008, the method of data collection for the onsite observations involved bringing the four scoring sheets for each of the scales, relationships, the active learning environment, wellbeing and involvement for each of the children being observed into the setting. The guidance for conducting the observations, as outlined in the Observation Scales suggest that the researcher ticks off the indicators on the observation scales checklist while conducting the observation. In the Reflect Respect Relate Observation Scales (State of South Australia, Department of Education and
Children’s Services, 2008) there are 234 indicators. Recent guidance for conducting onsite observations with young children (Siraj et al., 2015) suggests that observations should only be scored when the observer has an opportunity to reflect on the practice and make an informed decision of what he / she has observed. This was the guidance taken for this study with the intention of improving the ability of the measurement tool to answer the research question (Stewart et al., 2012). The research question being how, does the educator’s image of the child as a learner, influence her/his pedagogical approach and how does the preschool educator’s pedagogical approach subsequently impact on children’s level of wellbeing and involvement in the preschool setting. The findings from the Observation Scales while quantitative were collated through a qualitative lens and as such were subject to interpretation. Therefore, this quantitative tool provides data which is interpretative as opposed to a precise measurement.

The findings of the onsite observations were triangulated with the findings from the questionnaires, semi structured interviews and field notes in this mixed methods study to answer the research question. While the adaptation of the Observation Scales may be considered a limitation of the study, validity of the study was established incrementally based on the accumulation of evidence on how the measure relates to other measures (Sechrest, 2005).

A further limitation and challenge when undertaking this study was the use of the Reflect Respect Relate Observation Scales (State of South Australia, Department of Education and Children’s Services, 2008) to reflect an overall assessment for the preschool group of the quality indicators, relationships and the active learning environment and quality outcomes, wellbeing and involvement. The guide to using the scales recommends that 25% or a minimum of four children in the group are selected as the focus of the onsite observations. The limitation in relation to this data providing an overall picture of the level of quality indicators and outcomes for the group does not take into consideration, external influences or contexts which impact on children’s wellbeing. If one of the children selected for observation has poor levels of wellbeing, which are as a result of the child’s
ecological context and outside of the control of the educator, this is reflected in the overall assessment of wellbeing for the group.

5.7.4.3 The Invisible Children

I decided to timetable the observations to occur at set times for each child prior to the first onsite observation, data collection visit. While this was not a requirement of the *Reflect Respect Relate Observation Scales* (State of South Australia, Department of Education and Children’s Services, 2008), I thought that by having a pre-planned system for observing children this would be the best method to ensure collation of the observations. It became clear on the first observation session that in order to observe one-to-one interaction between educators and children that the observation needed to be documented when these occurred. One-to-one interactions between educators and children were very infrequent in many of the settings. In one setting where a child had been randomly selected there was no one-to-one interaction between the child and the educator observed from Monday to Thursday. The child did not request or require assistance, she was engaged in the group activities, but since she was compliant, she was not the focus of the educator’s attention. This child was invisible in the setting, her sense of identity or belonging was not being met. It was evident when conducting the observations that the children who demanded attention and the children who needed attention had more one-to-one interaction with the preschool educator. However, children who complied or who were not demanding did not receive individual attention from the preschool educators. I identified these children as the *invisible children*. The observation scales made it possible to identify these invisible children and while this could be considered as a challenge, it highlighted the value of using an observation scale.

5.7.4.4 Timing

The timing of when to undertake the onsite observations in the preschools was a challenge. Preschool providers did not want an onsite observer at the beginning of the academic year in Ireland in September, when they were
settling children into the preschool. Plans to conduct the research was negotiated around receipt of ethical approval, holidays and bank holidays, preschool events such as concerts, sports days and other activities. It was important to undertake the research during term time as one of the west of Ireland preschools was a full day-care setting. Equally as I had a limited time period in Boston, four months in total, it was equally challenging to agree mutually convenient dates to conduct the research in Boston. While this was a challenge, the challenge was made possible by the invitation and welcome of preschool providers in both geographical locations.

5.8 Data Analysis

A vast amount of data was collated in the 35 days spent in the seven preschool settings, twenty days in the four Irish preschool settings and fifteen days in the Boston preschool settings. The parent and preschool educator questionnaires, the preschool educator semi structured interviews and the onsite observations using the Reflect Respect Relate Observation Scales (State of South Australia, Department of Education and Children’s Services, 2008), which provided both quantitative and qualitative data, presented challenges for coding and interrogation. This section will discuss the approaches used to analyse both the quantitative and qualitative data. Data analysis involves the drawing of inferences from raw data (Wahyuni, 2012).

5.8.1 Quantitative Analysis of Educator and Parental Questionnaires

The quantitative data from the preschool educators, parental questionnaires and semi structured interviews was analysed using the five steps as outlined by Sarantakos (1993), the data was firstly coded, assigned numerical values to responses, checked to ensure that responses were clear, legible, complete and relevant. The data was then uploaded on the software package Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), Version 24 for Windows, the data was counted to ensure that all answers were registered and following this the data was tested for relational and grouping analysis.
Data from 17 educator questionnaires and 87 parental questionnaires was input and analysed using this system. The data collated recorded the age profile of the preschool educators, the number of years they have worked in the participating preschool setting, the preschool educators’ qualifications, the number of professional development opportunities availed off and the perceived challenges of being a preschool educator in the current context. Quantitative data obtained from the parental questionnaire included details about the gender, age, nationality and access date to the preschool. Using a Likert scale, parents were asked to grade their reasons for sending their child to preschool, the importance to parents of the preschool educators’ qualifications and the number of times the parent has discussed his/her child’s learning and development with the preschool educator. This data was analysed using SPSS.

5.8.2 Analysis of the Onsite Observation

The data collated from the onsite observations was analysed using the observation tool Reflect Respect Relate Observation Scales (State of South Australia, Department of Education and Children’s Services, 2008). The observation tool consisted of four variables which were observed in practice. These variables were the active learning environment and relationships as quality indicators and levels of wellbeing and involvement as quality outcomes. Following the onsite observation, quality indicators and outcomes were identified and observed.

Using the results from the indicator observation sheet, I made a judgement of the global quality of each signal and assigned a subjective interpretation based on the signals with indicators identified in the Reflect Respect Relate Observation Scales (State of South Australia, Department of Education and Children’s Services, 2008) of either a low, medium or high rating for each signal based on the observation and field notes. A figure between 0-5 was given to each observation for relationships, active learning environment,
wellbeing and involvement. The child’s score for each observation were added together and divided by six, the number of observations, to gain the individual mean score. An overall score for the setting was derived by adding the individual mean scores for each variable and dividing the total score by the number of observations conducted. In the case of the active learning environment, the number of educators in the setting was used to gain the total mean score for each setting across each of the four variables. The *Reflect Respect Relate Observation Scales* (State of South Australia, Department of Education and children’s Services, 2008) identifies the mean score acceptable or considered to be the lowest score which indicates a supportive environment, based on international research.

### 5.8.3 Qualitative Data Analysis

The qualitative analysis conducted on the educator questionnaires and semi-structured interviews provided data about the preschool educators’ beliefs, understandings and assumptions about their roles as preschool educators, their image of the child as a learner and their understandings of how young children learn. The qualitative data was analysed using a ‘Framework’ as a method of qualitative data analysis. The following five step approach was applied to analyse the qualitative data. These steps included, familiarization, identification of a thematic framework, indexing, charting, mapping and interpretation. The framework method which was developed by Richie and Spencer (1994) is according to Furber (2010) a transparent, rigorous and methodological data analysis process which is suitable for analysing qualitative data.

Having attended a training course in the CAQDAS programme, NVIVO, early in the doctoral research process, it was felt that NVIVO would be a helpful tool to assist with the coding and analysis of the educator semi-structured interviews. The use of multiple methods of data collection resulted in a variety of data, all of which needed to be analysed. Clark et al. (2005) uses the analogy of sifting through grains of sand before finding a nugget of useful information. Through the data analysis process, I became totally familiar with the data. I listened to the interviews prior to
transcription and I wrote up analytical notes before and after transcribing. This according to Maxwell (2012, p.105) helps to capture the researcher’s analytical thinking about the data and ‘facilitates such thinking, stimulating analytic insights.’

The preschool educator interview transcripts were analysed using ‘framework’ as a method of qualitative data analysis. Different themes were identified in the data. The themes were categorised, logical connections were made thereby providing a better understanding of the educator’s beliefs about her / his role and the educator’s image of the child as a learner as identified in the objectives of the study. Analysis of the data identified 59 subthemes these were subsequently coded into 9 themes. The categories which emerged were based on the collected evidence, governed by the research question, the aims and theoretical assumptions of the study and the literature review. The sub themes and themes can be found in (Appendix V).

**5.8.4 Triangulation**

Torrance (2012) suggests that the core justificatory principle underpinning mixed method research is that of triangulation. He suggests that no single method is likely to provide a comprehensive account of the phenomenon under investigation, there for two or more methods should be used. When different perspectives are generated, they provide a fuller and more informative picture of the situation being researched. By using different sources of data questionnaires, semi structured interviews and onsite observation while undertaking this research study it is hoped that the intrinsic bias that results from single method, single theory studies has been overcome. The quantitative and qualitative data was analysed separately, the findings from the data based on the research objectives was then triangulated and will be discussed in the discussion chapter.

**5.8.5 Validity and reliability.**

The subjective, interpretive nature of ethnography is a positive force in bringing new insights into the social conditions of the research context;
however, it also brings questions of validity and reliability into question. It is therefore difficult to promote subjectivity and at the same time assure the reader of the trustworthiness or validity of the research. Subjective bias according to Hammersley, (2000) can be addressed in educational research by assessing the validity and relevance of the research. Validity considers how plausible or credible the evidence presented is, while relevance is measured in relation to the purpose of the research and how it applies to the interest of a particular audience. As it is not possible for an account to be totally independent or free of perspective, validity will always be relative, depending on whose perspective the account is based. Validity in this study was strengthened through a mixed methods ethnographic approach. When considering the validity of qualitative research based on reinterpreting criteria from quantitative research, Johnson (1997) suggests three essential elements. He suggests that factual accuracy should be supported by accurate reporting of the data, that sufficient evidence should be produced to support the interpretation of the data and that there is a fit between the data that the theory which is credible and defensible. The responsibility to provide sound and sufficient evidence to critically examine and analyse the evidence rigorously is according to Phillips (1992) the responsibility of the researcher. This responsibility places the values, beliefs, knowledge and experience of the researcher at the core of valued research which adds to the knowledge base. I believe that this research has been rigorous in pursuing these types of validity and presents a valid perspective that contributes to the on-going conversation and addition to knowledge.

In recognition of the interpretive and multiple-perspective nature of ethnography, triangulation or cross validation was used as a way of strengthening the validity of the qualitative research. This was important because of the subjective nature of the qualitative research data and the potential of research bias in relation to the reinterpretation of the quantitative data. Triangulation is used, ‘to get a better fix on the subject matter at hand’ (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998, p.3). According to Atkinson et al. (2005) triangulation of the evidence responds to the intrinsic forms of social life, by being attentive to the talk, actions and interactions of the
rhetoric of daily life. The quantitative data collated from the questionnaires and semi structured interviews was used both deductively and inductively to validate the theoretical assertions and relationships generated from the onsite observations, field notes and semi structured interviews. The active and subjective role of the interpreter is recognised in this study and while triangulation of the findings was based on the data collated, interpretations of the findings of this study are presented as open to negotiation and reinterpretation. This research report reflects these commitments.

Adapting the Reflect Respect Relate Observation Scales (State of South Australia, Department of Education and Children’s Services, 2008) from a formal check list approach, to scoring the onsite observations, to taking narrative observations and scoring the observations immediately after the observation session was informed by recent literature (Siraj et al., 2015). The Reflect Respect Relate Observation Scales was adapted to counteract power relationships in the preschool settings (Freire, 1996) and to undertake ethnographic research taking the ‘fly on the wall’ approach as identified by Siraj et al. (2015). The validity of this study is based on the triangulation of both the quantitative and the qualitative data collated, taking into consideration the changing contexts, the dynamic nature of the preschool settings and my own subjectivity as a researcher.

5.9 Ethical Considerations

This section explores the ethical considerations which guided this research study. The institute in which the study was based required an assessment by the University Research Ethics Committee (REC). Two research ethics applications were submitted; the Irish study was submitted followed by the Boston ethics application on receipt of the Fulbright Scholarship. The assessment process conducted by the REC required a full and ethical scrutiny of the research objectives and design. Submission of both ethics’ applications required reflection of the plans and identification of possible issues which might arise. This section will firstly consider why ethical considerations are fundamental to research studies. Throughout this study priority was given to minimising risk of harm to participants and the
researcher. Ensuring that all participants had ongoing informed consent and children had the opportunity to note their assent is discussed in this section. The section also outlines how child protection which is both a legal and moral requirement when researching in ECEC setting was adhered to and complied with the Children First National Guidelines for the Protection and Welfare of Children, DCYA (2011, 2017) while conducting this research study. Being an insider researcher brings other ethical considerations and this aspect has been outlined previously.

“Methodology and ethics are integrally linked; ethically sound techniques are perceived as adding to the value of research and, conversely, methodological soundness can improve ethics”.  
(Thomas and O’Kane, 1998, p.826)

Research ethics is a complex construct, essentially concerned with the principles of right and wrong conduct (Gallagher, 2010). This conduct reflects various epistemological paradigms and methodological practices within particular social and cultural contexts (Trussell, 2008). Social research is a particularly complex activity where researchers are required to balance their own interests with the interests of participants, requirements of sponsors and a duty of care to participants. There are many textbooks to support and inform the researcher on ethical and methodological issues; however, the textbooks do not always prepare the researcher for specific challenges which may occur during the research process. This is particularly significant in this study as I was an insider researcher and was professionally known to the participants. Several studies highlight that the researcher may be considered by some research participants as being in a position of authority or a more powerful position than the participants. This power imbalance has been widely recognised as being the biggest ethical obstacle and challenge to researchers including children in research, (Alderson, 1995; Morrow and Richards, 1996; Thomas and O’Kane, 1998; Mayall, 2008).

It is of course the responsibility of the researcher to reflect on the ethical issues which might arise, and as a result design a proposal which justifies the use of methods which will minimise predictable risks to the research participant and the researcher. It was therefore imperative to ensure that this
research study was both ethically and methodologically sound, based on underpinning values and guiding principles. There are a number of general principles which serve to guide researchers to maintain high levels of competence in their work; these include the professional integrity and competence of the researcher and the recognition by the researcher of the rights, dignity and worth of all participants. This takes cognisance of individual diversity and culture combined with an awareness of professional and scientific responsibility to individuals and society in conducting research in a fair and impartial manner (Powell et al., 2012). Ethical considerations were ‘Woven through every aspect of research, shaping the methods and the findings’ (Alderson and Morrow, 2011, p.5).

It is now a standard requirement that researchers in minority world countries obtain approval from their institutional ethics committees and boards before commencing research projects. Research ethics committees play a vital role in raising awareness of ethical issues and monitoring research standards (Alderson and Morrow, 2004). As well as protecting research participants, ethics committees also exist to protect researchers and manage risks to their institutions and universities (Graham and Fitzgerald, 2010). Ethical approval was obtained from NUI Galway for the Irish study in March 2016 and for the Boston study which was a separate application in July 2016. The key ethical issues discussed in the literature are minimising risk, informed consent, protection of children, anonymity and confidentiality and payment of participants.

5.9.1 Minimising Risk of Harm to Participants and the Researcher

Ethical standards require that researchers do not put participants or themselves in a situation where they are at risk of harm as a result of their participation in the research study. Harm can be defined as either physical or psychological. I was aware of the importance of developing trust and rapport with the research participants, I confirmed that participant’s contribution to the research would remain confidential, would not be shared with management and participants would not be identifiable in the research. Underlying the ethical issue of protecting children from harm was the
principles of beneficence and non-maleficence. Gatekeepers for this study were the owner/managers of the preschool settings. The settings for this study were selected by purposeful non-probability sampling. Preschools in the west of Ireland were identified based on several criteria such as their management structure, pedagogical approach, and staff qualifications. Four of the gatekeepers (owner/managers) from the twelve Irish settings contacted requested further information and participated in the study. In Boston, the Reggio Children International representative circulated an expression of interest to all member settings, three of whom welcomed the opportunity to participate in the study. All invitations to participate were written on headed note paper containing National University of Ireland, Galway (NUIG), Early Childhood Ireland and The Irish Research Council logos. Irish and Boston gatekeepers expressed their appreciation to be included in what they considered to be important research for the early childhood education and care sector.

5.9.2 Informed Consent

The ethical issue of consent has probably generated the most debate in regard to research with children (Alderson and Morrow, 2004). In the literature, informed consent rests on four core principles: consent involves an explicit act, for example, verbal or written agreement; consent can only be given if the participants are informed about and have an understanding of the research. Consent must be given voluntarily without coercion and consent must be renegotiable so that participants may withdraw at any stage of the research process (Gallagher, 2010). Ongoing debates in the literature regarding consent include the use of passive or active consent procedures and assent when researching with children (Alderson and Morrow, 2011).

Preschool Setting Consent Forms

Twelve preschool owner/managers were contacted initially by email, inviting them to participate in the study. The email was followed by a phone call to the setting, which resulted in four preschools in Ireland and three preschools in Boston consenting to participate in the research study. Settings in Ireland who chose not to participate in the study cited that,
having spoken to their staff, it was decided that participation would cause undue stress on the educators. The seven settings that agreed to participate signed a consent form agreeing that the setting would participate.

**Educator Consent Forms**

For consent to be valid, it must be informed (Shaw et al., 2011). Each preschool educator received an educator pack which explained the research and included a consent form. Educators were advised that even if the preschool owner/manager had given consent for the setting to participate they could choose to participate and withdraw at any stage. One preschool educator in a setting which had three educators did not participate or consent to participate in the study.

**Child Assent Forms**

Discussion surrounding children’s involvement in research is ‘nested within broader discourses about nature and status of childhood’ (Munford and Sanders, 2004, p.471). Today, perspectives of the child should always imply that the child has made his or her own contribution and can be considered experts in their own lives (Langsted, 1994). DCYA (2012) recommend that informed consent from parents or guardians is required when conducting research which involves children. Parents were invited to consent to their child being one of four to six children in the preschool who were randomly selected to be observed in the preschool using the observation rating scale. DCYA (2012) also suggest that children’s independent assent should be determined based on their age and maturity. NUI Galway Research Ethics Committee on providing provisional approval for the study suggested that.

“There is no need to use the smiley face consent process with children of this age. We suggest monitoring children on an on-going basis for their assent”.

(Research Ethics Committee, NUI Galway, Dec. 2015)

While accepting this as a suggestion, as a researcher with a view of children as competent, I made the decision to offer the choice to the preschool children to engage or not with the child assent process. Dew (2007)
suggests that the values and beliefs of the researcher and the researcher’s assumptions of children and childhood determine the methodological position taken in research. In total, 60 Irish preschool children and 42 children attending preschools in Boston completed the assent forms. Some children completed the assent forms several times. One child advised, ‘I have coloured happy and sad, that means it’s OK’. The issue of informed consent or assent as it is referred to with children, has generated debate in regard to research with children. The Helsinki Declaration indicated that the informed consent of children should be obtained, if they have the understanding to do so. It is also stressed that informed consent is not a one-off occurrence; it is or should be a dynamic and subtle process which needs to be continuously negotiated. Having over twenty years’ experience of working with preschool children, I listened to and observed the children in the settings. As the children in the setting were not aware if they had been randomly selected to be observed, it was interesting to note that all children randomly selected with parental consent chose to complete the assent forms. Similarly, there were several children who chose to complete the assent form whose parents had not signed consent for the participation in the study. These children were not included on the list for random selection. This was an issue highlighted by NUIG Research Ethics Committee. The committee suggested amending the letter to parents to clarify the procedure when the parent did not provide consent for their child’s participation in the study. This was clarified, and full ethical approval ensued.

5.9.3 Child Protection

This study adhered to the legal and moral requirements of the Children First National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children (DCYA, 2011, 2017). I obtained Garda vetting (the police service of the Republic of Ireland) to conduct this research. Early childhood education and care providers and parents were informed through written communications that I had garda vetting for the study. One parent requested further information in this regard, and I forwarded same to the preschool setting for the attention of the parent. I carried the Garda clearance letter with me to each of the preschool settings as this is a requirement for management under the Child
Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016 (Government of Ireland, 2016). The Child Protection procedure for the study in Boston was underpinned by the Massachusetts General Laws (Commonwealth, 2016) which places a mandatory duty of care to report any reasonable concern in relation to child protection issues for children under 18 years. This requirement was adhered to in association with the policies and procedures of the three preschool settings.

5.9.4 Anonymity and Confidentiality

Hill (cited in Green and Hogan, 2005) identified three elements which need to be considered when undertaking research, but particularly when undertaking research which involves children. These include, public confidentiality, where research participants are not identifiable in the research report. Social network confidentiality is where research findings are not shared with family members, friends or others such as management or staff of the preschool setting and, third party breach of privacy which occurs where a disclosure is made as a legal requirement on the part of the researcher in relation to child protection concerns. These issues were addressed; all participants of the study were assured in the letter explaining the research that robust confidentially safeguards were in place. All participants in the study were de-identified as follows: each participant, the centre and location of the study, whether Ireland or Boston was allocated an ID number/name by the researcher before data collection began. All data was stored in keeping with data protection legislation. All electronic material generated during this research process was stored on a secure encrypted laptop. All data was coded using the setting code the individual code and the location code. All data collated during this research study was used only for the purpose of the research. The findings, observations, or discussion of the research were not shared by the researcher with the settings. Names used for the onsite observations and case studies were anonymised. All settings expressed their interest in the findings and requested feedback. However, this issue had been addressed prior to the study commencing, where participants were advised that feedback would not be provided, however each participating setting was offered a
professional development workshop for staff to support quality and reflective practice. All preschools were made aware in writing of the researcher’s duty to care, legal and moral responsibilities in relation to child protection.

5.9.5 Payment of Participants

Lather (1986) speaks about ‘rape research’; this is where the researcher gets the information required for the study, then leaves giving nothing or little in return and maybe even causing damage. Participants of this research study would have liked some feedback to support them to improve the quality of their practice. I offered to provide a number of professional development workshops for educators as a gesture of thanks to participating settings. Three of the Irish settings and one of the Boston settings accepted the offer.

5.10 Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to provide the rationale for and describe the research design and methodologies utilized in the study. The overarching aim of this research was to explore the preschool educator’s image of the child as a learner on the choice of pedagogical approach; Play-based, Montessori or Reggio inspired, and the subsequent impact on children’s levels of wellbeing and involvement. Section 5.1 of the chapter outlined the development of the research methodology. Section 5.2 recapped on the research question the rationale, aim and objectives of the study. Section 5.3 outlined the philosophical grounding for the study. This was followed by Section 5.4 which outlined the study design and the key theoretical and methodological considerations. Section 5.5 provided a comprehensive presentation of the methods and sources of data collection and Section 5.6 described the implementation of the study in preschools in the west of Ireland and Boston. This was followed by section 5.7 which outlined the design of the data collection tools. In Section 5.8 how the data was analysis was described. Finally, Section 5.9 outlined the ethical considerations when designing and implementing this study.
Chapter 6: Presentation of Findings

6.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to present the findings based on the pedagogical approach; Montessori, Play-based and Reggio inspired, which have emerged from the data collected from educators, parents and pre-school children across the seven preschool settings. Section 6.2 outlines the aim and objectives of the study. This is followed by Section 6.3 which provides a profile of the educators participating in this study. Section 6.4 will consider the quantitative and qualitative findings from objective one across all participants and individually in each of the three setting types; Montessori, Play-based and Reggio inspired. The findings of objective two will be presented in relation to each of the pedagogical approaches in section 6.5. This will be followed in Section 6.6 with the findings from objective 3. Section 6.7 will provide the findings from the onsite observations. The findings will be supported by a case study from each setting accompanied by an explanation of the observation scoring and an analysis section will be presented which will lead into the key comparison of the findings in the three setting types, Montessori, Play-based and Reggio inspired based on the data across three objectives of the study.

6.2 Aim and Objectives of the Study

The research question this study asked was, how does the educator’s image of the child as a learner influence her/his pedagogical approach in Montessori, Play-based or Reggio inspired settings and how does the preschool educator’s pedagogical approach subsequently impact on children’s level of wellbeing and involvement in the preschool setting? Therefore, the primary aim of this research study was to explore the preschool educator’s image of the child as a learner on the choice of her / his pedagogical approach in, Montessori, Play-based or Reggio inspired settings, and the subsequent influence on preschool children’s levels of wellbeing and involvement. This chapter presents the findings in relation to the objectives of the study, as described in chapter 1 and presented in Table 6.14 below. The findings will be presented based on triangulation of the
data. The quantitative and qualitative findings from multiple sources such as the questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, onsite observations and evaluation based on the observations will be collated. This collation of the results taken together will provide a comprehensive, robust picture which will facilitate deeper understanding of the impact of the pedagogical approach on children’s levels of wellbeing and involvement.

Table 6.14: Location of Results Relative to Objectives of the Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Objectives of this study</th>
<th>Location in this chapter</th>
<th>Sources of data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Objective 1</strong> To explore the preschool educator’s understanding of her/his role as an early childhood educator in a sample of preschool settings in the west of Ireland and Boston.</td>
<td>Section 6.2</td>
<td>Quantitative and qualitative data collected using Educator questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. Parent interviews.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Objective 2</strong> To identify the preschool educator’s image of the child as a learner and explore how this influences the pedagogical practice in the preschool settings in the west of Ireland and Boston.</td>
<td>Section 6.3</td>
<td>Quantitative and qualitative data collected using Educator questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, field notes. Parental questionnaires</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Objective 3</strong> To compare children’s level of wellbeing and involvement as a result of the quality of the relationships and the active learning environment in settings offering different pedagogical approaches, (Montessori, Play-based, Reggio inspired).</td>
<td>Section 6.4</td>
<td>Qualitative data collected using onsite observation tool: <em>Assessing for Learning and Development in the Early Years Using Observation Scales: Reflect Respect Relate.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Objective 4</strong> To examine the implications for ECEC policy and practice because of the addition to knowledge of this study.</td>
<td>Discussion Chapter.</td>
<td>This objective will be addressed in the Discussion, Chapter 8.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
6.2.1 Quantitative and qualitative findings

The quantitative data was tested in order to interpret the results in the context of the objectives of the study. The analysis was a five-step process, coding (assigning numerical values to responses), checking (ensuring that the responses were clear and complete), input the responses into the software programme, counting (ensuring all answers were registered) and testing (grouping, relating and analysing). All analysis was performed using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS).

The qualitative data was analysed for thematic content, from which inferences could be made in relation to the preschool educators’ understanding of their role and their image of the preschool child as a learner. Using ‘Framework’ as a method of qualitative data analysis, this approach to analysing the qualitative data involved a systematic process of sifting, charting and sorting material according to key issues and themes (Furber, 2010). The five key stages to qualitative data analysis involved in ‘Framework’ analysis, familiarization, identifying a thematic framework, indexing, charting, mapping and interpretation (Ritchie & Spencer, 2002) were adhered to.

The data for this study was generated using digitally audio-recorded semi-structured interviews with seventeen ECEC educators in seven ECEC settings in the west of Ireland and Boston. Interview schedules and questions were developed (appendix I). All interviews were transcribed and typed after each interview. The typed document included information about the context of the interview, such as setting name, introduction to the research and permission to record the interview. Each interview lasted approximately one hour.

The familiarization process according to Ritchie et al (2003) requires reading and re-reading the transcripts in order to gain a deep level of understanding. A greater understanding of the data came about through total immersion in the data, by listening and re-listening to the tapes and transcribing the data.
The qualitative data was analysed for thematic content, from which inferences could be made in relation to the preschool educators’ understanding of their role and their image of the preschool child as a learner. A thematic framework was identified through the familiarisation process as notes were made of themes which reoccurred in the data. These themes were collated into groups in order to be organized into a conceptual framework, or index (Ritchie et al, 2003). In total 59 initial themes were identified.

The draft theoretical framework was applied back to the transcripts of raw data to explore the ‘fit’ (Ritchie et al, 2003). This involved reading through the data in the transcripts and noting the theme on the draft theoretical framework that applied. NVivo version 10 was used to index the data. This phase the ‘Indexing’ refers to the process whereby the thematic framework or index is systematically applied to the data in its textual form. While all the data was annotated according to the thematic framework, it has to be acknowledged that the process of making judgements as to the themes was subjective, and as such may be open to differing interpretations.

After the data was indexed according to the theoretical framework, the data was summarized into a thematic chart. This phase is called charting (Ritchie et al, 2003). Charting involved reducing the original data into manageable sections of text that were easily discernible and locating them in the appropriate theme on the theoretical framework chart (Appendix V). The total number of themes derived from the 59 subthemes was 9. When all the data was charted according to core themes the data was analysed guided by the original research question and objectives 1 and 2 of the study. The analysis was guided by the themes which had emerged from the data.

In total nine themes emerged from the qualitative data based on the research question, the objectives, theoretical assumptions and the literature review. Appendix V provides a table which outlines the nine themes and sub themes identified. Under the theme of, how children learn, the educator’s beliefs, the question of passive and active learners and intrinsic and extrinsic motivation were highlighted. The area of supporting behaviour and
managing challenging and negative behaviour were also identified as sub themes as were power and power relationships. The second theme identified was pedagogy and under this theme, cognitive development, culture, listening, modelling, emergent curriculum, identity, belonging, controlling, autonomy supportive, exploring and thinking were identified. Also, under this theme were questioning, play, transitions, reflection, theory, transfer of knowledge, didactic teaching, independence, rewards, skills and scaffolding. The third theme identified was the role of the educator, the subthemes under this theme included, defending the role, values of the educator and articulating the role. The fourth theme which emerged from the data was the theme of parents, the sub themes within this theme included, the role of parents in ECEC, a deficit image of parents, relationships, communication, engagement and partnership with parents. The theme Expectations had three subthemes, parents’ expectations, expectations of children by the educator and educators’ expectations. The theme The Image of the Child as a Learner had four sub themes; these included the image of the child as being competent, a deficit image of the child, the curious child and the child with rights. Relationship was identified as an important theme and under this theme the subthemes of peer interactions, educator/child interactions and gender were identified. Children’s Basic Needs emerged as a theme throughout the qualitative data, the subthemes within this theme included wellbeing, communications and security. The final theme identified was the theme of Challenges; these were identified under three sub themes as regulations, money and resources. The above themes and sub themes were identified in the qualitative data collated from the questionnaires, semi structured interviews and field notes.

6.3 Profile of the Participants of the Study

Data was collated from the participants of this study, which included children, educators and parents in three preschool setting types Montessori, Play-based and Reggio inspired. The settings were in the west of Ireland and in Boston MA.
6.3.1 Preschool Settings

Managers in each of the seven preschool settings signed a consent form for the setting to participate in the study. Each setting provided an overview of the settings provision of ECEC. The seven settings sent personalised invitations from the setting to the parents advising them that the preschool was taking part in the study and invited parents and guardians to participate and/or consent to their child’s participation in the study.

6.3.1.1 Preschool Educators

Data was collated from preschool educators using; an educator questionnaire, semi-structured interviews and onsite observations using the observation tool *Assessing for Learning and Development in the Early Years using observation scales: Reflect Respect Relate* (State of South Australia, Department of Education and Children’s Services, 2008). Table 6.15 below provides the detail of the pedagogical approach used in the three setting types in which the 17 preschool educators were based.

- 17 preschool educators participated in this study
- 16 of the preschool educators were female, one educator was male
- Five preschool educators worked in Montessori preschools
- Eight preschool educators worked in Play-based settings
- Four preschool educators worked in Reggio inspired settings
Table 6.15: Curricular Approach of Preschool Educators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pedagogical Approach</th>
<th>Total Number educators</th>
<th>% Total</th>
<th>Total for west of Ireland</th>
<th>% for west of Ireland</th>
<th>Total number for Boston</th>
<th>% for Boston</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Montessori</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>29.41%</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Play-based</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>47.5%</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>42.85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reggio Inspired</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>23.5%</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>57.14%</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>57.14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6.3.2 Parents

Data was collated using the parental questionnaire from 87 parents, from a possible 148 families as identified in Figure 6.10 below.

➢ 29 parents from Montessori based settings, 38 parents from Play-based settings

➢ 20 parents from Reggio inspired settings.

![Figure 6.9: Number of parents in the three ECEC setting types Montessori, Play-based and Reggio inspired who completed the parental questionnaire](image)

Data collection from parents identified the number of parents who gave permission for their child to participate in the study across each of the preschool service types as outlined in Figure 6.11

288
➢ 40 parents of a possible 64 children attending a Play-based setting gave permission for their child to participate in the study

➢ 31 parents of a possible 44 children attending a Montessori school gave permission for their child to participate

➢ 39 parents of a possible 40 children attending a Reggio inspired preschool consented to their child participating in the study.

Figure 6.10: Number of parent / child consent forms signed giving parental consent for child participation

6.3.3 Children

Data was collected relating to children participating in this study using onsite observations and the observation tool *Assessing for Learning and Development in the Early Years using Observation Scales: Reflect Respect Relate* (State of South Australia, Department of Education and Children’s Services, 2008).

One hundred and forty-eight preschool children were in attendance in the seven preschool settings, 88 children were enrolled in the four west of
Ireland preschools and 60 preschool children were enrolled in the Boston preschools. In total there were 148 children enrolled across the seven data collection sites. Parental consent was received for 110 children across the seven sites to be randomly selected for onsite observation as part of this study as outlined in Figure 6.12 below. In total there were.

- 44 Preschool children enrolled in Montessori preschools, 31 with parental consent.
- 64 Preschool children enrolled in Play-based settings, 40 with parental consent.
- 40 Preschool children enrolled in Reggio inspired settings, 39 with parental consent.

![Parental Consent](image)

**Figure 6.11: Parental consent for child participation**

Of the 110 children with parental consent across the seven sites a total of 29 preschool children with parental consent were selected to be observed using the observation tool, *Assessing for Learning and Development in the Early Years using Observation Scales: Reflect Respect Relate* (State of South Australia, Department of Education and Children’s Services, 2008). The selection criteria for choosing children to participate in the onsite observations, included, parental consent, child assent, gender, age, number
of years in the preschool, if this was the child’s first or second year and number of days attending per week. In order to participate the child needed to attend fulltime in the preschool. The aim of the observations was to critically evaluate the quality of the pedagogical provision and its impact on children’s levels of wellbeing and involvement in their learning processes.

Child assent forms were completed by 119 preschool children across the seven data sites; assent was received from each of the 29 children who were observed in the preschool settings. The number of children observed in each of the three setting types Montessori, Play-based and Reggio inspired are outlined in Table 6.16.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pedagogical Approach</th>
<th>Number of children Observed</th>
<th>Total number children Registered</th>
<th>% of total children registered observed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Montessori</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Play-based</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reggio Inspired</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**6.3.4 Profiles of Educators in the West of Ireland and Boston**

Based on the 17 preschool educators who participated in this study, the data from the preschool educator questionnaire identified that the age profile of educators in Ireland and Boston is different as outlined in Table 6.17. In the west of Ireland, 20% (n=2) of the preschool educators were between the ages of 20-29 years. In comparison to Boston where 42.8% (n=3) of preschool educators were between 20-29 years. The age profile of the workforce in Boston based on the participating settings was younger. Similarly, in the upper age group in the west of Ireland 30% (n=3) of preschool educators were aged between 40-49 years, whereas in Boston 14.28% (n=1) of preschool educators were aged between 40-49 years. This suggests that in the west of Ireland preschools, there was a reduced number of new entrants into the workforce, in comparison to Boston where 42.8% (n=3) of the workforce were in the younger age category 20-29 years.
Table 6.17: Age Profile of Preschool Educators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Combined Sample</th>
<th>Irish Sample</th>
<th>Boston Sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>Number</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-29 years</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>29.4%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-39 years</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>47.1%</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-49 years</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>23.5%</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6.3.4.1 Length of Time Working in the Preschool

The length of time the preschool educators have worked in the current setting, as outlined in Table 6.18, clarifies that 70% (n=7) of Irish educators have worked in the current setting for less than five years. In comparison, 57% (n=4) of participating staff working in the Boston preschools have worked in the current setting from between five to over ten years. There is clearly a reason why these educators have chosen to remain employed in the same preschool for over five years. In conversation with a staff member (B, R, 16) it was highlighted that the Boston Reggio inspired preschool in which she was employed was a privately managed preschool. The staff terms and conditions in this preschool were agreed by the management and in this instance the educator identified that the terms and conditions of employment in this preschool were excellent. However, the educator did highlight that these terms and conditions were not reflective of other preschool settings in Boston as can be confirmed by the Early Childhood Workforce Index (CSCCE, 2016).
Table 6.18: Length of Time Preschool Educators are Working in this Preschool

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Length of time working</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Ireland</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Boston</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;1 year 11 months</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>35.29%</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14.28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;2 years &lt; 4 years 11 months</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>23.52%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>28.57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;5 years &lt;9 years 11 months</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>23.52%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>28.57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;10 years</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17.64%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>28.57%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The qualifications of staff in Boston and Ireland identify significant difference as outlined in Table 6.19. All educators in the participating preschool settings in Boston are licensed teachers. All the participating Boston preschool educators, 100% (n=7), held a primary degree, ISCED level 6. Five of the seven Boston participants, or 71.43% of the Boston preschool educators, also held a relevant master’s qualification in early childhood education ISCED, level 7. In Ireland there is no professional body or regulator for the early childhood education and care sector, Government of Ireland (2018). One of the ten Irish preschool educator participants, 10% (n=1), held a master’s qualification NFQ, level 9. The number of Irish educators participating who were qualified to Degree level, NFQ, level 8 was 20% (n=2). In effect, 70% (n= 7) of Irish participants in the study had a qualification which was at a vocational level, NFQ, level 6 or 5. The data confirms that the preschool educators in the participating Boston preschools have higher qualification levels than their Irish counterparts. The level of the preschool educators’ qualifications is identified as a significant quality indicator, with the European Commission (2014) suggesting that the optimum qualifications requirements to support quality early childhood experiences is where 60% of the workforce have a relevant primary degree.
Table 6.19: Qualification Profile of Preschool Educators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Qualification</th>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Ireland No.</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Boston No.</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level 5 Vocational NVQ</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11.76%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 6 Vocational NVQ</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>29.41%</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 7 Primary Degree NVQ</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.88%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 8 Honours Degree NVQ; equivalent ISCED Level 6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17.64%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>28.57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 9 Master’s NVQ; equivalent ISCED Level 7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>35.29%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>71.42%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Level 5 and level 6 National Framework Qualifications are vocational training qualifications and Level 7, and 8 are ordinary and honours level degree programmes which map onto the European Qualifications framework. The corresponding United States qualifications according to QQI and identified as equivalent by DCYA are available at Appendix X. The NFQ and the EQF and the content of training programmes, developed as per the standard guidelines are relevant between Ireland and Boston. ISCED level 6 Bachelor’s Degree, ISCED level 7 Master’s degree.

The Irish National Framework of Qualifications was established in 2003. The NFQ is the framework through which all learning achievements are measured and related to each other in a coherent way. The different types of qualifications in the NFQ are organised based on their level of knowledge, skill and competence. Because all NFQ qualifications are quality assured, they are recognised at home and abroad. The European Qualifications Framework (EQF) is an overarching framework that links the qualifications frameworks of different European countries together. The primary role of the EQF is to make qualifications more understandable across different countries and systems. The DCYA have provided a resource for ECEC providers to map their qualifications against the Irish National Framework Qualifications. The US Degree and master’s Programme mapping can be seen in (Appendix X).
Continual professional development in Boston is mandatory. All preschool educators teaching in Boston preschools which receive state or federal funding working over 20 hours per week are required to undertake 20 hours of continual professional development annually as a requirement of their licence. In Ireland, there is no requirement for preschool educators to undertake continual professional development. There are significant differences in the amount of professional development undertaken by participants in both data sites as outlined in Table 6.20. A total of 42.85% of educators in Boston undertake professional development more than five times per year. The comparison is striking with none of the Irish participating preschool educators confirming up-take or engagement with professional development more than five times per year. In fact, 50% of Irish educators stated that they undertake professional development once a year. From the qualitative comments, this undertaking is primarily for updating in relation to regulations and legislation, which in Ireland are considered to reflect minimum standards.

Table 6.20: Preschool Educators’ Uptake of Professional Development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Uptake of Professional Development</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Ireland</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Boston</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&gt;0 &lt; 1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>29.41%</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;1 &lt; 5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>52.94%</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>57.14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17.64%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>42.85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To conclude, Boston preschool educators participating in this study are younger, more highly qualified, are recognised as professionals, and have better working conditions and workforce development than their Irish counterparts.

Qualitative Findings of the preschool educator’s attitude to the importance of professional development was identified by 16 of the 17-preschool
educator’s as being very important. The themes which emerged from the preschool educator’s comments in relation to professional development included the importance of professional development opportunities to help educators to be up to date and to learn new ideas and approaches. Professional development was also identified by six of the preschool educators as an important way to network and be connected to other professionals in the ECEC sector. Professional development was considered by seven of the preschool educators as a tool to support reflective practice and to question and review their practice, five of the preschool educators, confirmed that they were invigorated and inspired when they had opportunities to undertake professional development opportunities. Accessing professional development opportunities on a regular basis was identified by three of the preschool educators as important as a catalyst to improve quality experiences for young children. Accessing or undertaking professional development was not identified as a challenge by any of the seventeen participating educators.

6.4 Objective 1 - The Preschool Educator's Understanding of his or her Role as an Early Childhood Educator

In order to explore and understand the preschool educators’ understanding of their role as educators, the 17 educators working in the seven settings completed a questionnaire, which was followed by a semi-structured interview. The findings from the questionnaires and semi structured interviews are presented and are further broken down into the findings from each setting type, Montessori preschools, Play-based and Reggio inspired preschools.

Role of the educator, findings from educator questionnaires.

The aim of questions six to thirteen of the educator questionnaire was to identify how the preschool educators perceived their role. When asked if children learn best when the educator shows the child how to do an activity properly, e.g. hold the pencil or crayon properly. Of the seventeen preschool educators five educators strongly agreed and six educators, across the three setting types agreed that children learn best when the preschool
educator shows them how to do the activity ‘properly’. In total 65% (n=11) educators agree that children learn best when the preschool educator teaches the child a skill or transfers knowledge. Three educators disagreed with this statement which is amounts to 17.5% (n=3) and 17.5% (n=3) neither agreed nor disagreed with this statement. Findings are presented in in Table 6.21 below which explores the preschool educator’s understanding of his or her role as one of transferring of knowledge and teaching skills and showing how to do an activity properly, thereby transferring skills to the child.

**Table 6.21: The role of the educator is to show the child how to do the activity properly**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neither Agree/Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Play-Based</strong></td>
<td>(n=0)</td>
<td>(n=5)</td>
<td>(n=2)</td>
<td>(n=1)</td>
<td>(n=0)</td>
<td>(n=8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0 %)</td>
<td>62.5%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Montessori</strong></td>
<td>(n=4)</td>
<td>(n=0)</td>
<td>(n=0)</td>
<td>(n=1)</td>
<td>(n=0)</td>
<td>(n=5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reggio Inspired</strong></td>
<td>(n=1)</td>
<td>(n=1)</td>
<td>(n=1)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>29.4%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The qualitative data identified from the questionnaires highlighted that four of the preschool educator’s described the role of the educator as that of giving direction, modelling and guiding children.

The questionnaire sought to explore the educator’s understanding of his / her role based on their pedagogical approach, whether the approach was adult directed, or child led. The question, ‘the role of the educator is to choose the themes or topics, search books, websites for information and teach the children all about it’, presented the following findings in Table 6.22.
Table 6.22: The role of the educator is to choose themes or topics for learning and tell the children all about it

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neither Agree/Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
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<tbody>
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<tr>
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<td>(n=2) 50%</td>
<td>(n=4) 100%</td>
</tr>
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<td>(n=5) 29.4%</td>
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<td>(n=6) 35.29%</td>
<td>(n=5) 29.4%</td>
<td>(n=17) 100%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Timetabling of the preschool programme is associated with a structured approach to teaching and learning as opposed to a child centred approach which follows the child’s emergent interests and is child led as opposed to educator directed. The following findings from the preschool questionnaires are identified in Table 6.23.

Table 6.23: We have a strict timetable, to ensure that we get all our work done

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neither Agree/Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
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<td>(n=6) 35.29%</td>
<td>(n=6) 35.29%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Question seven and eight of the preschool educator questionnaire aimed to establish if the preschool educators considered their role to facilitate children’s learning based on children’s active participation and emergent curiosity and interests. The question which explores if the atmosphere in the preschool room encourages talk and discussion asks the preschool educators to state their agreement or disagreement with the following
statement; “I use strategies to help children to think about their theories, ideas and understandings”. The findings across the three setting types are presented in Table 6.24.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</tbody>
</table>

Question eight of the preschool educators’ questionnaire explores if the preschool educators’ consider their role to facilitated children’s learning based on a social constructivist approach, where children discuss their learning with their friends and where they can hypothesise, explain, speculate and project their understandings in the preschool setting. The findings from this question are presented in Table 6.25.

<table>
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<tr>
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<td>100%</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Overall Total</strong></td>
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<td>(n=0)</td>
<td>(n=0)</td>
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<td>(n=17)</td>
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<tr>
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<td>23.5%</td>
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6.4.1 Objective 1 Findings from the Montessori Educators

The Montessori preschool findings were collated using educator questionnaire, semi-structured interviews and onsite observation of the five Montessori preschool educators’ understanding of their role. The findings from the questionnaires highlight, as identified in Figure 6.13 below that four of the five (80%) Montessori preschool educators agreed that their role was to demonstrate to the children how to do an activity properly, by teaching a skill and transferring knowledge, with one educator disagreeing (20%). Educator (I, M, 4) suggests that “it is important to show a child how something is done”, while educator (I, M, 5) suggested that “active learning stimulates deeper learning and children gain a better understanding of what they are trying to accomplish.

Figure 6.12: Role of the educator

Question six of the questionnaire explored the educator’s pedagogical approach, if it was adult directed, where the educator made the decisions on the learning outcomes thereby directing the learning or if the learning outcomes were based on children’s emergent interests. The following were the findings identified based on the analysis of the questionnaires completed by the Montessori preschool educators as outlined in Figure 6.14
The findings from the questionnaire identify that 80% (n=4) of Montessori educators agree that their role is to decide on the themes or topics which the children will learn in the preschool and that the role of the educator is to search different books, websites and further information to find out all about the topic and teach the children all about it. One Montessori educator, 20% (n=1) neither agreed nor disagreed with this statement.

When asked about strict timetabling in the preschool educator questionnaire as outlined in Figure 6.15, a total of 40% (n=2) Montessori preschool educators strongly disagreed that they had a strict timetable in their setting, with 20% (n=1) disagreeing that they had a strict timetable in their preschool setting and 40% (n=2) neither agreeing or disagreeing with this statement.
The two questions in the preschool educators’ questionnaire which were aimed at exploring if the educators’ considered their role as one which supports a social constructionist approach to teaching and learning presented the following findings from the Montessori preschool educators. All the Montessori educators agreed or strongly agreed that they provide learning environments which encourages talk and discussion and that their role is to help children to think about their ideas and to describe, explain and hypothesises together with their friends.

6.4.1.1 Role of the Montessori educator findings from semi structured interview

Semi structured interviews were conducted with the five Montessori preschool educators based on an interview schedule guide with prompts (Appendix I). Each interview was recorded and subsequently transcribed by the researcher. The questions which explored the preschool educator’s understanding of his / her role were questions three to five inclusive. When coding the interview transcripts, there were nine primary themes identified, the role of the educator theme incorporated the sub themes of articulating the role of the educator, values, and defending the role of the preschool educator. When analysing the data from the interview transcripts the role of the educator was also considered under the themes of how children learn and pedagogy. The importance of the educator’s understandings and beliefs about how young children learn and her / his pedagogical approach, based on an adult directed pedagogy or a child centred pedagogy was an identified theme. The educator’s image of the child as a learner theme was also identified in the qualitative data as relevant to the analysis of this objective as were the themes of parents and expectations, challenges, basic needs and relationships.

Under the theme the role of the educator, educator (I, M, 1) identified that “my role is to guide them in the ways of the world” and
“I do think that they need somebody there to guide them along, their interpretation of something might be totally different to what something is actually supposed to be”.

(I, M, 1)

Educator (I, M, 1) also stated that “my role is I suppose to aid them in their education, give them all the things that they require” or under the theme relationships, subtheme gender “directing them towards things that I think are more suited to boys or more suited to girls to do”. Under the theme role of the educator, educator (I, M, 1) considered her role as a guide, an aid and as an educator who directs children. The educator based her role on her image of the child from a deficit image, where the child was a ‘needy child’ needing direction and guidance and the educator’s role was to give that child everything he or she needed. This articulation of the Montessori educator’s role was also captured under the theme of how children learn the educator’s understanding of her role was based on her beliefs about children and childhood and whether she saw the child as an active or a passive learner.

Montessori preschool educator (I, M, 2) confirmed that, her role under the theme pedagogy was “in some instances to direct, I don’t think you can be non-directive especially if you have conflict”, this educator went on to say when asked about her role, “I guess, that’s a tricky question”, “I guess, my role is to point out the positive behaviour and to reinforce that, that’s good, to let them know they are doing good stuff”. Montessori educator (I, M, 2) stated that her understanding of her role under the theme role of the educator was also to direct, and directing particularly where there was conflict, this provided an understanding, under the theme of the educator’s image of the child, which in this case was based on a deficit, needy image. This educator confirmed that she saw her role under the theme pedagogy subtheme directing, as directing children to resolve conflict, because she did not believe that the child was competent to self-direct. This educator stated that she wanted to encourage children and support them to manage their own behaviour but based on the interview under the theme how children learn sub theme managing challenging behaviour she confirmed that she saw her role as managing children, in order to manage their behaviour.
Other quotes from Montessori preschool educators about their understanding of their role under the theme *pedagogy subtheme skills*, included, “my role is to teach them to use those skills for themselves and to be a guide” as “obviously we are teaching them, but they are learning from us” (I, M, 4). The role of the educator here was captured under the theme of *pedagogy*, where the educator saw her role as supporting children’s *cognitive development* by teaching *skills*, both subthemes of the theme *pedagogy*. This understanding of the educator’s role was also reflected in the theme, *how children learn* and gave an indication as to whether the educator believed under the subthemes *passive, active learners* children were active or passive learners. In this case the educator described her role under the theme *pedagogy*, as a transmitter of knowledge to the passive learner. Montessori educator (I, M, 3), suggested under the theme *pedagogy* sub theme *directing* that her role was “obviously there has to be some directions for safety of the children and the adults in the classroom, but for the rest, I think it’s what Montessori is supposed to do”. Montessori educator (I, M, 3) was defending her role, based on the subtheme of the theme *role of the educator*, as a person who gave directions to ensure the safety of the children and adults. In this way the educator controlled the learning environment as this was her understanding of her role.

Educator (I, M, 5) confirmed that her understanding of her role under the theme *pedagogy* was “we don’t really teach them, they figure it out for themselves, even talking they mostly learn by listening and repeating”. Educator (I, M, 5) under the theme *pedagogy* subtheme *directing* saw her role as a facilitator; she confirmed that she did not believe that her role was to teach or direct learning. Under the theme of *the image of the child*, this educator held an image of a competent child and based on her beliefs under the theme of *how children learn* and *pedagogy* this educator confirmed that she believed that children are active learners and listeners. This educator also confirmed that in the Montessori school the role of the educator is under the theme *pedagogy* to actively encourage exploration and discussion in children’s interests. This educator considered her role as that of a facilitator, a listener and an educator who supports children’s emerging
interests a subtheme of the theme pedagogy. This was elaborated on by educator (I, M, 1) who confirmed that the role of the educator under the theme pedagogy is to “ask open questions at circle time” she then confirmed that “this is a regular occurrence at circle time”.

“To aid them in their education and to aid them in everything, just to give them all the things that they require, guiding them in the ways of the world as well as say manners, so it’s aiding them as opposed to teaching them”. (I, M, 1)

This portrayal of educator (I,M,1) understanding of her role identifies the power relationship a subtheme of the theme pedagogy in a learning environment, where the educator defends her role as someone who aids children and gives them opportunities to ask questions at circle time, referred to by Bruner (1996) as ‘externalist theory’. Externalist theories are theories of teaching which reflect what educators can do for children from the outside to foster learning.

Montessori educator (I, M, 2) identified her role as being an enabler facilitating and directing children’s learning.

“We facilitate, we enable, we provide the environment as in the safety and the opportunities and then we are there to facilitate, direct in some instances. I don’t think you can be non-directive”. (1, M, 2)

Educator (I, M, 5) confirmed under the theme pedagogy, subtheme power/control that as an educator “You have to be in charge and I suppose I have got used to being the baddy in some respects”, with educator (I, M, 1) explaining under the theme pedagogy, power/control that the role of the educator is to “allow children certain freedoms so that they feel they are important” (I, M, 1). These comments reflect the pedagogy theme, where educators’ see their role as controlling and being more powerful, where the educator “allows” certain freedoms and in this way the innocent or incompetent child will “feel important.” This statement reflects an image of the child from a deficit perspective under the theme image of the child. When asked about timetabling activities Educator (I, M, 5) confirmed under the theme pedagogy subtheme autonomy supportive learning environments that “children advise and direct us throughout the morning as to what we
really should be doing". Similarly, based on the theme pedagogy, subtheme autonomy supportive learning environments educator (I, M, 2) commented that “we have a routine for the day, but it is open to change, and adjustments based on children’s interests”. Educator (I, M, 5) and (I, M, 2) both confirmed that their role reflects their image of a competent child and their pedagogical approach is based on listening and following children’s emergent interests. The qualitative findings in the interviews with Montessori educators provided a picture of educators who considered their role across a continuum from controlling and didactic, and an image of a ‘needy’ child to facilitating children’s emergent interests, based on an image of a competent child.

The Montessori educators discussed how they work with parents, under the theme parents. Educator (I, M, I) explained “if there is a particular point of interest, I would tell the parents, if I did not feel that they will come across it themselves”. While educator (I, M, 2) confirmed under the theme parents, subtheme parents’ role that “hopefully they will see what we are doing here and pick up on it at home.” In relation to the Montessori educator’s role as an educator under the theme parents, subtheme communication, educator (I, M, 4) confirmed that “I think our communication is very strong, we have the notice boards and stuff” while educator (I, M, 5) confirmed under the theme parents, subtheme communication that “we do a home links programme”. Educator (I, M, 3) explained that “we tell parents to explain to their child that we are here to keep them safe”. The Montessori educators articulated their role, under the theme, role of the educator, subtheme articulate the role as ‘telling’ parents. There was also an inference that parents will learn from the more knowledgeable Montessori educator, as educator (I, M, 2) suggested, parents will see what is happening in the preschool and pick up on this when they go home. When asked about parental engagement, under the theme of parents, subtheme partnership with parents the Montessori educators confirmed that parents come into the preschool when they were invited to share their role, “if someone was a nurse or a doctor they would tell the class about their role” (I, M, 1). Educator (I, M, 3) confirmed,
“Parents that have different kind of jobs, we had a guard, a nurse, come in, ya. I suppose apart from that, I don’t know that they have a huge role, as in what we do, they have their own role themselves”. (I, M,3)

The role of the educator in relation to their partnership with parents in the Montessori preschools participating in this study was not based on a partnership arrangement. The educators confirmed that they tell the parents what they believed they should be told. Educator (I, M, 3) confirmed under the theme of parents, subtheme relationships with parents that “there probably isn’t an awful lot of a link between the two, as in what we do and their input into what we do”. The Montessori educators participating in the study identified that the most significant contribution that parents made to the preschool was when some of the parents were invited to tell the children about their professional roles. Under the theme parents, sub theme deficit image of parents, educator (I, M, 2) spoke about her disappointment in parents’ interest in what the educators are doing. Educator (I, M, 3) suggested under the theme challenges that a challenge for educators was when,

“you haven’t got a parent who is invested and who either doesn’t recognise the child’s need or doesn’t understand the child’s need, or isn’t interested, that can be the biggest challenge”. (I, M,3)

Under the theme of challenges educator (I, M, 1) confirmed that “working with parents to a degree” was challenging for her, particularly if parents do not want to hear what the educator is saying. A Montessori educator from the orange Montessori preschool explained that in their Montessori preschool under the theme parents subthem role of parents “when we are doing the colours, numbers, letters or sounds, we want the parents to get involved” (I, M, 5). While educator (I, M, 4) suggested that the relationship with parents, based on the subtheme relationship with parents “we are just here as a tool to reinforce the teachings that comes from home”. Educator (I, M, 3) explained “like we are not teaching manners here, manners should come from home”. Under the theme of expectations Montessori educator (I, M, 3), confirmed the educators’ expectations of themselves. “We put a lot
of pressure on ourselves to succeed” while educator (I, M, 1) identified that “managing all the expectations, you have the children coming in, and you have the parents’ expectations”. Parental expectations under the theme expectations were identified by educator (I, M, 2) who suggested that “more parents are looking for the social emotional development as opposed to the hot housing and getting ready for school.” Under the theme of basic needs subtheme wellbeing, Educator (I, M, 2) confirmed the importance of her role in making children feeling secure in the setting “they know they can approach me and know that I am there for them and ya visa versa”.

The role of the educator in supporting positive relationships in the setting was analysed under the theme relationships of which there were three sub themes, peer interactions, educator / child relationships and gender. Educator (I, M, 1) confirmed under the theme relationships subtheme educator / child relationships that “we have a good relationship with each of the children”, she expanded on this to confirm that it was important to her to build positive relationships with the children and that her role was to “guide them as best I can”. Educator (I, M, 2) suggested that her role was under the relationships, subtheme peer interactions to “teach them to cope with situations as they arise and give them strategies to manage their emotions and then obviously assist where I can”. When discussion her role, educator (I, M, 3) under the theme relationships sub theme of peer relationships explained that “I help them with the little arguments that they have.” While educator (I, M, 1) confirmed under the theme pedagogy subtheme of power/ control that her role was to “talk to them, listen to them and allow them to have certain freedoms.” This educator expanded on this confirming that her role also included under the theme relationships, subtheme peer interactions “we get them to help other children as well so that they feel they are important.”

The role of the Montessori educators in relation to working in partnership with parents under the theme parents’ subtheme partnership was identified by the educators as being limited to inviting parents into the preschool to speak about their professional roles. Educators identified the difference between the role of the Montessori educator and the role of the parents a
subtheme of the theme *parents* as being distinct roles. The importance of relationships was identified as being important, however based on the semi-structured interviews the relationship between the child and the Montessori educators was based on a power relationship where the educator, ‘teaches, guides, helps, talks to and allow’ children. This highlights the more powerful position of the educator in the educator / child relationship.

6.4.1.2 *Role of the Montessori educator findings from onsite observations.*

The onsite observation of practice did not always reflect the comments of the Montessori educators about their roles. Both Montessori preschools had strict timetabling which were generally based on whole-group activities, where the educator directed the learning process as identified under the theme of *pedagogy*, subtheme *directing*. This pedagogical approach which was adult led and directed by the educator was also observed where children were advised when it was ‘quiet time’ to put their heads on the table and remain quiet. During ‘play time’ under the theme *pedagogy*, subtheme *play* children were not given choice; they were instructed by the adult regarding the area of the room they could play in, such as the small world toy area, or the construction or home corner. This adult-directed approach under the theme *pedagogy*, sub theme *power/control* resulted in the adults taking away children’s choice about who they played with during the timetabled ‘play time’. The timetabling of the morning also had a direct impact on the children’s transitions under the theme *pedagogy*, subtheme *transitions*. Children lined up to go to the toilet, wash their hands, to come into the setting and to go out to the outdoors play area. This lining up was directed by the Montessori educator. This pedagogical approach where children stood in line to access the toilets as a group activity, confirmed the control educators had over children’s decision-making processes, when analysing this observation under the theme of *pedagogy*, subtheme *power/control*. This observation also links to the theme of *relationships* and the theme of *how children learn*, subtheme *control*. The observed practice also reflects on the theme the *image of the child* under the subtheme *deficit image* where
there was an assumption by the educator that these children do not have the competence to decide individually when they need to use the toilet facilities. Observation of practice as analysed through the themes in the Montessori preschools identified under the theme *how children learn* identified the emphasise on controlling and managing children’s behaviour, under the theme *pedagogy* the approach was, directed, didactic, this resulted in poor transitions and gave visibility to the varying power relationships in the Montessori preschools.

Preparing the environment under the theme *pedagogy* to encourage children to explore, think, investigate and question was recognised by all the Montessori educators as being important or very important. Educator (I, M, 1) under the theme *pedagogy* subtheme *play* clarified that “the environment is geared towards play, exploration and learning, prepared by the teacher always with the child in mind”. Onsite observation confirmed that both Montessori preschools had clearly defined interest areas. There was limited natural or open-ended materials for children to explore as identified under the theme *pedagogy*, subtheme *emergent interests*. Access to the environment was strictly timetabled, with children being advised that “it’s not time to play with the toys yet, we have to finish our work, I will tell you when it’s time to play” (I, M, 3). This practice highlighted the control of the educator, where the pedagogical approach was adult directed as identified in the theme *pedagogy*, subthemes *didactic* and *power/control*. Interesting toys such as the magnets were stored in high shelves which children could not freely access. This was a further example of the theme *pedagogy*, subtheme *power/control*. The control by the Montessori educators of the materials in the learning environment and can also be considered under the theme *pedagogy*, subtheme *rights*. When asked how the Montessori educators support positive behaviour management the educators in one Montessori preschool confirmed under the theme *pedagogy*, subtheme *extrinsic rewards* that their approach to behaviour management was by offering a number of extrinsic rewards to children who were ‘well behaved’. The rewards included, ‘Duck, duck goose’, this is where the child “might sit
nicely, it’s just a bit of motivation to do the right thing” (I, M, 3). The educator when asked confirmed that,

“Duck, duck goose’ [is] a simple thing of opening the door and if you do ‘duck duck goose’, you are the first in the line, or you get the gold chair, or you are first up here to get to pick a buddy”. (I, M, 3)

The educator explained that all the children want to do ‘duck duck goose’ or get the gold chair or get the special books or be the happy helper. The themes identified here when analysing the data include the theme of how children learn, subthemes, extrinsic rewards, managing challenging behaviour, control, beliefs and pedagogy, subtheme, rewards, power/control and pedagogy.

The Montessori educators recognised their role in providing a prepared learning environment for children. However, children’s access to the learning environment was strictly timetabled, children did not have access to and were not given time by the educators to explore the materials, or actively engage with the materials. The environment and access to it was controlled by the educators. Therefore, the educators identified their role in controlling the environment. Under the theme of how children learn, sub theme, extrinsic motivation the use of extrinsic motivators in the Montessori classrooms was a further reflection of the power of the educators’ and how educators used this power over children using extrinsic motivators. In the second Montessori preschool the educator agreed that children were praised or acknowledged for positive behaviour, however she elaborated by saying “we give praise when it is wanted, not all the time they want praise and not all the time they need it, if they look for it I acknowledge it” (I, M, 1). This also portrayed as identified in the theme pedagogy subtheme power/control and the theme how children learn, subtheme beliefs the educator’s power and control over the children. The educator made a conscious decision to withhold praise unless children looked for praise; this signifies a belief that children should be managed by the educator.
Onsite observation of practice identified children being isolated and being advised that they would not get their turn if they did not behave themselves. Under the theme of *relationships* all of the Montessori educators confirmed that their role was to be available to the children and support them, the onsite observations did not confirm this at all times, particularly where the pedagogical approach was directive as opposed to nurturing. Triangulation of the findings identify that the Montessori educators participating in this study considered their role as being that of a teacher who transmits knowledge to the child. In this situation the power and knowledge rests with the educator. This imbalance of power was evident when children in both settings addressed the educators as ‘teacher’. The role of the educator in the participating settings was also seen to be that of managing children. This role of managing children was to ensure that the children learn particular skills such as holding a pencil properly or completing a jigsaw or other outcomes such as learning how to share and take turns. The qualitative themes identified in the semi structured interviews and the onsite observations, captured in the field notes, focused on the educators understanding of their role being linked to their understanding of how children learn and their pedagogical beliefs and understandings.

**6.4.2 Objective 1 Findings from Play-based Educators**

The findings from the two west of Ireland and one Boston Play-based setting of the preschool educators’ understanding of their role is based on the data collated from the educator questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, and onsite observation of practice. Five of the eight Play-based preschool educators identified their role in the educator questionnaire as transmitting knowledge to the child by showing the child how to do the activity properly. A total of two Play-based educators neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement and one Play-based educator disagreed with this statement. A Play-based educator further explained that her understanding of her role was to act as a guide, and if necessary, for example, if the child was not successful, her role was to manipulate the jigsaw piece into the correct place (I, P, 9). The findings from the Play-
based educators based on question five of the questionnaire are identified in Figure 16 below

![Role of Educator to Teach a Skill and Transfer Knowledge](image)

**Figure 6.15: Role of the Educator to Teach a Skill and Transfer Knowledge**

Question six of the questionnaire explored the educator’s pedagogical approach, if it was adult directed, where the educator made the decisions on the learning outcomes thereby directing the learning or if the learning outcomes were based on children’s emergent interests. The following outlined in Figure 6.17 were the findings identified based on the analysis of the questionnaires completed by the Play-based preschool educators.

![Educator Decides and Directs Learning](image)

**Figure 6.16: Educator Decides and Directs the Learning**
The findings from the questionnaire identify that 13% (n=1) agree that his/her role is to decide on the themes or topics which the children will learn in the preschool and that the role of the educator is to search different books, websites and further information to find out all about the topic and teach the children all about it. Half of the Play-based educators 50% (n=4) disagreed with this statement and 37% (n=3) strongly disagreed that the role of the Play-based preschool educator is to identify the knowledge and use this knowledge to direct the learning.

When asked about strict timetabling in the preschool educator questionnaire as outlined in Figure 6.18, a total of 50% (n=4) Play-based preschool educators strongly disagreed that they had a strict time table in their setting, with 25% (n=2) disagreeing that they had a strict timetable in their preschool setting and 25% (n=2) neither agreeing or disagreeing with this statement.

![Strict Timetabling](image)

*Figure 6.17: Strict Timetabling Play-based*

The two questions in the preschool educators’ questionnaire which were aimed at exploring if the educators’ considered their role as one which supports a social constructionist approach to teaching and learning presented the following findings from the Play-based preschool educators. All the Play-based educators agreed or strongly agreed that they provide learning environments which encourages talk and discussion and that their role is to help children to think about their ideas and to describe, explain and hypothesises together with their friends.
6.4.2.1 Role of the Play-based educator, findings from semi structured interviews

Semi structured interviews were conducted with the eight Play-based preschool educators, five of whom worked in the two west of Ireland Play-based settings and three who worked in the Boston Play-based setting. The semi structured interviews were based on an interview schedule guide with prompts (Appendix I). Each interview was recorded and subsequently transcribed by the researcher. The questions which explored the preschool educator’s understanding of his / her role were questions three to five inclusive. When coding the interview transcripts, of the nine primary themes identified, the role of the educator theme also incorporated the theme of articulating the role of the educator, values, and defending the role of the preschool educator. When analysing the data from the interview transcripts the role of the educator was considered under the themes and subthemes, how children learn, pedagogy and the image of the child, parents, challenges, basic needs, pedagogy and relationships.

The adult in the more powerful position was highlighted by the Play-based educators, with the role of the adult being described as “to help them to become better learners and to present them with meaningful learning opportunities” (I, P, 8) or to “show them how to do a specific activity” (B, P, 14) where through repetition they gain mastery (B, P, 13). This aligns with the theme role of the educator and subthemes of the theme pedagogy, demonstrate, modelling and transfer of knowledge. The theme of pedagogy sub theme, power/control which the educator had in the learning environment was also highlighted here. The Play-based educators saw their role as helping children and showing them how to do an activity, because the educator was in the controlling or more powerful position, based on the theme role of the educator. These quotes also confirmed an image of a passive learner and a ‘needy’ child under the theme image of the child, subtheme deficit image of the child.
Play-based educators also highlighted the importance of being playful, creating a playful environment, and having fun as an important role of the early years educator, under the theme *role of the educator*. Educator (I, P, 8) suggested “Make it a fun place; make it an encouraging place and an enjoyable place” (I, P, 8). Educator (B, P, 13) commented “My role is to provide them with Play-based learning opportunities and facilitate their ability to follow through on and explore their ideas”. These quotes identify the educator as reflecting on her role as a facilitator and links to the theme of the educators understanding of how children learn and pedagogy, subtheme reflection and the theme *role of the educator*. These quotes are also embedded in the theme the educator’s *image of the child*. This educator saw her role as a nurturer; she wanted to create spaces where children enjoyed their experiences. This educator’s understanding of her role is underpinned by the theme *relationships*, sub theme, positive adult / child relationships.

The Play-based educators also identified the importance of encouraging children or supporting children’s *intrinsic motivation*, a sub theme of the theme pedagogy. Educator (I, P, 6) confirmed that “I think anything a child does, you have to encourage them, I encourage them as much as I can”. The educator’s role in, ensuring the children are happy and feel secure and cared for was identified as important by educator (I, P, 6). This confirmed the educator’s understanding of her role under the theme *image of the child*, subtheme where educators want children to be happy and under the theme *basic needs* subtheme *security* where educators identify their role in supporting children to feel secure in the preschool setting. The role of the educator as a guide and a teacher of skills as outlined in the theme pedagogy, subtheme *skills* were identified. Preparing the learning environment and ‘giving them opportunities to learn by providing them with materials which are geared towards the child’ was identified as the role of Play-based educator (I, P, 7). One Play-based educator identified the role of the educator which aligns with the theme pedagogy, subtheme *intrinsic motivation as,*
“trying to make it interesting, to make them want to learn, so that they have the desire to learn, this makes it a lot easier rather than just saying it and expecting them to take it in, it’s getting them to want to do it”.

(I, P, 9)

The role of the preschool educator in demonstrating how to complete a task or learn a skill as identified in the theme *pedagogy*, subtheme *skills*, was identified, “you might show them how in theory you do it, but in practice they need to get in and get their hands stuck in and do it themselves”(I,P,8).

The analysis of the semi structured interviews provided a picture of the educators’ understanding of their role as being based on meeting children’s basic needs, for the theme *basic needs* subthemes *wellbeing* and *security*. The interviews also offered a picture of educators who saw their role as supporting children’s intrinsic motivation to learn through a culture of positive reinforcement and creating learning environments where children can explore and follow their emerging interests as outlined in the theme of *role of the educator, pedagogy sub theme intrinsic motivation*.

The Play-based educators discussed how they work with parents, under the theme *parents*. Educator (I. P, 8) advised that the relationship between the preschool and parents or families, “depends on the family and how much they have put into their child”. The educator expanded on this explaining, “we are always telling them what we are doing” however,

“parents expect a certain amount and you have given that, you could have a meeting with them and explain something to them, but you would nearly be questioned”. (I, P, 8)

Parents as the primary and first educators of their child have a right to ask about their child’s learning and development, these quotes when analysed under the themes of *parents*, subtheme, *parents’ role*, questions parents’ right to ask about the curriculum or pedagogical approach.

Under the theme of *parents*, the educator demonstrates a deficit or judgement of parents, in relation to parents’ engagement with their child’s learning under the subtheme of *deficit image of parents*. In contrast educator (I, P, 8) confirmed that “the involvement we had with parents this
year has been so positive, that it is undeniable we need to work in partnership with them”. This educator further expanded on these comments.

“I am getting increasingly greedy for parents’ involvement, it’s just about getting them on board, empowering them saying to them that they have something of value that we need, so get your act together and do this for us” (I, P, 8).

This educator confirmed that parents had not always been included, but that there is now a recognition that parents’ involvement is important for children’s learning, therefore this educator plans on being “a little bit more belligerent and get some more parents involved” as “there is a bridge to be gapped or a gap to be bridged that makes parents feel like they can come in”. These quotes identify the educator’s recognition of working in partnership with parents under the theme parents, subtheme relationships with parents.

Under the theme of expectations, parents’ expectations a subtheme of the theme expectations highlighted that, by having parents involved in the ECEC setting, there was a greater understanding of parents’ expectations for their child’s learning. Educator (I, P, 8) confirmed ‘getting parents involved, even just to talk has been huge’. This educator further explained, ‘when I started first it was more structured, it was all about getting them ready for school, with their numbers, letters and their bit of knowledge’. This educator referred to the changing expectations from a policy perspective and the importance of involving parents in their child’s learning to ensure a shared understanding of expectations for children’s learning.

Under the theme pedagogy educator (B, P, 14) explained that “we talk with the families on our curriculum nights about what we are seeing in children’s play and how we are supporting children’s learning”. This educator expanded and explained that,

“we have several parents who are Dr’s and they come in as our Dr experts, we are not like a cooperative preschool where parents have to take a role, but we definitely always have an open door”. (B, P, 14)
The educators in this preschool identified under the theme of *parents* and subtheme of *role of parents*, that parents are not obliged to work with the preschool setting as the preschool provision is based on a market model, however they are invited to do so. Educators in the Green Play-based preschool confirmed that “we are constantly inviting parents in or to come with us, they have been here for soup, they have been here for baking” (I, P, 10). This educator further explained that parents are kept informed

> “we tell them on a daily basis, we have weekly, daily planning on the door, we do pictures on the hallway, so they constantly see what their children are doing”. (I, P, 10)

This communication with parents is identified under the theme *parents*, subtheme *communication*. Based on the findings from the interviews this communication appears to be monodirectional as opposed to bidirectional. Having parents into the preschool, educator (I, P, 8) confirmed “gives the child who has their parent actively engaged with us a little bit more confidence”. Educators recognised the value of having parental partnership and engagement for children’s *wellbeing* a subtheme of the theme *basic needs*.

Under the theme of *challenges* pertaining to parents, Play-based educator (B. P, 13) confirmed that “sometimes when the parents don’t support the ideas we are trying to focus on and support, that can be very challenging”. While educator (B, P. 14) explained, that if educators notice that “something is not quite right on a developmental level” that this can be difficult for parents, “hearing that somethings not perfect with your child”. This educator clarified this statement by confirming that “if they get support early it makes a world of a difference”. These quotes when analysed under the theme *parents*, subtheme *communications* and *partnership* highlight the quality of communications with parents and demonstrates also the subtheme of *power* under the theme of *pedagogy*. The findings demonstrate the power the educator holds in the situation, when she / he identifies that something is “not quite right to the parents”, rather than engaging in dialogue with the parents to explore possible issues.
The role of the educator in supporting children’s basic needs, under the theme *basic needs* for security was identified by several of the Play-based educators. Educator (I, P, 8) confirmed that, “it is really important to get them to be comfortable and secure and that they can talk to us”.

“The more that we are really able to listen to them, the more they feel heard, the more comfortable they will be expressing themselves in whatever way they feel comfortable with”.

(B, P, 13)

These quotes from the Play-based educators identify the educators’ espoused recognition of the importance of listening to children under the theme of *pedagogy*, subtheme *listen*. The findings from the semi structured interviews of Play-based educators in three settings two in the west of Ireland and one in Boston, identify that the Play-based educators saw their role as supporting children’s intrinsic motivation to learn and to teach children skills. The Play-based educators recognised the value and importance of working in partnership with parents and verbalised a commitment to do this. Communication with parents based on the semi structured interviews seems to be based on a power dynamic where the power rests with the educator. Play based educators did not have any issues with parental expectations their challenges were based on the quality of their communications with parents and their beliefs about parents.

Under the theme *relationships* three subthemes were identified, *educator /child relationships, peer interactions* and *gender*. Findings from the Play-based semistructured interviews highlighted under the theme *relationships* Educator (I, P, 6) confirmed that she wanted children to see her as “somebody that they can trust that will look after them”. Relationships built on trust under the theme *relationships*, subtheme *educator / child relationships* was also confirmed by Educator (I, P, 8) who confirmed that “the little steps we take during the day to build trust and understanding between each other is important”. Educator (I, P, 6) advised that she hopes that the relationship that she has with children will help them to “come to me if they have any problems”, this educator expanded on this saying “I think respect is probably the key thing for me”. Data for the subthemes of
6.4.2.2 Role of the Play-based educator, findings from onsite observations.

The observation of practice did not fully correspond to the espoused beliefs of the educator’s role. Children in one of the Play-based settings under the theme pedagogy had limited opportunities under the subtheme to explore and think or take time to make meaning through play without the educator directing the play. There was limited autonomy or freedom of choice. This was due to the routine timetabling of activities and adult direction of the ‘play’ activities as considered under the theme of pedagogy, under the subtheme of didactic approach. When asked about timetabling of activities, six of the eight Play-based educators disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that they had a strict timetable in place in the preschool. Educator (I, P, 10) confirmed that they do have schedules where snack time and tidy-up time are at the same time each day. The comment from educator (I, P, 8) confirmed that they “do not worry too much about timetabling” preferring to have “loose routines”. Interestingly, an educator in the same preschool who had also disagreed with the statement confirmed, “We have a daily timetable that we follow, however if we feel that the children are doing a task, we allow them extra time to push out the next task” (I, P, 6).

These comments under the theme of pedagogy identify that due to timetabling in the preschool, there was little time to support children’s emergent interests as identified as a sub theme of pedagogy, as children were not provided with the time to explore and think. The reality based on the observation of practice was that there were not “loose routines” and educators did not “allow” children extra time to progress their interests. These quotes also identify the subtheme in relation to the power / control of the educator, to direct children’s learning. Play-based educators were adamant that they do not have timetables, preferring to refer to the ‘schedule’ or ‘large blocks’ of time where children can “delve deeply into their learning and play” (B, P, 13), which is open to change and adjustment.
The Play-based educators were anxious to defend their role. The observations of practice clearly demonstrated that there was a set timetable, it was however flexible in the Yellow preschool, however the Green preschool and the Indigo preschool were guided by the planned timetable.

The observation of practice confirmed that in all three playschools, activities were timetabled to varying degrees, with activities being primarily whole-group activities as opposed to supporting children’s individual needs to explore and think. This emphasis on whole-group activity as opposed to following the child’s lead was evident during circle time, story time, lunch time and ‘play time’. Seven of the eight Play-based educators (87.5%) agreed or strongly agreed that their role was to prepare the environment to encourage children to explore, think, investigate and question. Responses from the educators identify that children’s interests are observed and the environment is then prepared to develop “educational activities” (I, P, 9). Educator (I, P, 8) confirmed that sometimes the learning environment is planned and prepared by the educator and children together. However, “other times I go into ‘sneaky’ teacher mode and the environment reflects things that we are doing or have done”. The role of the educator here reflected the power of the educator under the sub theme power of the educator theme pedagogy. The educator used the play environment to transfer knowledge to children, where the image of the child came from a deficit perspective. There was an assumption that the children would not know what the educator’s plan for their learning entailed. This is reflective of Bruner (1996) who explains that the concept of learning is in the mind of the educator rather than the child.

In general, the Play-based educators highlighted that their role was to prepare the learning environment, with opportunities for “cooperative play and independent play” (B, P, 14). Ensuring that the environment provided a rich opportunity for children to explore, think, investigate and question was not highlighted as a priority in responses by Play-based educators in the questionnaires or interviews. The onsite observations of the learning
environments in the Play-based settings lacked or had a limited supply of natural or open-ended materials to support children under the theme _pedagogy_, subtheme _explore and think_, or children’s wonder and delight in their play under the theme _pedagogy_, subtheme _play_. The espoused beliefs about how children learn were not always evident in practice.

Supporting positive behaviour was a question which was asked in the questionnaire, the semi-structured interviews and observed onsite in practice. Play-based educators strongly agreed that “children respond very well to praise, however if we feel there are a few no-no’s, we ask the children to come up with the rules, this works well” (I, P, 6). One educator (I, P, 10) confirmed that “children in our setting are always given praise and encouragement everyday as this helps with their confidence and self-esteem”. This reflects the sub theme supporting children’s _positive behaviour_ when considering _how children learn_. Equally, educator (I, P, 9) confirmed that “children thrive on praise especially from us as educators”. There was a recognition that children take their cues about themselves from the educator as outlined in the theme _pedagogy_, sub theme _modelling_. When asked if educators guide children by suggesting what to do rather than what not to do, seven of the eight educators strongly agreed that this was the practice in their setting. In the eight setting, educator (B, P, 14) confirmed that “children are allowed to make their own choices, with educator (B, P, 14) confirming, “I try to remain positive when disciplining but sometimes I need to make choices for the children.” Educator (B, P, 15) from the same preschool commented on how this occurs in practice, “for example we use language like, ‘walking feet’ instead of ‘no running’”. In this playschool the use of extrinsic motivators, ‘star charts’, was used to manage negative behaviour. This use of _extrinsic motivation_ to _manage behaviour_ and _control or direct_ learning aligns to the subthemes as identified under the themes _how children learn_ and _pedagogy_.

The qualitative analysis of the interviews identified two different pedagogical approaches under the theme _pedagogy_. In the Indigo playschool where educators (B, P, 14) and (B, P, 15) were based the analysis of the interview transcripts identified a _controlling didactic_
approach where children were “allowed” to make choices by the more powerful educator as identified under the theme *pedagogy* subthemes control, power, didactic. The language used emphasised the *role of the educator* to discipline children and the educator confirmed that she needed to “make choices for the children”. Under the theme *pedagogy* and the *image of the child* the controlling power of the adult underpinned a *deficit image* of the child who needed to be managed, told what to do, and controlled with extrinsic motivators.

The practice reflected the educators’ comments in general across the three settings. Supporting positive behaviour was in two of the settings based on positive reinforcement where the child was praised for the action rather than as a person. In these two preschools supporting positive behaviour was facilitated through dialogue. In this instance children were trusted to make judgements and were supported to reflect on their decisions, this identified based on the theme the educator’s *image of the child*, that the educators’ image of the child in these preschools was that of a *competent* child. In the third setting, behaviour management was adult directed with children frequently being told what not to do, the pedagogical approach in this preschool was *controlling* and *directing* as outlined as a subtheme of *pedagogy*. The process resulted in a situation where the management of *children’s challenging behaviour* a sub theme of *pedagogy* was the primary focus, with children using their ‘walking feet!’ This management of children’s challenging behaviour was reflected in large timetabled group sessions. In this setting, children were called by the educator to eat their lunch in a rota system, three children at a time. The children had no choice who they shared their lunch break with or to decide when they wanted to eat their lunch. This play environment was *didactic* and under the *control* of the educator, it was not an autonomy *supportive* environment, as children did not have choice or autonomy. These observations linked to the themes *how children learn, pedagogy and relationships* under the subthemes of children being seen as *passive learners*, who were *controlled* by the educator where the *educator / child relationship* was based on a *power* relationship and the power rested with the educator.
Triangulation of the findings identify that the Play-based educators participating in this study were conflicted about their role as an educator. While Play-based educators espoused to believe that their role was to support children to learn through play, the practice did not reflect this espoused belief. Play was timetabled and primarily adult-directed and while play-based educators identified their role as providing environments for children to explore, investigate and hypothesise, onsite observation identified a lack of freely accessible open ended or natural materials to support children’s exploratory play.

6.4.3 Objective 1 Findings from the Reggio Inspired Educators

Findings from the four Reggio inspired educators in relation to their understanding of their role as an educator were collated from the answers received on the questionnaire, the semi-structured interviews and onsite observation of the practice of the four educators in the two Reggio inspired settings. The findings from the questionnaires highlight, as identified in Figure 6.19 below that 50% (n=2) of the Reggio educators agreed with the statement that children learn best when the adult shows the child how to do the activity properly. Both educators commented on this question, “I am not sure that I’d say learn the best, but they may be best supported in furthering their abilities” (B, R, 11) while the second Reggio educator commented, “it helps to have a teacher model for somethings, for other activities it can be a time for children to explore. I see the role of the teacher as more of a mentor, let the child lead and explore together”. (B, R, 12)

One educator 25% (n=1) neither agreed or disagreed with this comment, stating that she thought that children learn through trial and error, but assistance with skills such as putting on shoes, or holding a pencil may be needed for children to feel successful. The fourth Reggio educator 25% (n=1) disagreed with this statement.
Figure 6.18: The Role of the educator, how to do the activity properly

Question six of the questionnaire explored the educator’s pedagogical approach, if it was adult directed, where the educator made the decisions on the learning outcomes thereby directing the learning or if the learning outcomes were based on children’s emergent interests. The following were the findings identified in Figure 6.20 based on the analysis of the questionnaires completed by the Reggio inspired preschool educators. In total 75% (n=3) of the Reggio preschool educators disagreed that they decide on themes or topics, suggesting that “We follow the children’s interests, then we typically research and learn together” (B, R, 16). The fourth educator strongly disagreed with this statement, stating, “children take the lead, their learning is led by their explorations”.

When asked about strict timetabling in the preschool educator questionnaire as outlined in Figure 6.21, a total of 75% (n=3) Reggio inspired, preschool educators disagreed that they had a strict time table in their setting, with 25% (n=1) neither agreeing or disagreeing with this statement. Educators commented on a flexible schedule “in the event that children are particularly taken with a given exploration or investigation” (B, R, 17).

The two questions in the preschool educator’s questionnaire which were aimed at exploring if the educators considered their role as one which supports a social constructivist approach to teaching and learning presented the following findings from the Reggio inspired preschool educators. All the Reggio inspired educators agreed or strongly agreed that they provide
learning environments which encourages talk and discussion and that their role is to help children to think about their ideas and to describe, explain and hypothesises together with their friends. Comments included by educator (B, R, 11) included “children share and reflect on their experiences all of the time; it is a big part of our philosophy”.

6.4.3.1 Role of the Reggio inspired educator, findings from semi structured interviews.

The role of the educator in Reggio inspired preschools was analysed similarly to that of the Montessori and Play-based educators across the themes, image of the child, role of the educator, pedagogy, how children learn, expectations, basic needs, relationships, parents and challenges. The Reggio inspired educators articulated their roles with confidence. Starting with the theme the educator’s image of the child, educator (B, R, 16) confirmed that under the theme role of the educator she believed that her role was about “supporting children to be happy, contributing, participating citizens”. While Educator (B, R, 17) identified her role as based on the theme of pedagogy as “inspiring children to have a love of learning”, “a mentor, a researcher along with them” or as (B, R, 12) suggested that her role, which aligns with the theme pedagogy, sub theme, question and explore was to “help them learn how to pose and answer questions through stages and investigations”. From a pedagogical perspective under the theme pedagogy the Reggio educators confirmed that the role of the educator is underpinned by a rights-based perspective. Educator (B, R, 17) confirmed under the theme pedagogy, subtheme transfer of knowledge “my role is not to impart knowledge to them, but to think about how to build to that moment of discovery”. This educator further explained that her role under the theme pedagogy, subtheme question was “to make it a richer experience, so not just providing the thing to do, but by constantly asking for questions”. Educator (B, R, 16) confirmed under the theme pedagogy, sub theme facilitate that she sees herself as a facilitator “learning right along with them especially when we are delving into new topics”. This approach to teaching and learning is aligned to an autonomy supportive learning environment a subtheme of the theme pedagogy. Educator (B, R, 12) advised that she
understood her role to be aligned to the theme *pedagogy* “as a mentor, as a researcher along with them, keeping an eye mostly on what’s happening and taking a step back.” While Educator (B, R, 11) confirmed that she believed that her role based on the theme *pedagogy* sub theme *autonomy supportive* learning environment was to,

> “Firstly, create the environment which I take seriously, designing the space and having things where they can self-start and choose what they want to work on”. (B, R, 11)

Identifying her role, the educator confirmed that she saw her role as providing an environment which aligns with the sub theme *autonomy supportive* learning environment, where children have *rights a subtheme of the theme pedagogy* and have choice to *explore and think subtheme of the theme pedagogy*. This educator expanded on her understanding of her role and advised,

> “I see my role as supporting the child to be a good citizen, a respectful person who can solve problems, talk to their friends, advocate for themselves and that their creativity can be encouraged, these are my main things”. (B, R, 11)

One educator suggested that the role of the educator as aligned to subthemes of the theme *pedagogy, emergent interests, exploring, transferring knowledge* is that of a mentor, following the child’s lead and exploring together rather than the teacher identifying the learning material and transferring the knowledge to the children in the preschool (B, R, 17). The Reggio educators identified their role under the themes of *pedagogy* and *how children learn* in planning the curriculum as following children’s interests and consulting with them “then we typically research and learn together” (B, R, 16) or “I let children take the lead” (B, R, 17). Educator (B, R, 12) expanded on the comments.

> “My co-teacher and I will open up a theme or topic, based on interests, habits or work we see emerging around us, we research and if the children are interested, we will delve deeper while including them in the research process”. (B, R, 12)

Educators agreed that they have an important role in preparing the environment to encourage children to explore, think, investigate and
question. Identifying the environment as the “third teacher” educator (B, R, 12) commented that she sees her role as.

“to try to think about what children are doing, their current interests and what they are concentrating on and to think about potential next steps and make those available to them in the learning environment. I think about where the child’s line of questioning might be going and the provocations that would support next steps”. (B, R, 12)

The importance of the subtheme of *listening* under the theme *pedagogy* and hearing the voice of the child, a subtheme of *rights* under the theme *pedagogy* was identified as an important role of the preschool educator by educator (B, R, 11) who confirmed that her role was.

“to really listen to them and to provide for experiences based on this information. I have to think about how they can build to that moment of discovery and support making those connections in the environment”. (B, R, 11)

When asked about how the Reggio educators support positive behaviour, all of the educators were articulate in explaining as identified under the theme of *how children learn*, subtheme how they reinforce and support positive behaviour by talking about the positive things that they noticed during the day or “noticing the moments when they are doing great work or supporting each other” (B, R, 12). Educator (B, R, 17) explained.

“I quietly compliment those children that are always doing the right thing, they may feel like they are not seen, because if you are really being noticed and seen that makes you feel good”.

(B, R, 17)

Supporting positive behaviour and intrinsic motivation to learn were subthemes within the theme *how children learn*. The preschool educators identified that children in the Reggio inspired preschools are asked about the expectations they have for themselves, each other and the classroom community. Under the theme expectations the preschool educators explained that children have agreements with each other and there are a lot of “thank you” and “high fives”. The role of the educator in supporting children’s basic needs and children’s emotional wellbeing, under the theme *basic needs* was highlighted by educator ( B, R, 16) who confirmed “my
experience of this school because of the demographic, this particular group's social emotional skills, they have a lot of feelings and it’s a real big part of our day”. An example of a strategy which was given during the semi-structured interviews was that, when educators notice a child making space for a friend, the educator uses language which reinforces the child’s identity as a sub theme of the theme pedagogy as someone who is helpful, thereby supporting higher levels of wellbeing as a subtheme of the theme basic needs. Educators spoke about the work they were doing with children around empathy and how they were “working on thinking about how, what you do affects others, but there are times when you need to say, that’s not ok” (B, R, 17). Reggio educators articulated their role in supporting children under the theme of basic needs to feel secure, and each child’s need under the theme pedagogy for their identity to be supported and feel a sense of belonging in the early years setting. These themes were identified as themes and subthemes under the themes of basic needs, relationships, subtheme values of the educator, pedagogy and how children learn.

Under the theme of parents, Reggio inspired educator (B, R, 12) confirmed that “the practice of having parents as partners in the classroom is really wonderful”. This educator expanded on this, explaining the benefit of parents' monthly engagement as parent helpers in the preschool.

“They see a snapshot of what we are doing every day, or the line of questioning and they can be thinking about the conversations that happened and bring it up at the dinner table that is extremely useful”. (B, R. 12)

Educator (B, R, 11) also under the theme of parents confirmed that she believed that the approach to working in partnership with parents in the Reggio inspired preschools, which is a core value of the approach, “gives parents a resource, to see what happens in school and gives the child a chance to share that link between home and school”. Under the theme challenges, Educator (B, R, 11) confirmed that having parents act as parent helpers in the preschool can also be challenging “I have mixed feelings about this model for this age group, for some kids it's really beneficial but
for others it’s confusing and tricky”. The relationships, that the Reggio educators had with children and parents extended beyond the classroom. Educator (B, R, 16) explained that while exploring and thinking about dinosaurs one child invited her to come to the Natural History Museum with him, she mentioned this to the child’s mother who was delighted to accept the educators offer. The theme relationships extended out of the classroom into the family and community. There was acknowledgement by educator (B, R, 12) that the engagement with parents was enhanced due to the parents’ social advantage “I would say that this particular population of parents are relatively privileged and have a lot of resources available to them”.

When asked about the challenges experienced by the educators, educator (B, R, 17) confirmed “the biggest challenge for any teacher is kind of just societal expectations”. This educator further expanded on this under the theme of expectations.

“It goes down to what parents expect and what they think learning is and what they think learning looks like. The idea in a very capitalist society of there being a product at the end of everything is a challenge”. (B, R, 17)

A challenge under the theme challenges identified specifically by Reggio educator (B, R, 16) was in relation to the Reggio approach.

“The lack of time particularly with this kind of philosophy is a challenge. When starting a theme or unit from their interest, because it’s not planned, you take a lot of time to reflect on how or where we are going to go with that. Right now, they are very interested in telephones, so I quickly went to the library and got some books on telephones”. (B, R, 16)

6.4.3.2 Role of the Reggio inspired educator, findings from onsite observations.

Observation of the practice confirmed the Reggio inspired educators’ pedagogical practice. Under the theme pedagogy educators and children
were observed researching together. While there was a schedule in place in both preschools this was flexible, and if changes were made, this was done in a democratic manner, based on the theme pedagogy sub theme listening to children. The children discussed different topics at gathering time and were invited by the educator to consider, discuss and reach a solution, educators listened to children and children were actively involved in the decision-making processes as outlined in the theme, how children learn. While observing in both Reggio inspired preschools there were times when disagreements occurred between children. The educators in both settings were very aware of the situations and only intervened when children were unable to resolve the issue themselves, thereby supporting children’s autonomy and creating an autonomy supportive learning environment as identified as a subtheme in the theme pedagogy. Conflict resolution based on the theme relationships in both preschools involved conversations and reflections resulting in the children being supported to come up with the solution and resolve the issue themselves. This was supported by the educator’s image of the child as being competent to make decisions. Supporting children to self-regulate under the theme how children learn was observed in the Reggio inspired preschools, where the educators empowered children to regulate their own behaviour, by trusting children to have the competence to work out their differences, knowing that there was an adult available if required. Supporting positive behaviour was a sub theme under the theme how children learn which was evident in the Reggio inspired settings as opposed to managing challenging behaviour also a subtheme under the theme how children learn which was observed at different levels in both the Montessori and Play-based settings.

Triangulation of the findings from the questionnaire, interviews and the onsite observations confirmed that the educators in the participating Reggio inspired settings considered their role as being mentors, facilitators and researchers in partnership with the children. The educators considered their role in creating a rich environment for children to explore and investigate as a primary responsibility.
Educators highlighted the importance of their role in listening to children and taking their cue from children’s emergent interests, while constantly provoking and challenging children’s curiosities. These were all subthemes under the themes, pedagogy, how children learn and image of the child. The findings from the semi structured interviews and observation of onsite practice confirmed a commitment to working in active partnership with parents. Parents’ expectations and societal expectations were challenges which the Reggio inspired educators identified.

6.4.4 Objective 1: Comparisons and Contrasts across the Three Setting Types

In relation to the educator’s understanding of her/his role as an early childhood educator, which is the key focus of Objective 1, the findings from each of the setting types; Montessori, Play-based and Reggio inspired will be considered based on the triangulation of the findings in each of the setting types.

6.4.4.1 The Adult’s Role in Montessori Preschools

The participating Montessori preschool educator’s understanding of her/his role was that of a knowledge expert who demonstrates, models and teaches skills using didactic methods. Based on the Montessori educator’s understanding of her/his role as an educator, the pedagogical approach was directive and strictly timetabled. The focus in the participating Montessori preschools was to make the environment a safe place where the timetable and children were managed.

6.4.4.2 The Adult’s Role in Play-Based Settings

Through triangulation of the quantitative and qualitative findings, Play-based educators identified an understanding of their role to be transmitters of knowledge, to teach skills and help children to become better learners. This happened in the three Play-based settings. In the two west of Ireland Play-based settings the pedagogical approach demonstrated some balance
between adult and child led activities, however the balance was in favour of the adult to make the decisions. The focus in the west of Ireland Play-based preschools was to make learning enjoyable and fun; educators identified their role as supporting play. The pedagogical approach in the Boston Play-based setting was adult-directed. The focus in the Boston Play-based setting was on measurable learning outcomes pertaining to school readiness being achieved as identified in the children’s learning journals which documented their learning.

6.4.4.3 The Adult’s Role in Reggio Inspired Settings

The Reggio inspired educators identified their role as mentors, facilitators, researchers in partnership with the children. Based on their understanding of their role, educators took a social constructivist approach where children and adults learn and make meaning together. From the data the focus in the Reggio inspired settings was on a community of learners where learning occurs at an individual and group level.

6.4.4.4 Timetabling in Montessori Preschools

In the two Montessori settings timetabling of the programme was strict. This resulted in very poor transitioning as children did not have choice. The role of the educator was seen as managing the children and the environment. The pedagogical approach was adult directed based on a strict timetable which did not allow for children’s emerging interests or choice. In both Montessori preschools the emphasis was on large or whole group activities.

6.4.4.5 Timetabling in Play-based Settings

Timetabling of the programme in all three Play-based setting was different. In the west of Ireland Play-based settings, educators considered their role as providing a flexible schedule. Within this flexible schedule transitions were planned, and children while they did not have choice to continue with an activity they were engrossed in, were given notice and time to ‘tidy up’. The learning environment was adjusted at times to meet children’s emerging interests. Children in the two west of Ireland Play-based settings had some opportunities to choose play activities. In the Boston Play-based setting
children had limited choice in choosing activities, as the activities were strictly timetabled. Children in the Boston Play-based setting engaged primarily in large group activities. The pedagogical approach was primarily adult-directed. In all three Play-based settings there was an emphasis on large or whole group activities.

6.4.4.6 Timetabling in Reggio Inspired Preschools

In the Reggio inspired preschools, while there was a broad schedule, activities were flexible to meet the emerging interests of the children. Children were given ample time to finish or decide on the future direction of the project or game they were engaged in. Educators had prepared the environment prior to the children attending. Planning of the learning environment was undertaken during non-contact time. Several provocations were presented in the environment based on children’s emerging interests and topics of discussion. The learning environment changed daily and changed also during the preschool session. Preparing the environment was considered a significant role by the Reggio inspired educators. Activities were primarily individual or in small groups, children were given autonomy to decide as to whether or not they wished to join a large group activity.

6.4.4.7 Supporting Positive Behaviour in Montessori Preschools

Both Montessori preschools used a comprehensive array of extrinsic motivators to support positive behaviour in the Montessori preschool. These included: the golden chair, duck, duck, goose, where the best-behaved child was identified as the leader of the group, or was first in the line, or the best-behaved child got to read the special books. Star charts were also used to identify positive behaviour, as were helper charts.

6.4.4.8 Supporting Positive Behaviour in Play-based Preschools

The educator’s role in supporting children’s positive behaviour also had different meanings for the educators working within the three different preschool settings. The Play-based educators in two of the preschools identified that their role in supporting positive behaviour was through positive reinforcement and dialogue. The third play school which was the
Boston Play-based play preschool identified the use of star charts and extrinsic motivation to support positive behaviour management.

6.4.4.9 Supporting Positive Behaviour in Reggio Inspired Preschools

The Reggio inspired preschool educators identified open discussion, empathy and children taking ownership as the core elements which guide their pedagogical approach to supporting positive behaviour.

6.5 Objective 2 - To identify the preschool educator's image of the child as a learner and explore how this influences the pedagogical practice in the preschool setting.

Findings from the questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and onsite observation of practice in the seven preschools, with the 17 preschool educators, have been triangulated to identify the preschool educator's image of the child as a learner in each of the preschool setting types; Montessori, Play-based and Reggio inspired.

6.5.1 Objective 2 Findings from the Montessori Educators

The findings from the questionnaires as identified in Figure 6.22 completed by the Montessori preschool educators highlight that 40% (n=2) of preschool educators neither agreed or disagreed that children are passive learners and learn through didactic exposure, 40% (n=2) agreed that children learn when the educator models or demonstrates a skill and as such are seen as passive learners or empty vessels with one educator disagreeing that children learn in this way, suggesting that children are seen as more active participative learners. A total of 20% (n=1) disagreed that children learn by didactic exposure.
When asked if children learn by practicing a skill as outlined in Bruner’s model of learners based on the apprenticeship model and outlined in Figure 6.23 below, four of the five Montessori preschool educators 80% strongly agreed that children learn by practicing a skill to reach perfection. This approach to learning was described by one Montessori educator as, “children learn through repetition and persevering with things they may find challenging” (I, M, 1), this educator also suggested that “teachers are a source of encouragement and guidance facilitating the child to practice new skills”. This was further confirmed by another Montessori educator who stated, “practice makes perfect, we learn from our mistakes” (I, M, 4). One educator (n=1) disagreed that children learn by practicing a skill to reach perfection.
All of the five Montessori educators 100% strongly agreed that children learn through their experiences, especially through play. One Montessori educator commented on this question and stated.

“Children are constantly learning different skills, through their play such as social, language, grace and courtesy skills as well as learning educational concepts like numbers, shapes, colours etc.” (I, M, 1).

6.5.1.1 Findings from semi structured interviews-Montessori Educators

During the semi structured interviews, the Montessori educators were asked what the children in the preschool were like. Educators enthused that the children were ‘beautiful and wonderful’, ‘funny’ with a range of personalities and behaviours. Children were described as having strong personalities, being energetic, outspoken very curious, inquisitive and full of knowledge. Educator (I, M, 3) confirmed that she “would probably say lively, some of them are really quiet, but the lively ones really stick out, because they might take up a bit more of your time”. When asked if the preschool children ever surprise her, educator (I, M, 3) replied,

“Maybe at the start when I started, but I mean I don’t feel too surprised any more, an odd thing maybe ya, individual little quirky things that they might say. But am no, I wouldn’t say I am too surprised anymore, you get to know what to expect from them”.

(I,M.3)

The remaining four Montessori educators confirmed that yes, children surprise them on a daily basis; “they often have the best ideas” (I, M, 5) or “I always go home having learned something from them” (I, M, 4). Educator (I, M, 2) confirmed that sometimes she is surprised at “how independent they can be and how much they have learned since September”.

This initial question was structured to gain an understanding of the educator’s image of the child and her/his expectations of the children in the preschool. In general, the responses provided an image of the preschool child as competent, knowledgeable, and curious as subthemes of the theme image of the child. The exception was the image of a child who was lively and needed managing which was reflective of that educator’s understanding of how children learn.
To gain an understanding of the educator’s *image of the child* as a learner a number of questions in the questionnaire and the semi-structured interviews were posed. Of the five Montessori educators, 40% (n=2) agreed that children learn best by being shown how to do an activity properly, this would suggest that the child learns how do something properly when the educator *transfers* the knowledge to the child or teaches the child a *skill* which are both sub themes under the theme of *pedagogy*. The remaining 60% (n=3) neither agreed nor disagreed, with one educator commenting that “we want children to learn for themselves, Montessori philosophy encourages self-correction, perseverance and independent learning” (I, M, 2). This educator confirmed an image of the child as an *active* learner. All the participating Montessori educators agreed that children learn through practicing “repetition and perseverance” (I, M, 2). There was a consensus that children learn ‘by doing’ or as one Montessori educator suggested, children learn “through play” (I, M, 2). Four of the five educators (80%) confirmed that “we are teaching them, they are learning from us” (I, M, 3), “we are their role models, they learn from us” (I, M, 4) or as educator (I, M, 1) suggests, children learn “from hearing information”. These comments suggest that the educators believe that children learn from the *direction* of the educator, the educators are the role models, therefore children learn from the educator *modelling* by *didactic* exposure. Educator (I, M,1) confirmed that she believes that children are *passive* learners who learn by *listening* to the educator. These subthemes are identified under the themes of *how children learn* and *pedagogy*.

All the Montessori educators agreed or strongly agreed that in their preschool room they encourage discussion and they use strategies to help children to think about their theories, hypothesise and speculate. This suggests that educators *believe* that children are *active participants* in their own learning. Two of the five educators from the same setting identified that this happens at ‘circle time’. Educator (I, M, 1) explained that “open ended questions are a regular occurrence at circle time”. This comment reflects the subtheme *control* that the educator has over children, where open ended questions are acceptable at ‘circle time’. This was also
confirmed by educator (I, M, 2) “we talk at circle time about plans ideas and children’s interests”. Onsite observation identified that there was limited time in either of the two Montessori preschools for children to theorise or hypothesise, as the pedagogical approach was primarily adult-directed, with children being told or shown what to do. This approach extended to the use of templates to make binoculars from toilet roll holders in one preschool to spaceships in the second Montessori preschool. In both instances, all the finished products were identical.

There was an acceptance by all the Montessori educators (100%) that children learn through their experiences, especially through play. Educator (I, M, 2) further commented that “children are learning different skills through their play, as well as learning educational concepts like, numbers, shapes, colours etc”. This comment reflects the theme of pedagogy where play is instrumentalised as a tool for teaching. This conflict between ‘work’ and play was very evident in the participating Montessori preschools. The timetable was structured to include the Montessori programme, which was considered the work, free play was also timetabled each day, both indoors and outdoors. A total of 80% (n=4) of the Montessori educators agreed or strongly agreed that open ended materials were freely available to children throughout the day in their Montessori preschool. Onsite observation identified that there were limited/no, open ended or natural materials in either Montessori preschool.

Triangulation of the findings indicate that the participating Montessori educators based on the questionnaire, semi structured interviews and onsite observation had, it may be suggested an image of the child as a passive learner who learns through observation, demonstration and practice. The pedagogical approach, based on the onsite observations appeared to be didactic, it was observed that children were not given choice or a voice, the pedagogical approach observed was where knowledge was transferred to the child from the ‘more knowledgeable’ educator, this was confirmed by the educators in the semi structured interviews and questionnaires. Children were ‘allowed’ to speak and discuss at circle time under the direction and
guidance of the educator, as confirmed through questionnaire, semi structured interview and onsite observation.

6.5.2 Objective 2 Findings from the Play-based Educators

The findings from the questionnaires as identified in Figure 6.24 completed by the Play-based preschool educators highlight that 50% (n=4) of Play-based preschool educators disagreed that children are passive learners and learn through didactic exposure. In total, 37% (n=3) preschool educators agreed that children learn when the educator models or demonstrates a skill and one preschool educator neither agreed nor disagreed that children learn through didactic exposure.

![Learn by Didactic Exposure Diagram]

**Figure 6.23: Children learn by didactic exposure**

The Play-based educators who disagreed that children learn best through didactic exposure, suggested that “children learn through experience and exploring materials, after exploring, if they are interested then it is ok to show them how to do a specific activity” (P, B, 15). Educator (P, B, 13) disagreed that children learn when they are taught by the teacher, her comment was “children learn by example and with guidance how to figure things out”. The educators who agreed that children learn by didactic exposure confirmed that “children learn by observing others, but the educator should offer help to the child, manipulate the jigsaw piece into the correct place! for example” (I, P, 10). Educator (I, P, 8) suggested that
“children need direction and guidance on tasks they may not be able to do, this can be done individually or in a group”. The educator who neither agreed or disagreed with this statement commented that “children need the educator’s guidance to learn, but it is important for children to be independent and guide their own learning” (I, P, 9).

When asked if children learn by practicing a skill as outlined in Bruner’s model of learners or the apprenticeship model and outlined in Figure 6.25 below, one of the eight Play-based preschool educators strongly agreed that children learn by practicing a skill to reach perfection, 12.5% (n=1). A further three Play-based preschool educators agreed 37.5% (n=3) that children learn through practicing a skill based on the apprenticeship model. Two of the educators, 25% (n=2) neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement and the remaining two Play-based preschool educators disagreed that children learn through practicing and repetition or an apprenticeship model. The comments by educators who agreed that children learn through practicing new skills included, “practice makes perfect” and “by learning from their mistakes they will perfect the skill”, with educator (B, P, 6) suggesting “repetition is very important for teaching new skills to a child, they will learn to complete a task by constantly repeating the task”.

![Figure 6.24: Children as apprentice learner](image)

All eight or 100% of the Play-based preschool educators strongly agreed that children learn through their experiences especially through play.
6.5.2.1 Findings from onsite semi structured interviews – Play based educators

Play-based educators, when asked about what the children in the preschool were like, were anxious to explain that the children were ‘lovely’, ‘happy’ ‘funny’ ‘little people’, and ‘little children’. The children were also described as ‘curious’ and ‘creative’. These replies give some visibility to the Play-based educators’ image of the child as a learner. The educators were further prompted and to gain a greater understanding, they were asked if the children ever surprised them. The reply to this question confirmed that the educators were somewhat surprised by the competencies of the children in the preschool. Educator (B, P, 13) explained “It’s interesting within their play the kind of things they are thinking about”. Educators seemed surprised at the “things children say, their ideas” or “their little kind of takes on the world” (I, P, 8), with educator (I, P, 9) explaining that “they have their own little minds, they are constantly thinking of something”. These findings were interesting as they were accompanied by language which portrayed a deficit image of the child as being ‘little’ or in need of care. Children were referred to as ‘our children’ or ‘I have, or we have 23 children’ which implies an ownership of the children. The link between the use of the word ‘little’ and ‘funny’ when describing the children and the implied ownership or responsibility for these children is interesting and indicates an image of the child as being needy in need of guidance and protection.

The data tools further explored educators’ beliefs or image of preschool children as learners. All of the play-based educators confirmed that children ‘learn best through play’. The importance of playfulness and having fun was highlighted as an important factor as was experiential and hands on learning. This confirms a belief by the educators that children are active learners. The interviews and questionnaires provided some conflicting data. When asked how children learn, 60% (n=5) of play-based educators agreed that children learn best when they are shown how to do the activity by the educator. Educator (B, P, 15) suggested that “children learn by example and guidance”, this was echoed by educator (I, P,7) who believes that “children
need direction and guidance” and educator (I, P, 9) confirmed that “I do believe that children learn by observing others”. The remaining 40% (n=3) of play-based educators disagreed with this statement and suggested that while “modelling can be a useful and necessary tool” (I, P, 8), that children learn through “trying and re-trying” or “exploring the materials”. Repetition was considered by 87.5% (n=7) of the play-based educators as being important as “practice makes perfect” (I, P, 9) to “gain mastery” (B, P, 13).

All the play-based educators agreed that children are thinkers, that they are competent to have their own theories, ideas and understandings. Educator (I, P, 6) expanded on how this happens; “we encourage children to talk and discuss when they are doing their free play, we also get them to direct the conversation at circle times” (I, P, 6). This approach to ‘supporting’ children’s thinking was further confirmed by educator (I, P, 9) who explained that “I tend to make children think and decide for themselves, rather than tell them what I know”. These comments confirm a commitment to providing an autonomy supportive learning environment where children have choice and have a voice. Circle time was identified as a time by two of the eight Play-based educators as a time where children could talk and discuss their ideas. The observation of practice highlighted that while educators confirmed that children learn through play and that they are ‘thinkers’, in practice children had little choice when they played as ‘free play’ was timetabled between circle time and break time or story time. In the play-based settings real play, where children had choice, wonder and delight occurred primarily when children played outdoors as educators were not trying to ‘teach’ children through play.

The eight play-based educators strongly agreed that children learn best by exploring and thinking. These educators also all strongly agreed that open ended materials are freely available to children in their preschool settings. The onsite observation in the Play-based preschools highlighted limited open-ended or natural resources were available for children to explore, manipulate or test hypotheses.
Triangulation of the data to ascertain the Play-based educator’s image of the child as a learner suggests based on the findings from the questionnaire, semi structured interview and on-site observation that the educators saw children as being ‘small’ and in need of protection and care. The educators appeared to be somewhat surprised by the competencies of the children, however as there was little evidence of critical reflection or pedagogical documentation, children’s competencies were not made visible. All the Play-based educators identified that children learn through play. As these were Play-based settings, the core elements required for learning in play; choice, wonder and delight were not evident or based on the onsite observation were limited due to timetabling and the lack of open-ended and natural materials. The Play-based educators’ image of the child as a learner based on the questionnaire, semi structured interviews and onsite observation was based on seeing the child as an imitative learner, who learns through repetitive practice, didactic exposure and modelling. The pedagogical approach appeared, based on observation, primarily adult led. While the programme in all three settings was timetabled, the levels of flexibility were different in each setting. However, ‘free play’ was timetabled in all three Play-based settings. Play-based educators espoused to believing that children learn best through play. However, based on the collated data there was an emphasis on trying to teach the children through play, as educator (I, P, 8) suggested “children don’t necessarily need to know about learning, from the learning point of view it’s up to us to do that, that’s our job”.

6.5.3 Objective 2 Findings from the Reggio Inspired Educators.

The findings from the questionnaires as identified in Figure 6.26 completed by the Reggio inspired preschool educators highlight that 50% (n=2) of Reggio inspired preschool educators disagreed that children are passive learners and learn through didactic exposure. One Reggio inspired preschool educator, 25% (n=1) neither agreed nor disagreed with the question and the remaining one educator 25% (n=1) disagreed that children learn through didactic exposure.
The Reggio inspired educators who agreed that children learn best through didactic exposure, suggested that she was “not sure I’d say learn best, but they are best supported in furthering their abilities”. The second educator commented.

“For certain things it helps to have a teacher model, for other activities it can also be just a time for children to explore, I see the role of the teacher as more of a mentor, let the child lead and explore together”. (B, R, 12)

When asked if children learn by practicing a skill as outlined in Bruner’s model of learners as the apprenticeship model and outlined in Figure 6.27 below, three of the four, 75% (n=3) Reggio inspired preschool educators agreed that children learn by practicing a skill to reach perfection. The fourth preschool educator 25% (n=1) neither agreed nor disagreed with this question. The comments of the Reggio inspired educators included, “practice should be contextual to their learning” (B, R, 16) and “there is a value to repetition for reinforcement and for trying out different variations of a particular skill” (B, R, 11).
The four Reggio inspired preschool educators strongly agreed that children learn through their experiences especially play.

6.5.3.1 Findings from onsite semi structured interviews -Reggio inspired educators:

“I don’t want to take away the joy of discovery by just saying here’s the answer”. (B, R, 11)

When asked about the children in the Reggio inspired preschools, three of the four Reggio inspired educators reflected that the questionnaire had started the self-reflection process and prepared them for the semi-structured interview. Educator (B, R, 12) explained about the children in the preschool stating, “I have been really struck by what deep thinkers this crew is, I am fascinated by how they approach materials” (B, R, 12). Educator (B, R, 16) confirmed that “they have like this toolbox of social skills and they are just so ready to just fill the room with their own ideas”. Children were described as independent, “Ready and knowing what’s going on” (B, R, 11). The educator’s fascination with the competencies of the children highlighted a high level of reflection about this question with educator (B, R, 12) explaining “I think their ability to articulate some of their thinking really amazes me”. These comments support an image of a competent child who are active thinkers and learners.

The four Reggio inspired educators confirmed that a constructivist approach, “where children learn by doing and come to particular strategies
in their own terms independently is best” (B, R, 12). The importance of believing in children’s capacity to take the lead and their intrinsic motivation and curiosity to learn was identified by the educators. The educator’s beliefs a subtheme under the theme of how children learn and their expectations of children a further theme, confirm a belief in children’s active autonomous intrinsically motivated learning which were also subthemes under the theme, how children learn. The importance of intrinsic motivation was identified by educator (B, R, 12) who suggested “When they come to something at their own pace and on their own terms by trial and error. I think you retain it so much more if you are driven by yourself as opposed to someone at you”. This was further confirmed by another educator who commented,

“while practice is good it should be relevant and contextual to the child’s interest, where the child is motivated to repeat an activity because of an intrinsic motivation to do so, not to perfect a skill” (B, R, 11).

The Reggio educators referred to children, “learning by exploring their own theories” (B, R, 16). This gave recognition to children having the capacity to have their own theories and the importance of children actively exploring and thinking. This was further reflected in the questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and onsite observations, where all of the educators agreed that discussion, dialogue and opportunities for children to hypothesise, speculate and theorise is “a big part of our curriculum/philosophy” (B, R, 17). This comment analysed under the themes image of the child and how children learn, provided further evidence of a commitment as part of the curriculum and philosophy for an autonomy supportive learning environment. Educators highlighted how these strategies were reinforced in “our explorations, small group and gathering time, reflection is very important in our classroom” (B, R, 16). Having a community feel with open dialogue is “absolutely a goal in our classroom, what are our ideas? How do they vary? How can we communicate them and make them come to life?” This open dialogue was evident in the onsite observations where children had a voice and led the emergent curriculum, supported by the educators in partnership with parents.
All the Reggio inspired educators confirmed that children learn through their experiences, with two educators referring to the multiple intelligences of children. While play has not until recently been associated with the Reggio approach, 75% of the educators (n=3) confirmed that children learn in play. There was a conversation regarding parents perceived value of play as a curricular approach in a private fee-paying preschool and the importance of naming play and giving visibility to the ‘pedagogy of play’ through pedagogical documentation. There was agreement that open ended materials should be freely available and accessible to children throughout the day. Both environments were rich in freely accessible open-ended and natural materials, and educators highlighted how open-ended materials create “much room for surprise, learning and growth as children move further beyond their play” (B, R, 11).

Triangulation of the findings suggests that the educators could articulate clearly their image of the child as a learner. The onsite observation and collated data identified that these educators recognised children as capable and competent, intrinsically motivated and curious to learn with a voice and rights, not merely needs. The pedagogical approach was based on a social constructivist model where children were part of a learning community together with the adults. The children based on observation appeared to be trusted to lead, with educators supporting the emergent curriculum while also always being one step ahead and challenging and provoking children’s thinking. The evidence suggests that relationships in the preschools were underpinned by respect and valued reciprocal learning in partnership, where both the child and the educators researched and learnt together. The educators’ image of the child as a learner in these two Reggio inspired preschools was based on the data from the questionnaires, semi structured interviews and onsite observation. The image of the child as a learner was that of the child as a ‘thinker’, where the child came to preschool with knowledge accumulated from home and the community. The data suggests and the educators articulated that the children had their own theories and hypothesis. The onsite observations confirmed that the pedagogical approach was flexible and supportive, where educators listened to children
and supported children’s emergent interests. This happened in a ‘rich’ learning environment where children had opportunities to explore and think within a system of respectful relationships. The onsite observation confirmed that children in the participating Reggio preschools experienced choice, wonder and delight in their play.

6.5.4 Objective 2: Comparisons and Contrasts across the Three Setting Types

Triangulation of the data across each of the participating setting types; Montessori, Play-based and Reggio inspired identified the educator’s image of the child as a learner.

6.5.4.1 The Image of the Child as a Learner: Montessori Preschool Educators

The Montessori preschool educators participating in this study clearly indicated that they saw children as passive objects to be moulded by demonstrating and modelling activities and skills which needed to be acquired. The fact that some children were identified as ‘more lively’ (I, M, 3) and took up the educator’s time suggests that these children were perhaps considered to be wilful and in need of correction. This was evident in the use of extrinsic motivators which were used to support positive behaviour. Controlling of the objects (children), such as the adults ‘allowing’ (I, M, 1) children to discuss their ideas during circle time, reduced spontaneity and changed the objects (children) into inanimate things, complying with the rules, accepting and never questioning authority. Children who did question were considered lively and ‘really do stick out’ (I, M, 3). The Montessori educators saw the preschool child as an apprentice learner who practiced skills and learnt by rote rather than trusting that the child could think about his or her own thinking and learning. By providing an adult-directed programme, the educators decided on the learning which would happen in the preschool, and as a result the learning by the child was conceived in the mind of the educator (Bruner, 1996).
6.5.4.2 The Image of the Child as a Learner: Play-Based Educators

The image of the child as identified through analysis of the Play-based educators data suggested that, children were objectified as ‘lovely little people’ (I, P, 6) or ‘funny’ (B, P, 14) or ‘cute’ (I, P, 8). This image of the child as cute or funny or as a little person suggested a portrayal of the child as innocent and needing protection, nurturing and guidance. This deficit but nurturing image of the child may imply that the educator had little expectations of the child as a ‘thinker’, and that the role of the educator was to nurture the innocent cute child and transfer knowledge to the child. It was evident that the Play-based educators wanted the children to have fun, be happy and to play. The language used to describe children in the questionnaire and semi structured interview may or may not be perceived as patronising towards the child where there was an assumption that children need to learn talents and skills rather than knowledge and understanding. Children it appeared from the data were seen as passive recipients of learning, where knowledge was transmitted from the more knowledgeable adult. Seeing children as objects may suggests a right or a power to do things to them, such as tell them what they need to learn and positions the educator as the more powerful and knowledgeable other. While the Play-based educators espoused that children surprised them, the Play-based educators comments, that they were surprised at ‘their little takes on the world’ (I, P, 6) or ‘they all have their own little minds and they are always thinking of something’ (I, P, 9) may be considered condescending and could suggest a belief that they (the children) are ‘wonderful little people’ (I, P, 6) with limited capacity. The above findings are based on individual data, it is anticipated that a more comprehensive picture will emerge through discussion of the collated data.

6.5.4.3 The Image of the Child as a Learner: Reggio Inspired Educators

The participating Reggio inspired educators based on the data, recognised children as active subjects of their own learning, citizens with rights to autonomy, voice, choice and active participation in their learning. The child was recognised as a ‘thinker’ who comes to preschool with funds of
knowledge from his or her life experiences. Reggio inspired educators identified the importance of reciprocal learning with children. Children were seen by the Reggio inspired educators as capable and competent, coming to preschool with their own theories. The importance of trusting children’s ability and competence was highlighted in the questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and onsite observation. There was a recognition which was evidenced in the data that children’s learning occurs through constructing, discussion, collaboration and guidance. The Reggio educators confirmed that accumulating knowledge and achieving skills is not enough; mastery, they suggested, is achieved through reflection and metacognition. The role of the educator in this instance, the Reggio inspired educators suggested, is to learn alongside the child.

6.5.5 Objective 2: Parents’ Expectations and Understandings

Parents are recognised in both jurisdictions the west of Ireland and Boston as the primary carer and educator of their children. Parents’ involvement in this study was essential as the research evidence identifies the important and crucial role of parents in their child’s early years education and care experiences (Urban et al., 2011; European Commission, 2014; Melhuish, 2015). Parents’ expectations of the preschool provision and their understandings of how young children learn were collated using a parental questionnaire. Parents also spoke informally to the researcher while onsite in the preschool settings in Ireland and during the parent information sessions. The three Boston preschool settings had a different parent helper each day and this was also a valuable opportunity to informally speak with parents. The aim of the parental questionnaire was to understand why parents send their child to preschool and to explore what their expectations were from the preschool setting in relation to the care and education of their child. The questionnaire sought to understand if preschool was considered by parents as a place where children are prepared to attend primary education. It was hoped also to gain an understanding of parents’ beliefs about how children learn.
6.5.6 Findings from Parental Questionnaire

A total of 87 parents of children attending preschools in the west of Ireland and Boston completed the parental questionnaire. The breakdown of the number of completed questionnaires are available in Table 6.26 were as follows.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Montessori</th>
<th>Play Based-Ireland</th>
<th>Play Based-Boston</th>
<th>Reggio Inspired</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6.5.6.1 Montessori Preschools

Twenty-nine parents who had children accessing a Montessori based setting completed the parental questionnaire. In response to the question, which asked the parents their reason for sending their child to preschool, twenty-seven parents completed this question using a Likert scale of one to five. As outlined in Figure 6.28 in total 40.74% (n=11) parents confirmed that they send their child to a Montessori preschool to prepare them for primary school. A total of 25.92% (n=7) of parents send their child to a Montessori setting to support their child to play with friends. A further seven parents 25.92% (n=7) confirm that they sent their child to preschool to have fun, with one parent 3.70% (n=1) sending her child to learn his colours, numbers and the alphabet and the remaining parent 3.70% (n=1) sent his child to access the free preschool year.
6.5.6.2 Play-based Settings

As outlined in Figure 6.29, a total of 39 parents, 32 parents who had a child attending a Play-based setting in the west of Ireland and seven parents who had a child attending a Play-based setting in Boston confirmed that 36% (n=14) of parents accessing Play-based settings do so to ensure that their child is ready for primary school. A further analysis of this data identified that none of the parents of children attending the Play-based preschool in Boston identified preparation for primary school as their primary reason for sending their child to preschool. A total of 28% (n=11) of parents who had a child accessing a Play-based setting confirmed that they did so as they wanted their child to have fun. In total 20.5% (n=8) of parents confirmed that they send their child to a Play-based preschool setting to play. A total of 7.69% (n=3) confirmed that they sent their child to preschool to access the universal free preschool year with the same number, 7.69% (n=3) stating that they send their child to a Play-based preschool to explore, think and learn. In total 2.56% (n=1) parents send their child to preschool to learn colours, numbers and the alphabet.
6.5.6.3 Reggio Inspired Settings

The 18 parents who had children accessing a Reggio inspired setting in Boston, highlighted that 94.44% (n=17) of them sent their child to preschool to explore, learn and think. One parent or 5.5% (n=1) advised that she sends her child to preschool to play with friends. Figure 6.30 outlines parents’ reasons for sending their child to a Reggio inspired preschool.

6.5.6.4 Preschool Educator Qualifications

When asked how important the qualifications of the preschool educator were to parents the following were the findings.
6.5.6.4.1 Parents of Children Attending Montessori Preschools

Of the 29 parents of children attending a Montessori preschool, Figure 6.31 identifies that 58.6% (n=17) of parents identified that the qualifications of the preschool educator were very important. A total of 20.68% (n=6) of parents confirmed that they believe that experience is more important than an accredited qualification. Qualifications were deemed important by 10.34% (n=3) of parents and a further 10.34% (n=3) of parents confirmed that qualifications were not at all important to them. In total 67% of parents of children attending a Montessori preschool confirmed that the level of accredited qualification of the preschool teacher was important or very important.

![Staff Qualifications Parents of Children Attending Montessori Preschools](image)

Figure 6.30: Staff Qualification requirements of parents of children attending Montessori preschool

6.5.6.4.2 Parents of Children Attending Play-based Settings

Of the 36 parents from Play-based settings who answered this question pertaining to staff qualifications 36.11% (n=13) of parents said that qualifications were very important. A further 36.11% (n=13) confirmed that the experience of the educator is more important. A total of 22.22% (n=8) parents confirmed that qualifications are important and 5.5% (n=2) identified that qualifications are not at all important. All the 13 parents who agreed that the experience of the educator was more important than qualifications came from the Irish Play-based preschools. These findings as
outlined in Figure 6.32 identify that 58% of parents of children in Play-based preschools believe that the qualification of the preschool educator is important or very important.

![Diagram showing qualification requirements of parents of children attending Play-based preschools]

Figure 6.31: Staff Qualification requirements of parents of children attending Play-based preschools

6.5.6.4.3 Parents of Children Attending a Reggio Inspired Preschool

A total of 17 parents from Reggio inspired preschools completed this question, of which 47.05% (n=8) parents stated that the educator’s qualifications were very important. A further 41.17% (n=7) of parents highlighted that educators having an accredited qualification was important to them. One parent confirmed that a qualification was not important and similarly, 5.8% (n=1) parent noted that experience is more important. In essence, 88% (n=15) of parents of children attending Reggio inspired preschools participating in this study identified that, the accredited qualification of the educator was important or very important to them as outlined in Figure 6.33.
Parents’ Understanding of How Their Child Learns

Parents were asked about their understandings of how their child learns. This question was posed to ascertain if parents believe that their child learns through a traditional adult-directed didactic approach or if parents believe that children learn through constructing their own learning in partnership with the preschool teacher.

6.5.6.5.1 Findings from Parents of Children Attending Montessori Preschools

Of the 24 parents of children identified in Figure 6.34 attending Montessori preschools who answered this question using a Likert scale, 37% (n=9) of parents identified that their child learns best when the preschool educator and the children explore and think together. A total of 25% (n=6) of parents of children attending Montessori preschools stated that their child learns best when the preschool educator teaches him/her something. When the preschool educator creates opportunity for the child to learn, 17% (n=4) of parents suggest that this is how their child learns best. A further 13% (n=3) of parents identified that their child learns best when learning is done in isolation and the time is given to work things out. Of the 24 parents of
children attending Montessori preschool, 8% (n=2) of parents confirmed that their child learns while playing with other children.

Figure 6.33: How children learn; parents of children attending Montessori preschool

6.5.6.5.2 Findings from Parents of Children Attending Play-Based Settings

Figure 6.35 below identifies that of the 39 parents of children attending Play-based settings, in total 49% (n=19) parents confirmed that they believe that children learn when they explore and think together with the educator. 28.20% (n=11) of parents confirmed that they believe that their child learns best when the educator creates opportunities for their child to learn. The number of parents who believe that their child learns by playing with friends was 10.25% (n=4). Equally, four parents, or 10.25% (n=4), stated that their child learns when the teacher teaches him/her something. One response 2.56% (n=1) confirmed that the child learns best alone when given time to work things out. The finding that only 10.25% (n=4) of parents whose children were attending a play-based preschool believed that their child learns best by playing with friends is significant. This is significant when considering that in Ireland the curriculum framework *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009) is a play-based curriculum. A condition of funding, for the ECCE scheme in Ireland is that

![Chart: How Children Learn Parents of Children Attending Playbased Preschool]

**Figure 6.34: How children learn, parents of children attending play-based settings**

6.5.6.5.3 Findings from Parents of Children Attending Reggio Inspired Preschools

Figure 6.36 outlines that of the 16 parents of children attending a Reggio inspired setting, 50% (n=8) confirmed that they believe that their child learns best when the preschool educator and the children explore and think together. A total of 18.75% (n=3) believe that children learn best when the teacher teaches them something. Parents who believe children learn best when learning alone accounted for 12.5% (n=2) of the answers. This was similar to the 12.5% (n=2) of parents who confirmed a belief that children learn best when the educator provides opportunities to learn. Only one parent, 6.25% (n =1), confirmed a belief that children learn while playing with friends.
How children learn, parents of children attending Reggio inspired settings

Parents in the three preschool setting types were asked when they last discussed their child’s learning with the preschool educator. Findings outlined in Figure 6.37 from twenty-eight parents of children attending Montessori preschool settings who answered this question, highlight that 23% (n=6) parents discussed their child’s learning with the preschool educator within the previous week. In the previous month, 27% (n=7) parents discussed their child’s learning with the preschool educator. The number of parents who discussed their child’s learning with the educator in Montessori preschools within the previous three to six months was 35% (n=9) parents and 15% (n=4) parents stated that they discuss their child’s learning yearly at the parent teacher meeting. The remaining two parents commented, one parent commented that this question was not applicable while another parent stated, “I haven’t, I missed the scheduled appointment, we were to reschedule but it never happened” (Parent, Montessori preschool).
Of the 34 parents who completed this question, who had a child attending a preschool Play-based setting in the west of Ireland or in Boston, the follow findings were noted. There was no significant difference between the findings in relation to this question from the Irish and Boston questionnaires, three parents did not complete this question. Figure 6.38 confirms that in total 32% (n=11) parents confirmed that they discussed their child’s learning with the preschool educator on the previous week. In the previous month, 18% (n=6) parents had a discussion with the educator about their child’s learning. The number of parents who spoke to the preschool educator within the previous three to six months was 41% (n=14) and 9% (n=3) parents stated that they discuss their child’s learning with the educator yearly at the parent / teacher meeting.
Findings from seventeen parents of children attending Reggio inspired preschool settings as identified in Figure 6.39 highlight that 41% (n=7) parents discussed their child’s learning with the preschool educator within the previous week. In the previous month 53% (n=9) parents discussed their child’s learning with the preschool educator and 6% (n=1) one parent discussed their child’s learning with the educator in a Reggio inspired preschool within the previous three to six months.

6.5.6.5.4 What do the findings from the parental questionnaires tell us?

When asked why parents send their child to preschool the findings in the Play-based settings, two in the west of Ireland and one in Boston identified
that 36% (n=14) parents confirmed that they send their child to preschool to prepare them for primary school. The 14 parents who made this response were all parents of children in Irish Play-based preschools. In total, 40.74% (n=11) parents of children attending Montessori preschools confirmed that they did so to prepare their child for primary school. In contrast, no parent from the Boston cohort identified preparation for primary school as a reason for their child attending a preschool setting. Priority for 94.44% (n=17) of Boston parents of children attending Reggio inspired settings was to enable their child to explore, think and learn with one parent confirming 5.5% (n=1) that she sends her child to preschool to play with friends.

In the Play-based settings, 20.5% (n=8) of parents confirmed that they send their child to preschool to play. The data confirmed that 25.92% (n=7) of parents who send their child to a Montessori preschool do so in order that their child can play with friends. In contrast only one parent 5.5% (n=1) of a child in a Reggio inspired preschool identified that she sends her child to preschool to play.

Findings in relation to how important it is that the preschool educator has an accredited qualification confirmed, by parents who had a child accessing a Play-based preschool, identified that 58% (n=21) of parents’ believed that staff qualifications were important or very important. Similarly, the total number of parents who had a child attending a Montessori school who believed that accredited qualifications were important or very important was 66.93%. Of the parents from Reggio inspired preschools, 88% (n=15) confirmed that the qualifications of the educator were important or very important to them.

In relation to how parents believe their child learns, the findings from the parents of children attending Montessori preschools identifies that 37% (n=9) parents confirmed that they believe their child learns when the educator and children explore and think together. These parents also confirm that, 25% (n=6) of parents whose child attended a Montessori preschool believed that their child learns best when the educator teaches their child something. Play-based settings highlighted that 49% (n=19)
parents of children attending Play-based settings believe that their child learns best when the educator and child explores and thinks together. In total 28% (n=11) of parents believe that children learn best when the educator creates opportunities for children to learn. Only 10% (n=4) of parents whose child attended a Play-based preschool confirmed that they believed that their child learns while playing with friends. The findings from the parents of the children attending Reggio inspired preschools who completed this question identify that 50% (n=8) confirmed that they believe that their child learns best when the child and the educator explore and think together.

The findings suggest that the parents who sent their child to a Montessori preschool participating in this study, 40.74% (n=11) want their child to be prepared to attend primary school. Of the parents who sent their child to a Play-based setting 36% (n=14) parents all with children attending an Irish Play-based preschool want their child to be prepared to attend primary school. None, of the parents of children attending the Boston Play-based preschool identified school readiness as an important or very important factor in their decision making. In total 99.44% (n=17) of parents of children attending a Reggio inspired preschool confirmed that they send their child to Reggio inspired preschools to explore, think and learn. In the Montessori 59% (17) parents confirmed that accredited qualifications were very important to them. In the Play based preschools 36% (n=13) parents confirmed that educator qualifications were very important to them. Equally 36% (n=13) parents confirmed that the educators’ experience was more important than their qualifications. In Reggio inspired preschools 47% (n=13) parents confirmed that the educator’s qualifications were very important.

When asked about how they believed their child learns, 37% (n=9) of parents in the Montessori preschools confirmed that they believed that their child learns when the child and the preschool educator explore and think together. In total 49% (n=19) of parents in Play-based settings confirmed that their child learns best when the child and the educator explores, thinks and learns together. The findings were similar in the Reggio inspired
settings where 50% of parents confirmed that they believe that their child learns through exploring and thinking with the educator.

The parents who completed the question to ascertain the frequency of parents discussion with the preschool educator in relation to their child’s learning, identified, that the highest level of engagement in the Montessori settings was 35% (n=9) of parents who had discussed their child’s learning in the previous three to six months. Parents who answered this question with children attending Play-based preschools confirmed that the highest percentage of parents 41% (n=14) discussed their child’s learning in the previous three to six months. The highest percentage of 53% (n=9) of parents of children in Reggio inspired settings confirmed that they had spoken to the preschool educator about their child’s learning in the previous month.

6.6 Objective 3 – Comparing children's level of wellbeing and involvement as a result of the quality of the relationships and the active learning environment in settings offering different pedagogical approaches, (Montessori, Play-based, Reggio inspired).

The observation tool, Assessing for Learning and Development in the Early Years using observation scales: Reflect Respect Relate (State of South Australia, Department of Education and Children’s Services, 2008) was used during the onsite observation. The tool was used to gain an understanding of the quality of both the educator/child relationships and the pedagogical approach, and to consider how these impact on preschool children’s levels of wellbeing and involvement. In essence, the tool was used to understand how the pedagogical approach impacts on young children’s wellbeing and their levels of involvement in their learning and meaning making processes. In each of the seven settings, a minimum of four children were randomly selected prior to the first onsite visit. Children selected were from the group of children who had parental consent to participate in the study. When selecting children to be observed for the study, cognisance was given to the age, sex and whether this was the child’s first or second year in the preschool setting. Score sheets were printed for six children in each setting as a back-up in case the selected participants
were not present on the day. Appendix W provides an example of a scored scale sheet across each of the observed indicators, Relationships, Active Learning Environment, Wellbeing and Involvement.

Reflect Respect Relate, Figure 6.40, identifies that the highest levels of learning and wellbeing occur when children receive high quality care and teaching. Quality care and teaching are dependent on the quality of the educator/child relationships and the pedagogical practice. When these two elements are of a high quality, children will experience high levels of wellbeing and will have high levels of involvement or engagement in their learning. Children will be intrinsically motivated, curious and driven to learn. This level of quality will only occur when reflective practitioners have clear teaching and learning objectives (State of South Australia, Department of Education and Children’s Services, 2008).

Figure 6.39: Reflect Respect Relate (State of South Australia, Department of Education and Children’s Services, 2008, p.15)

In order to measure the quality of the pedagogical practice (relationships and the active learning environment) and the outcomes associated with the quality of the pedagogical practice, children’s levels of wellbeing and
involvement observations were recorded. A minimum of four children in each preschool setting were observed using the Reflect Respect Relate Observation Tool to measure the quality of the relationships, the active learning environment and children’s levels of wellbeing and involvement. The findings are presented using a case study based on one of the observations across the four indicators: relationships, active learning environment, wellbeing and involvement in each of the settings. Following the case study an explanation of how the observation was scored is presented. The mean score for the setting is then provided based on the collation of the scores for each of the five observations across the four indicators: relationships, the active learning environment, wellbeing and involvement. The overall score for the setting is provided. This is then compared to the lowest score indicative of a supportive environment. The process for undertaking the observations is outlined below in Figure 6.41.
6.6.1 Findings from Onsite Observations in Play-Based Settings

6.6.1.1 The Green Playschool, Ireland – Observation Findings

Four preschool children were observed over a five-day period in the Green playschool to measure the quality of the active learning environment and the level of children’s wellbeing and involvement. Findings from the observations in the Green playschool Ireland are outlined in Figure 6.42. Two educators were observed to measure the quality of the active learning environment. The preschool was based in a rural location which had a large migrant population. The following is an example of one observation conducted in the Green Playschool using the Reflect Respect Relate Observation Tool (State of South Australia Department of Education and Children’s Services, 2008).

6.6.1.1.1 Case Study: The Green Playschool

The children in the Green playschool were all playing in different areas of the room, they had choice where they played and who they wished to play with. Cian and Colm had taken a box of toy cars and were playing together, side by side. Cian was driving a small car across the window ledge. He was
concentrating on the motion of the car. “This is a sports car” he exclaimed to himself. Colm was standing beside him watching the activity. When the car reached the end of the window ledge or ‘track’ Cian began to aimlessly push the other cars in the box. The cars were pushed along the window ledge by Cian one after the next until they fell off the window ledge and crashed to the ground. The educator who was constantly vigilant went over to the two boys and asked them to tell her about their game. Cian explained that he was racing cars, the educator asked Cian where people usually race cars and Cian advised that people race cars on a track. The educator asked the children if they would like to have a track to race their cars on. Cian thought this was a brilliant idea, “That’s amazing! We will build a track for our cars”. The boys collected blocks and boxes, anything they could find, they built a track. Not satisfied with a straight track the boys put curves on the track and bridges. There were hills and towers added to the track. Both boys were provided with the time and space to play. When it was time to go outside the boys left their track and returned later to put it away.

6.6.1.1.2 Scoring this Observation

The educator in this playschool was physically and emotionally available to Cian, she observed his cues and reacted. Displaying a level of interest in the child’s activity the educator extended and empowered the boys to think and further explore their curiosities about cars and car racing. The educator provoked the boys to think about where their imagination could take them without directing or hijacking the children’s play. The score for relationships for this observation was four.

The learning environment provided choice and different activities for children. Children’s autonomy and participation was respected, and the educator responded and extended children’s initiatives and ideas. During this play activity children were encouraged to discuss their ideas and their play was extended by the presence of a facilitating and supportive educator. The score for the active learning environment for this observation was five.
Cian’s level of wellbeing was recorded as five for this observation, he was full of vitality and spontaneity. Cian enjoyed playing with his friend and was enthusiastic about his game.

Initially, Cian’s level of involvement in his play was low, at a rate of two; his actions were aimless. When the educator introduced or made the provocation of building a track, Cian was challenged to consider how the two boys could do this. This resulted in cooperative and constructive play where both boys became highly engaged in trying to figure out how to make the best racetrack. The facilitation of the educator to extend the boys’ play in this observation led to high levels of involvement and meaning making. The boys had autonomy, their competence was recognised and how delighted they were when they drove the race cars over bridges and into tunnels.

6.6.1.1.3 The Mean Score for the Green Playschool

Four children were observed in this setting, two boys and two girls, and two educators were observed to calculate the quality of the active learning environment. In the Green playschool, based on the four individual mean scores, the mean score for relationships was 3.4 (Figure 6.42). The acceptable minimum mean score for relationships based on the scale is 2.5. Relationships were positive and responsive with information from children’s families being used. Verbal and non-verbal ques were reacted to sensitively and respectfully.

When observing the active learning environment, two educators were observed. The mean score for this setting was 3.7. A mean score of 3 is the lowest acceptable score for a supportive learning environment. Educator one scored 3.5 and Educator two scored 3.8. Both educators were responsive, and had very positive interactions; they extended children’s language, and offered provocations. Educator one, who was the lead educator, was responsible for the technical and organisational role. This resulted at times in the environment being adult-directed, and children being scheduled to engage in a number of whole group activities.
Children’s mean level of wellbeing was recorded as 3.8, with 3.5 being the lowest acceptable level for wellbeing. Children in this setting felt secure, they enjoyed their activities and were active.

Four individual mean scores were recorded and a mean score for involvement in this setting was recorded as 3.2, with the lowest acceptable score indicating a supportive environment being 3.32. There were four children observed in this setting. Three of the children’s scores were between, 3.3 to 3.6 for involvement, as there were many examples of children being involved in their meaning making in the setting. The fourth child, who was new to the setting and English, was not her first language, scored 2.3 for involvement. While this girl had an involvement level of four for one observation, most of the time she wandered aimlessly around the room or followed two boys who were of the same nationality. As a result, the mean score for involvement for this setting is below the lowest acceptable to indicate a supportive environment. The findings of the case study observation suggest that children have higher levels of involvement when they are supported to co-construct meaning, when the learning is meaningful, and the child is intrinsically motivated and curious to learn.
5.6.1.2 The Yellow Playschool, Ireland – Observation Findings

Five preschool children were observed over a five-day period in the Yellow playschool to measure the quality of the active learning environment and the level of children’s wellbeing and involvement. The findings are presented in Figure 6.43. Three educators were observed to measure the quality of the active learning environment. Six five-minute observations were conducted on each of the five children to measure the active learning environment. Six two-minute observations on each child were conducted to measure involvement. The mean score for the setting was divided by three, the number of educators. The mean score for each child and each adult was calculated by dividing the collated total scores of the six observations by six to ascertain the mean score for each of the variables. The mean score for each child was added together and divided by the number of children observed in the setting to establish the mean score for the setting. The Yellow play-based playschool is privately managed and based on the grounds of a primary school. The following is an example of one observation conducted in the Yellow Playschool using the Reflect Respect Relate Observation Tool (State of South Australia Department of Education and Children’s Services, 2008).
6.6.1.2.1 Case Study: The Yellow Playschool

The children in the Yellow playschool had just finished tidying up. There was lots of singing and the educators were highlighting that “Tanya is already tidying up” and Tony was “doing great help”. The educator called the children over to an area of the room as he wanted to show the children something from the history corner. The children sat in a circle and Tim, the focus of this observation, sat quietly in the circle with his friends. As singing, music and rhyme was intrinsic to all activities in this playschool, the educator sang a rhyme, “La la la, I would like to introduce you to the concept of raising your hand”. Teresa put her hand up and put her finger on her lips and the educator invited her to share her story about a picture in the history corner. The educator asked the children to recall what happened in the picture. “Did we do something with leaves that day?” asked the educator, “yes” said Tony, as he reminded everyone that the picture was taken on the day that they had the great leaf race. Then the educator asked the children, “Did the wind blow any children away that day?”, “Oh, no” said Tina, “we are all too heavy”. Tara had her hand up and her fingers on her lips as she waited her turn to speak. The educator recognised this and said, “Yes Tara, your hand has been up for ages and you have been very patient”. Tim sat quietly in the group; he did not raise his hand or put his finger on his lips. The educator held up another picture. This picture was of Tim and the educator advised that this picture was taken of Tim some time ago, so it was history. The educator asked Tim what age he was and who had taken the picture. Tim did not respond, and the educator explained that it looked like he was two years old and based on the fact that dad was in the picture it was probably mum who took the picture. Tim blushed and the delight of being identified in the group was evident as he smiled. The educator confirmed to Tim, “Isn’t that a lovely happy memory to have, Tim”.

6.6.1.2.2 Scoring this Observation

When considering this observation under the relationship signals, it was evident that the educator was responsive to the child bringing information
from the family and culture into the conversation. Tim was a quiet child and did not put himself forward in the group and the educator gave visibility to Tim in a very respectful way. The interactions in the play group were very ‘playful’ active and lively. While the verbal exchange was respectful the educator did not encourage this to be a two-way conversation. The educator asked Tim about the photo; however, the educator explained the photo to the other children rather than taking the time to listen to what Tim had to say about the photo. The score for relationships for this observation was 3.5 as the interaction, while supportive, was not a reciprocal interaction, it was adult led.

The active learning environment based on this observation identified that this was a whole group activity. There was an underpinning learning outcome to teach children how to wait and take their turn in a group and to teach children about ‘history’. The educator and children constructed meaning together as the children remembered; however, the questions asked by the educator were closed and did not challenge children’s thinking. The children were passive with information being transmitted to them. Children’s initiatives, such as ‘we are all too heavy’, were not followed up. The active learning environment score for this observation was three, with the comment that learning was superficial and adult directed. This was reflected in Tim’s level of involvement, which was scored at a two. There was no energy, concentration or meaning making in this activity for Tim. This observation highlighted that while Tim seemed quiet in the group, he showed pleasure in the sharing of his photo and history. He physically exhibited delight, through his smile, but also the way he sat up in his seat, when the educator showed his photo to the class. Tim was happy and proud to share the joy. The wellbeing score for this observation was four.

6.6.1.2.3 The Mean Score for Yellow Playschool

Based on a combination of the observations and a mean score calculated for the Yellow Playschool as outlined in Figure 6.43, under the relationship scale the mean score for the setting was 3.5. The acceptable minimum mean score for relationships based on the scale is 2.5. There were three educators
working in this setting. The relationships between the educators and the children were very playful; there was lots of signing and laughter. The children had both physical and emotional access to the educators; interactions were positive and consistent. Children were consistently being referred to as being ‘little people’, ‘squeegees’, which was all done in a protective, caring way, but placed the power relationship with the adult.

The indicators observed for the active learning environment included how the educator creates an environment, co-constructs meaning with the children and reflects and plans. In this setting, three educators were observed. The mean score for this setting was 3.1. A mean score of 3 is the lowest acceptable score for a supportive learning environment. Educator one scored 2.3, this educator’s role in creating the learning environment was nurturing and functional, helping with coats, having “the crack” with the children. Educator two scored 4 this educator worked as a special need’s assistant. This educator was totally attuned to the child and facilitated and scaffolded learning. Educator 3 scored 3.1; there were lovely interactions with this educator who was present and attuned to the children.

The mean score for children’s level of wellbeing in the Yellow playschool was 4.0, with 3.5 being the lowest acceptable level for wellbeing. There was a lot of singing and opportunities for expression through performing arts; children had a lot of fun.

A mean score for involvement in this setting was recorded as 2.3, with the lowest acceptable score indicating a supportive environment being 3.5. This score is based on, the fact that materials were all plastic; there were no natural or real-life materials in the setting. Children were not challenged to explore and think. The educators were engaged in children’s play, guiding and leading. The daily routine was followed, which resulted in children not having time to engage in deep level thinking. The materials and equipment in the environment were all plastic and did not lend themselves to provoke children’s curiosity. Educator (I, P, 8), working in the Yellow preschool, strongly disagreed when answering the questionnaire that the role of the educator is to prepare children for primary school. However, in practice,
this educator was trying to develop “the concept of putting your hand up” (I, P, 8) to help prepare the children for primary school as confirmed in conversation. The level of involvement in this playschool was low as a direct result of the direct teaching approach of the educators. While this was a Play-based setting, children’s play was guided by the educators and the lack of space, (not physical space) and time where children could explore and think alone or with friends was diminished because of the high level of educator engagement and large group activities.

![Observation Scores Yellow Playschool](image)

Figure 6.42: Mean Observation Scores Yellow Playschool

6.6.1.3 The Indigo Playschool, Boston – Observation Findings

Four preschool children were observed over a five-day period in the Indigo Playschool to measure the quality of the active learning environment and the level of children’s wellbeing and involvement. The findings of the onsite observations are presented in Figure 6.44. Three educators were observed to measure the quality of the active learning environment. The Indigo playschool is a privately managed fee-paying preschool in Boston. The following is an example of one observation conducted in the Indigo Playschool using the Reflect Respect Relate Observation Tool (State of South Australia Department of Education and Children’s Services, 2008).
6.6.1.3.1 Case Study: The Indigo Play-based Preschool, Boston

The children in the Indigo Play-based preschool were doing a group activity on ‘food meditation’. There were sixteen children in the group. The children sat on chairs and on cushions in a circle around the educator. PJ stretched across the floor as he waited for the lesson on ‘food meditation’ to begin. This activity required children to sit up and follow the instructions, so PJ was advised by the educator to “go to the cosy corner if you are going to lie down”. The educator took her seat in the circle and she was holding a small plastic bag which contained Cheerio’s dry breakfast cereal. The educator advised the children, that if they wished to take part in today’s food meditation, they needed to sit with their two hands together. The educator walked around the circle and advised the children to take one Cheerio each from the bag. The children were advised by the educator, not to do anything with the Cheerio as they needed to “wait for us; we will do it all together”.

As the children sat in the circle the educator advised them that she wanted them to hold the Cheerio, look at and notice the Cheerio. The educator then enquired, “What do you see?” and the children replied, “a circle” “a triangle”. The educator asked the children to squeeze the Cheerio and then asked the group if the Cheerio was hard or soft. The children were then instructed to listen to the Cheerio and to smell the Cheerio. When asked what it smelt like, Shirif said it smelt like Cheerios. Following this, the children were advised to touch the Cheerio to their lips and then to touch the Cheerio to their teeth. The educator demonstrated this activity as she directed the children. The children were directed to place the Cheerio on his or her tongue and roll it around. The educator then asked that children what the Cheerio felt like against the children’s teeth. The children were instructed by the educator to take a bite, “I did.” exclaimed PJ who had bitten and swallowed the Cheerio shortly after he put it in his mouth.

6.6.1.3.2 Scoring this Observation

When scoring for relationships based on this observation, the score recorded was 1. This was a whole group activity where children were directed by the
adult to meditate on the properties of a Cheerio. The global indicator identified that the relationships in this observation was totally non-supportive. The interactions were restrictive and dominated by the educator.

The learning environment for this observation did not empower children to be curious and was not challenging for the children. The learning activity had little relevance or meaning for the children. The score recorded for the active learning environment based on this observation was 1. PJ’s level of involvement was scored at 1. This signifies that there was no activity occurring and that PJ was absent minded with no interest in taking part in this activity. A score of 2 which signifies, ‘mainly non-supportive’ was recorded for wellbeing.

6.6.1.3.3 The Mean Score for the Indigo Playschool

In the Indigo play-based setting as a result of collating the four indicator scores, the mean score for relationships in this setting was 2.6. The acceptable minimum mean score for relationships based on the scale is 2.5. The three staff were nurturing and warm and they engaged in discussion with children. However, they were busy with the routine of the day where the timetable was planned, there was little flexibility and there were several large group activities which all children had to engage in.

A mean score of 3 is the lowest acceptable score for a supportive learning environment. The mean score for the preschool was 2.9. The playroom was an enclosed space with natural light coming from windows at ceiling level. The educators in this playschool confirm that they decide on one topic per year based on their knowledge of children’s interests. The current annual theme was based on medicine, hospitals, doctors and looking after the sick which was developed and expanded. Materials in the preschool room primarily supported the theme of hospital and children played medical related games. There were some opportunities for children to play in other areas such as the construction area, but this was timetabled. Children started their day in the outdoors where they were received by the educators and following this, they were timetabled to access the indoor classroom.
The children were taken out in groups into the hall for their science and art lesson. Learning was compartmentalised rather than holistic. There were some very positive one-to-one interactions observed throughout the observation period.

Four individual mean scores were recorded to obtain the wellbeing level. The mean score for wellbeing in the setting was calculated at 2.6, with 3.5 being the lowest acceptable level for wellbeing. Children’s level of wellbeing was compromised due to the didactic approach to teaching in this play-based setting. There was a clear distinction between play and work time, with work time being considered where children were taught a lesson, such as letter recognition. Letter recognition entailed all the children being seated in a circle. The educator then proceeded to ask the children to recognise letters from the alphabet which she held up for the group. There were many behavioural issues as the children did not want or choose to engage in this activity. The score recorded for involvement was 2.6, with the lowest acceptable score indicating a supportive environment being 3.5. There were a number of times when children became involved in their play but were advised to ‘tidy up’ as another timetabled activity was about to start.

![Observation Scores Indigo Playschool](image)

**Figure 6.43: Mean Observation Scores Indigo Play-based Preschool**
Figure 6.45 presents the mean scores for the three play-based settings: The Green and Yellow Play-based settings in the west of Ireland and the Indigo Play-based setting in Boston. The calculation of scores are presented, with the first column providing the scores for the Green play school across the four variables, relationships and the active learning environment as quality indicators and wellbeing and involvement as quality outputs. Column two reflects the scores for the Yellow playschool and column three reflects the scores for the Indigo Playschool.
Figure 6.44: The mean scores for the three play-based settings

6.6.2 Findings from Onsite Observations in Montessori Preschools

The Red Montessori Preschool, Ireland – Observation Findings

Four preschool children were observed over a five-day period in the Red Montessori preschool. The findings are presented in Figure 6.46. Two educators were observed to measure the quality of the active learning environment. The Red Montessori preschool was privately managed and based in an urban housing estate in Ireland. The following is an example of
one observation conducted in the Red Montessori preschool, using the *Reflect Respect Relate Observation Tool* (State of South Australia Department of Education and Children’s Services, 2008).

6.6.2.1 Case Study: The Red Montessori Preschool, Ireland

It was circle time in the Red Montessori preschool. The sixteen children present were seated in a circle for morning circle time. The educator reminded the children about their discussions yesterday and asked them what planet they live on. The children replied in unison that they live on planet earth. The educator then asked the children what is so special about planet earth and the children were delighted to tell her that there is “air” on earth. The educator continued and asked the children what is different in space and they explained again as a group that there is no air in space. The educator then confirmed that the children were right, that there is no “oxygen” in space. The educator then dropped her pen and asked the children if there is something else that we know about earth and the children shout “gravity”. The educator asked the children, “If I was on the moon and I dropped my watch, what would happen?” Some of the children jumped up out of their seats and started moving, “we’re floating”, “No! No, stop floating” advised the educator as she directed the children to sit back down in their seats.

The educator then advised the group of children about the plan for the day. The plan for the day involved, “Today we are going to make spaceships- wow! And moon rocks and we are going to paint them”. The children started dancing and jumping off their seats, “ok, back on your seats” advised the educator. Timmy, who was full of energy continued to dance around his seat. The educator advised Timmy that he was not listening and “you won’t be able to do what we are going to do next”. The educator explained that the next thing they were going to do was, they were going to fly to space and collect moon rocks at the end of the session. Timmy’s imagination was rocketing to the moon as he joyfully started to tell his friend about his plans for the space journey. However, Timmy was forgetting something, “you are forgetting Timmy, what do we not forget to do at circle time? You are
forgetting to put your hand up and do not shout in front of our friends”. Timmy is isolated in the presence of his friends; he had ‘misbehaved’ because he was active, energetic and curious. Timmy was advised by the educator, “the best way to let your friends hear you, you need to put up your hand”.

6.6.2.2 Scoring this Observation

When considering the responsiveness of the educator in this observation, Timmy was not listened to; his verbal and nonverbal cues and social signals were ignored. Interactions between Timmy and the educator were not positive or respectful, they were didactic and controlling. The child’s lead was not followed. The educator’s communication was controlling; Timmy was told by the educator what not to do rather than what he could do. The expectations of these children were unrealistic. These four-year-old children were expected to sit in a circle for approximately twenty minutes being told what they were going to do next. There was no choice, no autonomy, and no recognition of the children’s competence. Timmy was identified to the other children as a troublemaker because he did not comply and passively sit on his seat and recite answers which were learnt by rote.

The score for relationships based on this observation was 2. The active learning environment did little to support Timmy’s curiosity. The theme of space was identified by the educator and while Timmy tried to have his ideas and voice heard, the didactic approach had a controlling effect on Timmy’s intrinsic motivation and imagination. The score for the active learning environment based on this observation was 1. Timmy’s level of wellbeing recorded during this observation considering his happiness and satisfaction level, his social functioning and dispositions was given a global score of 4, which is high. This score reflected Timmy’s level of confidence, resilience and self-esteem, attributes and knowledge which Timmy brought with him to preschool from his home and cultural context. Scoring for Timmy’s level of involvement was low, at 1. Timmy was not involved in any activity. When he did demonstrate an active interest, he was advised to sit in his seat.
6.6.2.3 The Mean Score for the Red Montessori Preschool

Based on a combination of the observations and a mean score calculated for the Red Montessori, under the relationship scale the mean score for the setting was 2.8. The acceptable minimum mean score for relationships based on the scale is 2.5. Both educators were available to children; however, the level of support from both educators was different. Relationships were recorded as ranging from being technical or functional to being sensitive and reciprocal during the onsite observations. Under the active environment scale there were two educators observed in this setting. Educator one had a mean score of 1 while educator two had a mean score of 4, this resulted in the setting gaining a mean score for this setting of 2.5 for the active learning environment. The lowest acceptable score indicating a supportive environment is 3. The different approaches by the two educators are evidenced in their mean scores. Educator one was didactic, authoritative, and believed that her role is to keep children safe (I, M, 1). The pedagogical approach was adult led. Information was transferred to children in one direction. Educator two in the preschool offered a different dynamic. Educator two encouraged children’s autonomy, offered choice and was warm and responsive, supporting children’s decision making and creative expression.

Four individual mean scores were recorded and the mean score for the setting was calculated as 3.3, with 3.5 being the lowest acceptable level for wellbeing. This score was as a direct result of children not having choice in their activities. Activities were primarily adult-led and directed large group activities, which did not challenge children’s thinking. Children were managed to comply to use their ‘inside voice’ and to ‘sit with feet on the floor’. There was strict timetabling.

The involvement scale which measures nine signals of involvement was used to measure the level of children’s involvement. Four individual mean scores were recorded and a mean score for this setting was recorded as 2.4, with the lowest acceptable score indicating a supportive environment being 3.5. This score was a direct result of all activities being adult led; children
did not have choice or autonomy and the activities did not challenge the children.

![Observation Scores Red Montessori](image_url)

**Figure 6.45: Mean Observation Scores Red Montessori**

### 6.6.2.4 The Orange Montessori Preschool, Ireland – Observation Findings

Four preschool children were observed over a five-day period in the Orange Montessori preschool and three educators were observed to measure the quality of the active learning environment. The findings for the onsite observations are presented in Figure 6.47 the Orange Montessori preschool is privately managed and based on the grounds of a primary school in Ireland. The following is an example of one observation conducted in the Orange Montessori preschool, using the Reflect Respect Relate Observation Tool (State of South Australia Department of Education and Children’s Services, 2008).

### 6.6.2.5 Case Study: The Orange Montessori Preschool, Ireland

It was mid-morning in the Orange Montessori preschool. There were eighteen children and two educators present on the day. The educator complimented the children that they were all very good because they had stayed in their groups and asked the children to line up at the green table. There was a hum in the room as the children returned from their breakout groups. The children had all been assigned by the educator to different breakout groups within the room, such as the small world area, or the
construction area or the home corner and were now going to line up at the green table. The educator exclaimed that the children needed to do this quietly as “when you are really loud, then I’m really loud”. When the children were all standing in the line the educator advised the child at the top of the line to go and wash her hands. Hand washing was a regular pre-lunch routine, all of the children washed their hands daily before having lunch. Triona decided that she would go to wash her hands next, but as she was not the next child in line she was advised by the educator, “Triona, it is not your turn, you are next in line”. The educator took Triona by the hand and returned her to the line.

Triona on returning from washing her hands she picked up her lunch box and searched for a table to have her lunch. Two of Triona’s friends were sitting at a table eating their lunch. As there were only two chairs at the table, Triona picked up a chair and brought her chair to her friends table. The educator advised Triona that she had a place for her at the larger table, but Triona objected saying “I don’t want to sit there; I want to sit here with these girls”. The educator then directed Triona to take her lunch box and have her lunch at the big table as she was told to do. “No, no, no!!” shouted Triona as she picked up her chair and threw it on the ground, crying with frustration. Triona clenched her hands on either side of her body and exclaimed “I am trying to be good, but it’s so hard!! The educator who was also exhibiting signs of frustration retorted; “you might get away with that kind of behaviour at home, but you won’t get away with it in Montessori”. Triona went to the back of the room and sat on a chair. When she was ready, Triona returned and sat at the big table and ate her lunch.

Of note was that the following day, Triona sat with her two friends at the same small table for lunch and there was no problem. This may be because the following day the lead educator was in the setting and as such, levels of responsibility and stress may have been reduced. The controlling approach of the adult resulted in Triona complying in the first instance by being returned to the line. When Triona actively objected it was confirmed to her that this was not acceptable behaviour. There was no opportunity for discussion or even reasoning for the educator’s decision to refuse to ‘allow’
Triona choice in where she sat for lunch. This resulted in Triona passively and powerlessly complying with the direction of the educator.

6.6.2.5.1 Scoring this Observation

When scoring this observation, the indicator observation identified that the relationship with the educator during this observation was totally non-supportive. The relationship was negative, restrictive and controlling. Triona’s need to be listened to and for comfort were rejected. As a result, the score for relationships based on this observation was 1. This correlated with Trion’s score for wellbeing, which was also scored at a 1. Triona was unhappy, crying and totally frustrated and overwhelmed. The score for involvement was a 2 for this observation. While Triona wanted to actively engage, the learning environment did not support and curtailed any engagement, resulting in Triona passively accepting the educator’s direction.

When scoring the active learning environment, three educators in this setting were observed. The educator referred to in this observation maintained a directive pedagogy. Children were advised to draw ‘only on the black board’. Children were taught by rote, they were asked, ‘What month is it?’, and ‘What month had we last month?’ Children were also invited to tell the teacher the month ‘as Gaeilge’. Children were invited to “let’s put our eyes on, what kind of sky is it”? When Tom stood up and put up his hand he was told “sit down, Tom.” Children were asked “what’s it like in summer?” The children answered as a group, “hot” or when asked “what happens in spring?” and again they answered as a group in unison “flowers start to grow”. Children were told by this educator that “we have to behave properly in Montessori”. This observation reflected the educator’s espoused image of the child as being ‘lively’ and “the lively ones really stick out, because they might take up a bit more of your time” (I, M, 3). The scoring of the learning environment based on this observation was marked at a 1, which indicates that the active learning environment based on this observation was totally non-supportive.
6.6.2.5.2 The Mean Score for the Orange Montessori Preschool

Based on a combination of the observations and a mean score calculated for the Orange Montessori, under the relationship scale, the mean score for the setting was 2.5. The acceptable minimum mean score for relationships based on the scale is 2.5. There were three educators working in this setting. While primarily the pedagogical approach was didactic, there were many positive interactions where the educators were responsive, and children had physical and emotional access to the educators. The pedagogical approach of the educators was at times playful and children did receive warmth and affection.

In this setting, using the active learning environment scale, three educators were observed. Educator one scored 1, educator 2 scored 2.6, educator 3 scored 3.2. The mean score for this setting was 2.3. A mean score of 3 is the lowest acceptable score for a supportive learning environment.

Four individual mean scores were recorded for the quality of children’s wellbeing in the Orange Montessori preschool setting. The mean score for the setting was calculated as 2.9, with 3.5 being the lowest acceptable level for wellbeing. This score was as a direct result of strict timetabling, didactic teaching, rote learning, and the prevalence of large group adult-directed activities. The very poor transitioning practices and the use of extrinsic rewards also correlated to the mean score for children’s wellbeing. Children in this setting did not have autonomy or choice, their competence was not recognised by the educators as the pedagogical approach was primarily teacher-led. The relationship was based on a power differential where the educator had power and control over the children. The mean score for children’s involvement in their learning processes was recorded as 2.0, with the lowest acceptable score indicating a supportive environment being 3.5. The materials or activities did not challenge children’s thinking.
Figure 6.46: Mean observation scores Orange Montessori

The mean scores recorded for onsite observations in the Red and the Orange Montessori preschools are presented in Figure 6.48 below. The scores for the Red Montessori are calculated under column one and the scores for the Orange Montessori are calculated under column 2.
Figure 6.47: The mean scores for the two Montessori preschools

### 6.6.3 Findings from Observations in Reggio Inspired Preschools.

#### 6.6.3.1 The Violet Reggio Inspired Preschool, Boston – Observation Findings

Four preschool children were observed over a five-day period in the Violet Reggio preschool to measure the quality of the active learning environment and the level of children’s wellbeing and involvement. Figure 6.49 presents the findings for the onsite observations in the Violet Reggio inspired preschool. Two educators were observed to measure the quality of the active learning environment. The Violet Reggio Inspired preschool is based
in the basement of a church building in Boston. The preschool is a private preschool a parent cooperative, where sliding scale fee payments are applied. The following is an example of one observation conducted in the Violet Reggio Inspired preschool, using the Reflect Respect Relate Observation Tool (State of South Australia Department of Education and Children’s Services, 2008).

6.6.3.1.1 Case Study: The Violet Reggio Inspired Preschool, Boston

The children in the Violet Reggio inspired preschool were playing outdoors on a cold October morning. This was Dora’s second year in the preschool, so she was well settled in. Dora was aged four years and three months. The context of this observation is very significant; there were high levels of stress and tension in Boston on the days approaching the US presidential election. There was much public discussion regarding the use of force by police, particularly in disadvantaged areas, and the issues of gun laws and the targeting of primarily black boys by the police was being highlighted on the media. In the preschools I heard children asking their non-US friends if they were going to be going away. I wrote a blog, “The walls have ears” highlighting the volatile situation in Boston during that time. The preschool educators were very aware of the situation which also affected them, and they were conscious of trying to ensure that the children attending the preschool felt secure and safe in the preschool environment.

The out-door area, while small, had a variety of well-defined interest areas which included a sand pit, mud kitchen and a climbing frame. A selection of natural materials was available for children to explore; these included pinecones, real kitchen equipment such as delph plates, saucepans and an amazing colander. A selection of wood, blocks and sticks were piled against the boundary wall. The children chose where they wished to play and with whom. The educators’ facilitated children’s autonomous decision making, by not directing or engaging in children’s play unless invited by the children. They also remained vigilant and offered support to children if required or requested by them.
The educator, while keeping a watchful eye, noticed that Dora was not engaged in play and she was watching a group of boys busy playing. Dora looked ‘sad’ and the educator acknowledged this and asked if she could help. Dora explained that the boys would not allow her to play the game, because they were playing police. They were driving the police car, shooting and catching baddies. The educator invited the boys in the group and Dora to come together; she reminded the children that as a class they had made an agreement about playing police. The children were reminded by the educator of all the good things that the police do for the community and she asked them to name some of these things. It was agreed by the children that directing traffic is an important role of the police force and perhaps if they wanted to play police, they could play a game about police directing traffic.

In order to direct traffic, the children realised they needed to build a road. Darren took a long piece of timber from the pile and advised his friends that “we need this for the fly over”. Dora, who really wanted to be part of this exciting play exclaimed, “We need more stuff”, “I know what this needs, we need blocks for the road”. The educator assisted Dora who then wheeled the blocks over to the play area in the wheelbarrow. Dora placed two blocks under the beam of timber which was now the new road and she proceeded to walk across the beam. “Oh, it’s a bit rocky how can we fix it Dora?” asked the educator. Dora took control of the situation; she decided that a flat piece of wood was needed to make a ramp up to the road. Dean, aged four, arrived with two plastic wheels which were placed to the side of the ‘road’. Dora decided that she would test the ramp, “this makes it a bit tricky Dora, I’m glad you tested it” said the educator. All the boys wanted to test the new road and another beam was added to bring the road “all the way”. The educator identified another piece of timber, but asked, “Can we balance on this? It is a real challenge, one friend at a time”. The educator asked the children why only one friend at a time could use the road. The children immediately identified that if there are too many friends on the road there would be a traffic jam. Therefore, in order to keep the traffic flowing, Dora came up with a solution of having two options or directions and another
piece of timber is added. The educator advised the children that there
needed to be rules for using the road. The children negotiated the start point
and the direction of traffic. Dora appointed herself as the policewoman to
keep the traffic flowing.

6.6.3.1.2 Scoring this Observation

This observation identifies high levels of responsiveness for the adult/child
interaction between Dora and the educator. Dora received a consistent
response from the educator with whom she had both physical and emotional
access. The educator listened, observed and was sensitive to her cues.
Dora was being isolated by the boys in the group and the educator identified
this and acted promptly. The temperament, the mood and the cultural
context and information from the children’s family situation was crucial to
this observation. The educator recognised how the cultural and social
context can be reflected in children’s play and she supported and guided
children to reflect on this in their play. However, it may also be suggested
that the educator dictated and diverted the children’s play, which resulted in
children’s choice and autonomy being overruled by the educator. The
scoring for the relationship scale based on this observation between the
educator and Dora using the Reflect Respect Relate Observation Tool was
positive and was assigned a level 5 rating.

The signals for scoring the active learning environment are based on three
domains, social constructivist pedagogy, play and enabling learning
dispositions. Throughout this play experience the educator modelled
wonder and inquiry; she was proactive in provoking and encouraged
children to problem solve. Children were encouraged to explore and
investigate, and the environment was prepared to support children’s
curiosity as it contained a rich source of natural and open-ended materials.
The educator responded to the children’s verbal and nonverbal
communications. Learning opportunities were identified, and children’s
emerging interests were followed. Children were encouraged to hypothesise
and consider how this road would work. They also learned in their play
about taking turns, sharing the joy and collaborating. The educator also
encouraged children to think about the consequences of their actions, supporting them to come up with an alternative plan. The play environment provided choice, opportunity, real life relevant experiences for co-constructing understandings with children.

Children had opportunities to co-construct meaning, they had autonomy, the play experience was authentic, and the educator encouraged children to reflect on the decisions they made. However, it must be noted that the decision to stop playing ‘police catching baddies’ was influenced by the power dynamics between the educator and the children. While children’s critical thinking and problem-solving abilities were supported in their play, the educator did use her position to control the game. The active learning environment scored a 5 for this observation, based on the one to one observation of the pedagogical approach between the educator and Dora.

In this play episode Dora was able to communicate her needs, ideas and feelings. She had the opportunity to try out her idea and risk the possibility of being unsuccessful as she was secure in the learning environment and among friends. The environment offered Dora opportunities to challenge herself and ask for help when needed. Dora was confident in taking the lead. Supported by the educator, she demonstrated high levels of vitality, flexibility and enjoyment. The level of wellbeing recorded for Dora based on this observation was 5. Throughout this play activity Dora was, focused, motivated and challenged. The active learning resulted in Dora exhibiting high levels of energy and concentration, when successful she shouted with delight. A level of 5 was recorded for involvement for this observation based on the indicators and signals.

6.6.3.1.3 The Mean Score for the Violet Reggio Inspired Preschool

The mean score for the Violet Reggio inspired preschool is presented in Figure 49. The relationships score in the Violet Reggio inspired setting was based on four individual mean scores. The mean score for the setting was 4.1 and the acceptable minimum mean score for relationships based on the scale is 2.5. The relationships in this setting were responsive, the environment was predictive and calm, educators engaged respectfully with
children listening to them, there was sustained two-way communications and children were given time to respond.

A particularly nice observation in this setting was a situation where a boy appeared sad, the educator noticed. The boy explained that his dad had to move away to go to work and he missed him and now his nanna would be collecting him. The educator considered what the class could do to support the child. The educator asked the boy if he would like to make a book for his dad as this is something, she had done herself in the past when her sister went to China. The children also offered their opinions. One girl explained that when her dad is in California, she speaks to him on Skype. Other children confirmed that they also do this. However, the boy whose family were from India explained that his dad or his mam or even his nanna did not know how to Skype. The children decided to revert to plan A, when the boy decided he would like to make a book for his dad with the help of his friends. The book project continued throughout the week supported by the educators and the children. The scoring of this observation identified a level 5 for relationships; however, the child’s score for wellbeing was scored at 2 as he was very upset and missed his dad. Similarly, the child’s score for involvement was 2. There was a direct correlation between the boy’s emotional wellbeing and the quality of his involvement in his play and learning. This score impacted on the mean score for the setting across the wellbeing and involvement indicators.

The second of the four children randomly selected, whose scores impacted significantly on the overall mean score, was Dee. Dee was not observed having a one-to-one interaction with either of the two educators in this setting until Friday. Dee was a quiet, shy child she did not demand attention and did not perhaps appear to need it. However, on the Friday, Dee did request assistance with closing her coat. The approach in this preschool is that children should try to be independent and firstly try to solve the problem themselves. If this is not successful, the child seeks assistance from a friend and if together the children are unable to solve the problem, they seek assistance from the educator. I spoke to the educators following the semi-structured interview about the absence of any one-to-one
interaction with Dee. Educator one advised that during the parent teacher meetings that week, the parents of Dee advised them that she cries and does not want to come into preschool. The educators were very surprised as they felt that she was always happy pottering around doing her own thing. Following our discussion, educators have agreed to set up a key person system where each child will be linked in with by an educator, at least once a day. While the relationship in general appeared positive in this preschool, based on a mean score of four children observed, the scores for wellbeing and involvement were impacted by the social/family context and the pedagogical approach.

Four individual mean scores were recorded and the mean score for wellbeing for the Violet Reggio inspired setting was calculated at 3.9 with 3.5 being the lowest acceptable level for wellbeing. In this setting, two educators were observed to measure the active learning environment. The mean score for this setting was 4.5. A mean score of 3 is the lowest acceptable score for a supportive learning environment.

An example of the quality of the learning environment may be seen in the following observation. Thomas was building New York City from open ended materials and a map. “What are we going to find in the city?” asked the educator. “Maybe we could find dinosaurs”, replied Thomas. The educator advised Thomas that there is an Archelogy class in Harvard. “We will need tools” replied Thomas “or we could use our hands, eyes, and smell.” The educator, extending Thomas’ thinking enquired about what else they would find in the city. Thomas confirmed that you would find nature in the city. The educator asked Thomas if his friends could bring some nature into his city. “Yes, go to Harvard common and get leaves” replied Thomas. The educator wondered how they would carry the leaves and Thomas confirmed they could carry the leaves in a basket, but Thomas wondered what they would do if the leaves were to blow away. The educator confirmed that this was a very good thought. Thomas considered and came up with the solution, “We will need a deep basket with a lid”. Thomas identified potential problems and came up with the solution independently.
Four individual mean scores were recorded for involvement and a mean score for this setting was recorded as 3.3, with the lowest acceptable score indicating a supportive environment being 3.5. The activities and opportunities offered to the children were rich and challenging; children had choice and autonomy and they were given time to engage in their meaning making processes. Educators created the environment and engaged in children’s play when invited by the children to do so.

![Observation Scores Violet Reggio Inspired Preschool](image)

**Figure 6.48: Mean Observation Scores Violet Reggio Inspired Preschool**

### 6.6.3.2 The Blue Reggio Inspired Preschool, Boston

Four preschool children were observed over a five-day period in the Blue Reggio preschool. Two educators were observed to measure the quality of the active learning environment. The Blue Reggio preschool was a privately-owned preschool in urban Boston. Figure 6.50 presents the findings from the onsite observations. The following is an example of one observation conducted in the Blue Reggio Inspired preschool, using the *Reflect Respect Relate Observation Tool* (State of South Australia Department of Education and Children’s Services, 2008).
6.6.3.2.1 Case Study: The Blue Reggio Inspired Preschool, Boston

David and Dane were playing in the ‘hospital’ area. The area was rich with real life materials, these included stereoscopes, X-rays, bandages, posters of bones and parts of the body and books. The educator was sitting on the floor and the children played in the different areas of the preschool room. Danielle went up to the educator with a stethoscope and explained that she wanted to listen to her heart. The educator asked if Danielle could hear anything, “I hear turkeys and frogs”, replied Danielle. The educator asked Danielle, did she need to get the turkeys and frogs out of her chest and Danielle confirmed that yes, the educator would need an operation. Danielle went to find the educator’s file and ECG sheet. David and Dane were also playing in the hospital play space, they were using masking tape as bandages and there was a difference of opinion. The educator was aware of this and observed how the children would resolve their conflict. Dane who was the focus of this observation explained to David that he was sad because he didn’t always want to be the patient; he wanted to be the doctor, too. The educator trusted the boys to resolve their issues. When they agreed that they could both be doctors and that they did not want friends to be sad, they both went over to the educator and explained how they had successfully resolved their differences. They were very proud of their achievement and the educator congratulated them on their discussion skills.

6.6.3.2.2 Scoring this Observation

The relationships observed in this observation were responsive; the boys were confident that they would be supported by the educator. The educator observed and trusted the children to work out their differences. Interactions were positive, with the educator engaging in children’s play when invited by the children to do so. Children were given time and space to engage in interactive play, they were also given encouragement and support which helped them to resolve their conflict. Scoring for relationships in this observation was a 5.
The active learning environment also scored a 5. A rich environment was available for children to explore, there were a variety of natural and open-ended materials. The learning environment changed daily as a direct result of children’s emerging interests. The educators were one step ahead of the children, having researched and provided materials and provocations to support children’s curiosities.

Dane’s level of wellbeing from this observation was scored at a 5. Dane had trust and confidence to resolve the issue; he made positive connections with David, he was flexible and had empathy for his friend. Dane was absorbed in trying to resolve the issue with David; he considered different strategies to resolve the issue. When both boys agreed as to how they would progress their play, they went to the educator and explained their actions, because they were proud of their achievements.

6.6.3.2.3 The Mean Score for the Blue Reggio Inspired Preschool

In the Blue Reggio inspired setting based on four individual mean scores as outlined in Figure 6.50 the mean score for relationships in the setting was 4.9. The acceptable minimum mean score for relationships based on the scale is 2.5. The relationships and interactions in this setting were responsive and positive; educators engaged in sustained two-way turn taking conversational interactions. Transitions were excellent, with children’s time and attention being respected. This was a nurturing environment. The educators visibly enjoy their work. They were both motivated and enthusiastic, treating children with respect and being physically and emotionally available to the children.

Two educators were observed in this setting to measure the active learning environment. The mean score for this setting was 4.4. A mean score of 3 is the lowest acceptable score for a supportive learning environment. Educator 1 scored 4.3 and Educator 2 scored 4.5. Both educators enabled children’s learning dispositions, supported children’s curiosity and exploratory drive. The educators co-construct meaning with children while also creating a rich environment for children to flourish. An example of a beautiful, respectful approach was observed when Toby was singing loudly;
the educator asks if he has been on stage or performed on a stage before. The educator suggested that Toby had a voice for stage as he projected his voice so very well. Toby felt good because his voice was acknowledged; this was evident in his facial expression and posture. The educator then reflected that perhaps Toby’s voice projection was too great for such a confined space. Toby agreed that perhaps the educator was right. Toby was given the opportunity to make the choice to reduce the volume. Toby was not told to stop singing loudly, his competence was trusted, and he made his own decision.

The mean score for children’s wellbeing in the setting was calculated as 4.7, with 3.5 being the lowest acceptable level for wellbeing. Children were happy, confident, and autonomous. They confidently expressed their preferences. Observation of the children confirmed that they were receptive and could cope with change. The children were open, alert and persistent but above all, they were curious.

Four individual mean scores were recorded for involvement in the setting. A mean score of 4.2 was recorded, with the lowest acceptable score indicating a supportive environment being 3.5. Children had a wide variety of interesting materials to explore. There were some large group activities, but children made the decision to engage or not. Materials challenged children’s thinking and the educators extended, supported and facilitated the child’s meaning making processes.
The overall scores for the Reggio inspired settings across the four variables are presented in Figure 6.51. The scoring in column 1 refers to the Violet Reggio inspired preschool and the scoring in column 2 refers to the Blue Reggio inspired setting.
The findings demonstrated a difference across the three setting types.

6.7.1 Findings from the Play-based Settings

The findings from the Play-based settings demonstrate that the quality of relationships is higher when the educator engages in learning with the child,
where they co-construct knowledge as opposed to didactic teaching. This correlates to higher levels of wellbeing. The findings from the data highlighted that, Play-based settings which were flexible and followed the child’s emergent interests, resulted in children having higher levels of involvement in their learning.

### 6.7.2 Findings from the Montessori Settings

The findings from the Montessori preschools demonstrate that children have low levels of wellbeing and involvement when the pedagogical approach is didactic and adult led. Children’s basic needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness are not met within a traditional pedagogical approach where learning is transmitted from the educator to the learner. The importance of a nurturing pedagogy where children have quality relationships with the educator are essential for high levels of wellbeing to occur. If levels of wellbeing are low and children do not have autonomy or choice, then the pedagogical approach directly impacts on the child’s level of involvement. If learning, is meaningless and is not of interest to the child, children become bored and either become passive or rebel against the authoritative approach. This results in issues of behaviour management, which in this instance was managed in both Montessori preschools using extrinsic rewards. The findings of the onsite observations in the Montessori preschools are not reflective of the Montessori philosophy as outlined in the context chapter. The findings are reflective of the interpretation of the Montessori approach taken by the participating educators. The qualifications of the participating educators identify that one educator had a level seven ordinary level degree and the other educators were qualified to level six (NFQ).

### 6.7.3 Findings from the Reggio Inspired Settings

In the Reggio inspired preschools, children’s level of wellbeing and involvement correlated to the quality of the active learning environment. Higher levels of involvement were recorded when the active learning environment challenged children’s thinking and the learning was meaningful. The findings also highlighted that children’s involvement in
their learning is reliant on his/her level of wellbeing. The findings demonstrate that for children to have high levels of wellbeing and involvement in the preschool setting, a pedagogical approach based on a social constructivist model is necessary.

6.7.3.1 The Mean Scores for the three setting types

The mean score for the three setting types are presented now in Table 6.27

| Mean Scores for All three preschool types |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
|                 | Relationships   | Active Learning Environment | Wellbeing | Involvement |
| Lowest Acceptable score | 2.5 | 3.0 | 3.5 | 3.5 |
| Montessori       | 2.6 | 2.4 | 3.1 | 2.3 |
| Play-based       | 3.2 | 3.2 | 3.4 | 2.7 |
| Reggio Inspired  | 4.5 | 4.4 | 4.1 | 4.7 |

6.7.4 Findings across the Three Objectives of the Study

The profile of the participants of the study identified that seventeen early years educators working in three preschool setting types across two geographical locations in the west of Ireland and Boston, participated in this study. The setting types included two Montessori pre-schools in the west of Ireland, three Play-based preschools, two of which were in the west of Ireland and one which was in Boston. The Play-based preschool in Boston was included as the manager who had initially committed to participate in the study had worked in a Reggio inspired preschool, however at the time of the study she was managing a play based preschool with the intention of bring some of the Reggio principles to the play-based setting. The inclusion of a play-based setting in Boston brought another dimension to the study.
A total of 87 parents completed the parental questionnaire across the seven preschool settings and 110 parents gave consent for their child to participate in the study. In total 29 of the 110 children with parental consent across the seven settings in the west of Ireland and Boston were selected to be observed in their preschool setting, using *Reflect Respect Relate Observation Scales* (State of South Australia, Department of Education and Children’s Services, 2008). Of a possible 148 children attending the seven preschools, 119 children completed child assent forms. Children who had completed child assent forms and had parental/guardian consent were considered for participation in the onsite observations. In total 174 onsite observations were conducted in the seven preschool settings, observations were based on 234 indicators across four areas, the active learning environment and relationships as quality indicators and wellbeing and involvement as quality outcomes.

There were distinct differences between the profile of preschool educators in Boston and the west of Ireland. The age profile of preschool educators in Boston participating in this study confirmed that 43% of participants were aged between 20 and 29 years. Of the upper age group 14% of Boston preschool educators participating in the study were between the ages of 40-49 years. In contrast the age profile of preschool educators participating in the Irish study confirmed that 20% of participating preschool educators were between the ages of 20-29 years, with 30% between the ages of 40-49 years. The length of time that preschool educators had been working in the participating preschool setting also identified differences. In Boston 57% of preschool educators had worked in the same setting from between five and over ten years. In Ireland 30% of preschool educators had worked in the same setting for between five year and over ten years. In Boston 14.28% of preschool educators had worked in the participating setting for less than two years, whereas in Ireland 50% of the preschool educators had worked in the participating setting for less than two years.

There were significant differences between the qualification levels of preschool educators participating in this study. In Boston of the seven participating preschool educators 28.57% \( (n=2) \) of the educators had as their
highest educational achievement a relevant degree with 71.42% (n=5) of the participants having a relevant Masters in ECEC. Of the ten preschool educators from the participating west of Ireland preschools the highest qualification level for 70% (n=7) of them was a vocational qualification, with 20% (n=2) having a relevant Degree in ECEC and 10% (n=1) having a relevant Masers in ECEC. There were significant differences identified in the findings in relation to preschool educators’ commitment to continuous professional development and learning. The Boston preschool educators confirmed that 57.14% (n=4) of the participants undertake professional development between one and five times per year, with 42.85% (n=3) undertaking professional development and learning opportunities more than five times per year. In contract 50% (n=5) of the participating Irish preschool educators confirmed that they undertake professional development learning once a year with a further 50% (n=5) stating that they undertake professional learning up to five times per year. The qualitative findings suggest that engagement in professional development is primarily focused on compliance and attendance at workshops focusing on legislative requirements.

It must be acknowledged that due to the small number of preschool educators participating in this study, the fact that there were three Play-based settings as opposed to two Montessori preschools and two Reggio inspired preschools comparisons in relation to variables such as staff qualifications, length of time working in the setting, age range or commitment to continuous professional development can and has been made on the quantitative findings. However, these variables cannot be attributed to qualitative findings due to the small numbers of participating educators. Also, the onsite observations measured the mean or overall quality of the preschool setting based on the active learning environment and relationships and children quality outcomes wellbeing and involvement, rather than children and educators individual scores.
Triangulation of findings of Objective 1 - The Preschool Educator’s Understanding of his or her Role as an Early Childhood Educator

The educators’ understanding of their role across the three preschool programme types was different, based on triangulation of the findings from the questionnaire, semi structured interviews, onsite observations and field notes. The Montessori educators identified that they believe that children are passive, imitative learners who learn through demonstration and modelling this was reflected in the findings of the questionnaires and the semi structured interviews. In total 80% (n=4) of the Montessori preschool educators confirmed in the questionnaires that their role is to teach a child to do things properly, by choosing the topics or themes and teaching the children all about then. This was confirmed in the interviews where one educator explained that “my role is to guide them in the ways of the world” and “I do think that they need somebody there to guide them along, their interpretation of something might be totally different to what something is actually supposed to be” (I, M, I). Onsite observation confirmed a didactic approach to teaching skills and a focus on rote learning and strict timetabling in the participating Montessori preschool settings.

In the Play-based settings 62.5% of educators agreed that their role was to demonstrate to a child how to do things properly. However only 12.5% of Play-based educators agreed that the educator chooses the topic and teaches the child all about it “My role is to provide them with play-based learning opportunities and facilitate their ability to follow through on and explore their ideas”. The Play-based educators viewed children as ‘little’ or ‘cute’. Children were objectified and the educators’ role was to care for and protect the children. Play-based Educators wanted the children to experience success, which was demonstrated when one educator confirmed that, if the child is not successful, then her role is to manipulate the jigsaw piece into the correct place for the child. The espoused views of the Play-based educators were that children are active learners, who learn through experience and play. The onsite observations of the pedagogical approach did not reflect the espoused views of the Play-based educators. The Play-
based learning environments all exhibited different levels of structure and adult-directed learning, with varying degrees of timetabling.

In the Reggio inspired settings 50% (n=2) of the educators agreed that their role was to demonstrate to children how to do an activity properly, qualitative data confirmed that the educators who agreed with this statement in the questionnaire further expanded and suggested that a didactic model of teaching based on the transfer of knowledge may in some case support child’s learning.

“it helps to have a teacher model for somethings, for other activities it can be a time for children to explore. I see the role of the teacher as more of a mentor, let the child lead and explore together”. (B, 12, R)

Onsite observation confirmed a dialogical collaborative learning environment, where children’s emergent interests were supported and discussed.

The findings from the study identify that the educator’s understanding of her/ his role as an educator directly impacts on the pedagogical approach. If the educator’s understanding of her/his role is to transfer information and knowledge to the child, then the pedagogical approach will be didactic and controlling. If the educator considers her / his role as that of a facilitator then the pedagogical approach will be autonomy supportive. The findings clearly demonstrate that educators may take an autonomy supportive approach and alternate with a didactic approach. This study highlights the different levels on a continuum between a didactic or controlling pedagogical approach and an autonomy supportive pedagogical approach.

There are other influences which impact on the educator's pedagogical approach and this includes educator’s understandings or perceptions of parental expectations.
Triangulation of findings of objective 2 - To identify the preschool educator’s image of the child as a learner and explore how this influences the pedagogical practice in the preschool setting.

The Montessori preschool educators participating in this study 40% (n=2) of the educators agreed that children learn through didactic exposure. The focus of children learning skills or the apprentice model through repetition and practicing was identified by 80% (n=4) of the Montessori preschool educators as the way that children learn. This finding indicates children being seen as passive objects who learn through repetition and perfection of skills through experience. The Montessori educators referred to children as being ‘funny’, ‘curious’ and ‘lively’. The fact that some children are ‘livelier’ and take up the educator’s time suggests that these children are perhaps considered to be wilful and in need of correction. This was evident through the onsite observations and the use of extrinsic motivators to support expected behaviour.

Controlling of the children such as ‘allowing’ children to discuss their ideas during circle time, reduced spontaneity and the children were seen more as objects or inanimate things, complying with the rules, accepting and never questioning authority. Children who did question in the Montessori preschools were considered lively and ‘really do stick out’. The findings of the onsite observations confirm that the Montessori educators participating in this study saw the preschool child as apprentice learners who practice skills and learn by rote rather than trusting that the children can think about their own thinking and learning. By providing an adult-directed programme, the educators managed and decided on the learning which would happen in the preschool and learning by the child was conceived in the mind of the educator (Bruner, 1996).

Triangulation of the data to ascertain the play-based educators’ image of the child as a learner suggests based on the findings from the questionnaires, semi structured interviews and on-site observation that the educators’ image of the child is of children as being ‘small’ and in need of protection and care. Children were also described as ‘lovely little people’ or ‘funny’ or
‘cute’. The educators expressed surprise at how competent young children are. All the Play-based educators identified that children learn through play. As these were Play-based settings, the onsite observations confirmed that the core elements required for learning in play; choice, wonder and delight were not evident or limited due to, timetabling and the lack of open-ended and natural materials.

In total 37% (n=3) of the Play-based educators agreed that children learn through didactic exposure as imitative learners, learning through repetitive practice, didactic exposure and modelling. The pedagogical approach observed during onsite observation confirmed to varying degrees across the three Play-based settings that the learning environments were primarily adult-led. While the programme in all three settings was timetabled, the levels of flexibility were different in each setting. However, ‘free play’ was timetabled in all three Play-based settings. Play-based educators espoused to believing that children learn best through play. However, based on the collated data there was an emphasis on trying to teach the children through play, as educator (I, P, 8) suggest “children don’t necessarily need to know about learning, from the learning point of view it’s up to us to do that, that’s our job”. The Play-based educators’ image of the child as a learner based on triangulation of the findings suggests that the child in the Play-based settings was seen as innocent and cute learning through play which is managed and decided by the educator.

The findings from the questionnaires, semi structured interviews and onsite observations from the Reggio inspired educators confirmed that children were seen as competent learners, this was articulated well by the Reggio inspired educators in the questionnaires and semi structured interviews. Onsite observation of practice confirmed an image of a competent child who had autonomy, voice and audience they could influence their learning and were active participants in the learning process.

Findings from the parental questionnaires which may influence the choice of pedagogical approach identified that the highest percentage 41% (n=11) of parents of children attending a Montessori preschool, choose a
Montessori preschool to prepare their child to attend primary school. The highest reason for parents of children attending a play-based setting identified 36% (n=14) sent their child to prepare them to attend primary school. Findings from the parental questionnaire circulated to parents of children attending Reggio inspired preschools identify that the highest percentage of parents 94% (n=17) send their child to preschool to explore and think.

Parents’ outlined their understandings of how their child learns; the findings suggest that 37% (n=9) parents of children attending a Montessori preschool believe that their child learns best when the child and educator explore and think together, with 25% (n=6) stating that their child learns best when the educator teaches the child. Parents of children attending a play-based preschool confirm that 49% (n=19) of parents believe that children learn when the educator and the child explore and think together. Findings from the parents of children attending Reggio inspired preschools confirm that 50% (n=8) of parents believe that their child learns best when the educator and child explores and thinks together. The findings across the three setting types confirmed that the educator’s image of the child does influence her/ his pedagogical approach.

**Triangulation of the findings of objective 3 – Comparing children’s level of wellbeing and involvement as a result of the quality of the relationships and the active learning environment in settings offering different pedagogical approaches, (Montessori, Play-based, Reggio inspired)**

The findings based on the onsite observations, while quantitative in nature were collated through a qualitative lens as the 234 indicators outlined in the Reflect Respect Relate Observation Scales (State of South Australia, Department of Education and Children’s Services) across the four areas the active learning environment, relationships, wellbeing and involvement were viewed and interpreted and as such are open to the bias and subjectivity of the observer. Of the 174 onsite observations conducted 102 were conducted
in preschool settings based in the west of Ireland and 72 onsite observations were conducted in preschool settings in Boston.

Triangulation of the findings suggest that based on the accepted level which is considered the lowest acceptable score indicative of a supportive environment the Montessori schools participating in the study scored the following. The acceptable score for a supportive active learning environment based on a social constructivist pedagogical approach is 3.0. Neither of the two Montessori preschools scored 3.0. The Red Montessori preschool scored 2.5 and the Orange Montessori scored 2.3. These scores reflected the level of adult directed pedagogical approach in both preschool settings. The lowest score acceptable based on the observation scales for the quality of the relationships is 2.5. The Red Montessori scored 2.8 and the Orange Montessori preschool scored 2.5. This score was reflective of the power relationships in the preschool settings. The lowest acceptable score for children’s wellbeing based on the observation scales is 3.5, the score in the Red Montessori was 3.3 and the score in the Orange Montessori was 2.9, both below the desired minimum level. The acceptable lowest score for involvement based on the observation scales is 3.5 the Red Montessori scored 2.4 and the Orange Montessori scored 2.0, both below acceptable levels.

Findings based on the onsite observations in the Play-based settings identify that the scores for the Green play school for the active learning environment were 3.4 with 3.0 being the lowest acceptable score for a supportive environment. The score for relationships in the Green play school was 3.7 with the lowest acceptable score being 2.5. The score for wellbeing was 4.0 higher than the 3.5 minimum acceptable score and the score for involvement was 3.2 below the 3.5 acceptable minimum score as outlined in the observation scales. The scores for the Yellow play-based setting identified that the active learning environment level was 3.5 above the minimum acceptable score of 3.0. The score for relationships was 3.1 above the 2.5 minimum score. Wellbeing levels scored at 4.0 above the 3.5 minimum and involvement scores scored at 2.3 below the minimum acceptable score of 3.5 were recorded. The scores for the Boston Play-based setting the Indigo
playschool indicate a score of 2.9 for the active learning environment which is below the 3.0 acceptable level. The score for relationships for the Indigo playschool was 2.6 just above the acceptable level of 2.5 minimum for relationships. Levels of wellbeing were scored at 2.6 below the 3.5 minimum and involvement levels scored 2.6 below the 3.5 minimum level.

Findings based on the onsite observations in the Reggio inspired settings identify, that the scores for the Violet preschool identify that the score for relationships for this preschool was 4.1 where a minimum is 2.5. The score for the active learning environment was 4.5 higher than the minimum score of 3.0. The score for wellbeing was 3.9 above the 3.5 minimum score and the score for involvement was 3.2 below the minimum score which reflected the changing personal context for one child who was being observed. The scores for the Blue Reggio inspired preschool identified a 4.9 score for relationships over the minimum 2.5 score. A score of 4.4 was recorded for the active learning environment above the minimum 3.0 level acceptable. Wellbeing score of 4.7 above the 3.5 minimum score was recorded and a score of 4.2 was recorded for involvement above the 3.5 minimum score.

6.8 Conclusion

This chapter presented the findings as emerging from data collected from educator questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, parental questionnaires and onsite observation of practice in the seven preschool settings. Section 6.2 outlined the aim and objectives of the study. This was followed by section 6.3, which provided a profile of the educators participating in this study. Section 6.4 considered the quantitative and qualitative findings from objective one in relation to each of the three setting types; Montessori, Play-based and Reggio inspired. The findings of objective two were presented in relation to each of the pedagogical approaches in section 6.5. This was followed in Section 6.6 with the findings from objective 3. Section 6.7 provided the findings from the onsite observations. The findings were supported by a case study from each setting accompanied by an explanation of the observation scoring and an analysis section was presented which led into the key comparison of the findings in the three setting types,
Montessori, Play-based and Reggio inspired based on the data across three objectives of the study.
Chapter 7 Discussion

7.1 Introduction

This research study was undertaken to answer the following research question. How does the educator’s image of the child as a learner influence her/his pedagogical approach and how does the preschool educator’s pedagogical approach subsequently impact on children’s level of wellbeing and involvement in the preschool setting? The overarching aim of the research was to ‘Explore the preschool educator’s image of the child as a learner on the choice of her / his pedagogical approach, (Montessori, Play-based or Reggio inspired) and the subsequent influence on preschool children’s levels of wellbeing and involvement’. This question and the associated aim and objectives which were explored throughout the thesis will now be discussed in the context of the findings of this study.

As previously discussed in Chapter 1, increasing numbers of children in the western world are accessing preschool education. Marmot et al. (2010) confirm that it is during the first years of a child’s life that the building blocks for lifelong learning are put in place. With more children attending center based ECEC settings, it is the quality of these early experiences which is crucial for optimum growth and development (European Commission, 2014). Quality ECEC experiences are identified as being associated with more equitable child outcomes, a reduction in poverty, increased intergenerational social mobility and better social and economic development, (Council of the European Union, 2010). Equally, poor-quality early childhood education and care provision can have a negative impact on young children, with long term effects such as deficits in language and cognitive development, particularly for children from low income families (Penn, 2009; Mc Ginty, 2015; Melhuish, 2015).

In Ireland, early childhood education and care has become a policy priority which has resulted in several initiatives. The most significant of these initiatives is the provision of two years universal free preschool for all children prior to attending primary school. Despite the Irish government having invested €502 million in early childhood education and care and
school age childcare in 2018 (DCYA, 2019) and 118,899 children in 4242 early years services in Ireland accessing the ECCE scheme in 2017/2018 (Pobal, 2018), little is known about the quality of that provision. There has not been to date a national evaluation of the quality of Irish ECEC provision following the introduction of the ECCE scheme in 2010. Compliance with the Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016 (Government of Ireland, 2016) is inspected by Tusla- Child and Family Agency. Inspection against the Child Care Regulations is based on the minimum quality standards for regulatory compliance. The quality of the pedagogy has only been inspected in preschools since 2016, with 24.85% (n=867) education focused inspections conducted by January 2018 (DES, 2018). Therefore, given this gap in knowledge this study explored if the educator’s image of the child as a learner influenced her / his pedagogical approach and the subsequent impacts on preschool children’s levels of wellbeing and involvement based on the educator’s pedagogical approach.

In chapters 2 and 3, a comprehensive review of the key literature pertinent to this study was presented. Chapter 2 started with a discussion on children and childhood and progressed to pedagogy and quality. Chapter 3 focussed on wellbeing and involvement Self Determination Theory and Bioecological Theory. This information was combined to create a tentative conceptual model to understand the interlinkages between all the elements of theory relevant to this study. The key findings of the study were categorised and presented in chapter 6 by service type, namely, Montessori, Play-based or Reggio inspired. The purpose of this chapter is to discuss a set of high-level findings which emerged in chapter 6, considering the tentative conceptual model. In doing this, it is possible to address the objectives of the study and in turn answer the research question and address the overarching aim of the study.

In terms of the layout of the remainder of this chapter, Section 7.2 recaps on the research question, aim and objectives of the study while Section 7.3 will discuss the findings and theory for objective 1-4. This is followed by Section 7.4 which will discuss the study’s contribution to knowledge. Section 7.5 will conclude this, the discussion chapter.
7.2 Recap on the Study’s Research Question, Aim and Objectives

The overarching aim of this research study was to ‘Explore the preschool educator’s image of the child as a learner on the choice of their pedagogical approach, (Montessori, Play-based or Reggio inspired) and the subsequent influence on preschool children’s levels of wellbeing and involvement’.

To address the research question and the overall research aim, the objectives which guided this study were as follows:

➢ Objective 1 - To explore the preschool educator’s understanding of her/his role as an early childhood educator in a sample of preschool settings in the west of Ireland and Boston.

➢ Objective 2 - To identify the preschool educator’s image of the child as a learner and explore how this influences the pedagogical practice in the preschool settings in the west of Ireland and Boston.

➢ Objective 3 - To compare children’s level of wellbeing and involvement as a result of the quality of the relationships and the active learning environment in settings offering different pedagogical approaches, (Montessori, play-based, Reggio inspired).

➢ Objective 4 – To examine the implications for ECEC policy and practice as a result of the addition to knowledge of this study.

For ease of discussion, the four objectives are collapsed and discussed collectively, which provides a more contextualised understanding of the learning environments which best support preschool children’s high levels of wellbeing and involvement.

7.3 Discussion of the Findings and Theory for Objectives 1 to 4.

Having undertaken a detailed review of the findings presented in chapter 6, it is not possible to discuss each individual finding and the corresponding theory in this chapter. Instead, I have identified four high-level themes which were identified as core elements, based on the findings of this study. These will be discussed in the context of the conceptual framework, to address the overarching aim of the study.
Theme 1 - Opposing Images of the Child as a Learner

Theme 2 - Opposing Pedagogical Approaches

Theme 3 - Wellbeing and Involvement of Preschool Children

Theme 4 – Bio ecological Influences on the Image of the child as a learner.

7.3.1 Theme 1 - Opposing Images of the Child as a Learner

Dahlberg et al., (2013) suggest that there are many understandings of children and childhood which can be traced through historical, social and cultural change. Dahlberg et al., (2013) suggest that the language educators’ use when speaking about children provides an insight into who the educator thinks the child is, or how the educator sees the child as a learner. The educator’s image of the child as a learner, whether this image is implicit or explicit, Malaguzzi (1994) suggests, is the premise for the educator’s beliefs, values and ethical approach to teaching and learning. While Bruner (1996) suggests that the educator’s image of the child as a learner is central to the pedagogical approach practiced by the educator. The literature identifies a reconceptualisation of the image of the child as a learner from the traditional image of the child as a tabula rasa, or empty vessel, to an image of the child as a competent and confident democratic citizen with rights, not just needs (Rinaldi, 2006).

Taking the three philosophical approaches which were explored in this study, Montessori, Play-based and Reggio inspired, the literature clearly identifies that all three philosophies of teaching and learning are underpinned by an image of a competent child. Dr Montessori speaks about the ‘curious child’, Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009) which focuses on a Play-based curriculum refers to children as ‘competent and confident learners’ while Malaguzzi founder of the Reggio approach, refers to the child as ‘rich in potential, strong and powerful (Edwards et al, 1998). However, the findings from this and previous research suggests that many of the educators within these setting types, espoused image of the child as a learner, is not always reflected in their practice (Winter, 2003). It was therefore essential to triangulate the
evidence from the questionnaires, semi structured interviews, observations and field notes to identify the educator’s image of the child as a learner in the three different setting types, Montessori, Play-based and Reggio inspired in the west of Ireland and in Boston MA. These ideas will now be discussed.

The Montessori educators, who participated in this study, articulated their image of the child primarily as that of a needy child or a tabula rasa. This was evidenced in the questionnaires, the semi-structured interviews and the onsite observations. Bruner (1996) suggests that the beliefs or folk pedagogies that educators’ hold, reflect a variety of assumptions about children. These include children being seen as ‘wilful’ and needing correction, as innocent and needing to be protected from a vulgar society, and as needing skills to be developed which can only happen through practice. Equally Johansson (2004) suggests that when the educator’s image of the child is, that the child is irrational then, the learning environment he or she provides is a controlling environment, as the educator’s belief is that these children need to be managed and controlled.

The findings from the data collated from the Montessori educators participating in this study identify that some of the educators saw children as passive objects who were at times irrational or ‘lively’ needing to be managed and controlled. This was evidenced by the pedagogical approach, which was in varying levels, controlling, authoritative and didactic and included the use of extrinsic motivators to ensure that the children “do, the right thing” (I, M, 1). Equally there were Montessori educators, who confirmed that they believed that children were competent, and this reflected in their pedagogical practice, which was a combination of both an adult led, and a child led pedagogical approach. However, the culture, values and beliefs of the individual were at times subsumed in the culture, values and beliefs of the preschool settings. Therefore, for systemic change to occur, a change in mind set in relation to the educator’s image of the competent child must come through education from a bottom up and a top down approach.
The image of the child, as espoused by the Play-based educators participating in this study were conflicting at times. It was evident that this was not a topic that the educators had given extensive consideration too. The findings, based on triangulation of the data, suggests that while the Play-based educators suggested that they see the child as being competent, children were objectified as being ‘cute’ and ‘funny’ and ‘little’ (Bruner, 1996). The child was not seen as a ‘thinker’, in effect, the image of the child was that of the Apollonian or innocent child or a child with limited capacity. This image of the innocent child, while it demonstrates the protective, nurturing and caring nature of the educator, portrays the child as in need of protection and guidance (James et al., 1998). The Play-based educators identified their role as nurturing; they considered their role to be that of a guide, helping children to become better learners, or allowing them to make their own choices. These statements present an image of the child as a passive learner, waiting for the knowledge to be passed or transferred from the more knowledgeable and more powerful educator who ‘allows’ the child to make choices, which in itself is a contradiction in terms (Bruner, 1996; Freire, 1996).

The Play-based educators were anxious to confirm that they saw preschool children as competent learners, while clarifying that their role was to support children to learn through play and to create environments for children to explore and think. The language used by the Play-based educators provided an insight into their image of the child as a learner. The use of language which portrays the child as ‘little’ or ‘cute’, as Dahlberg et al (2013) suggests holds an insight into who the educator thinks the child is, or how the educator sees the child as a learner. The findings from the quantitative and qualitative data confirms that the Play-based educators’ image of the child as a learner was that of a child who was ‘little’ needed ‘care’ and that of a ‘tabula rasa’, or empty vessel, waiting to be filled by the knowledgeable educator.

There was a conflict between the Play-based educators’ espoused image of the child as a learner and the subsequent pedagogical practice observed.
Observations from practice identified a mix of both adult led and child led practice between the three Play-based settings. In two of the Play-based settings where the pedagogical practice reflected the educator’s espoused image of the child as being competent, children had opportunities to make some decision and they had different levels of autonomy and choice. In the more traditional Play-based setting the educators espoused image of the child was not reflected in practice, as this Play-based preschool was primarily adult led. This resulted in the learning environment being a controlling, passive learning environment. The Play–based educator’s explicit image of the child and their implicit image of the child as a learner were reflected in their pedagogical practice which in the three Play-based settings was a mixture of autonomy supportive active learning environments and passive controlling learning environments.

Preschool educators in the Reggio inspired settings articulated a clear definition of their image of the child and their understanding of their roles as educators. This image of the child as a competent child was observed in practice, where children frequently had the autonomy to choose where they sat, who they sat with, what they wanted to play with and when they wanted to play. Children’s emerging interests were supported in most instances, and the educators extended children’s learning by providing rich resources to support their play and meaning making. The Reggio inspired educators clearly aligned with the image of the child as being competent, confident and capable, ‘rich in potential, strong, powerful, competent and most of all connected to adults and other children’ (Malaguzzi, in Edwards et al., 1998, p.275). This was evidenced through the questionnaires, interviews and onsite observation. The role of the educator was described in the interviews and questionnaires and observed in practice as being that of a co-researcher learning together with children (Rinaldi, 2006). The learning environments in the Reggio inspired settings were constantly changing with the educators offering different provocations throughout the day. There was a variety of natural and open-ended materials to inspire and ignite children’s curiosity and imagination. The learning was generally child led, supported and facilitated by the educator (Rinaldi, 2006; Laevers, 2017).
Critics of this approach suggest that the projects or provocations offered to the children by the educators in the Reggio settings are directed by the educator. Observation from practice identified that provocations presented to the children were primarily as a result of educators listening to children, hearing what they were saying about their emergent interests which resulted in the educators offering provocations to extend these interests. An example of this was when one boy expressed an interest in maps and the location of the preschool in Cambridge. A large map of Boston was printed by the educator and the child located with his friend’s places of interest on the map, using stones, coloured blocks, string and other natural materials such as leaves to identify places of interest. There were other provocations which were presented by the educators such as, in one Reggio inspired preschool there was an area introduced where the children could sew and explore different materials, wool and thread. Children had choice to access this area, which many children choose to do. The provocation was presented, but the children had autonomy to make their own decisions whether to access or not. Children were generally trusted to make decisions and learn from their experiences alone and with friends (Bruner, 1996; Malaguzzi, cited in Edwards et al., 1998). However, while this was the pedagogical approach most frequently observed this was not always the case, as identified in the case study of the Violet preschool. In this situation the educator intervened, diverted and directed the children’s play. Children’s emerging interest in playing police was directed by the educator as opposed to facilitating and supporting children’s autonomy to choose the game they had wanted to play.

Based on the literature and as outlined by Prout and James (1997) there has been a reconceptualisation from the traditional image of the child as needy, passive and requiring protection and guidance to an image of the child as a competent and confident democratic citizen with rights, not just needs (James and Prout, 1997, Dahlberg et al, 2013; Urban, 2018). This image of a competent child was explicitly stated by educators in all three setting types. However, observation of practice identified that the espoused image of the child held by some of the educators did not reflect their pedagogical
practice. This is why Malaguzzi (1994) suggests that as educators we have an ethical and moral responsibility to make explicit our image of the child as a learner and through reflection on our practice we will identify if our espoused image of the child is reflected in our pedagogical approach.

7.3.2 Theme 2 - Opposing Pedagogical approaches.

Pedagogy, according to Zufiaurre (2007, p.147) is the ‘praxis’ or the regime of teaching and learning that, ‘Inducts human beings into knowing rather than knowledge’. Bruner (1996) suggests that the educator’s choice of pedagogy communicates a conception of the learner and the learning process. Bruner (1996) further suggests that the educator’s choice of pedagogy is never innocent, that it is inevitably based on the educators ‘folk pedagogy’, or their beliefs about how the child’s mind works. These beliefs he confirms are deeply ingrained cultural beliefs and are based on a desire to help the child to learn. The findings from this study confirm a commitment by all the preschool educators participating in the study to support preschool children’s learning.

Bruner (1996) suggests that there are four models of learners, the apprentice learner, the leaner who learns by didactic exposure, the thinker and the knowledgeable learner who comes to preschool with funds of knowledge (Moll, 1992). Bruner (1996) also suggests that there are two types of learning environments, the traditional learning environment which is a controlling passive learning environment or an autonomy supportive active learning environment. When the educator has an image of the child as needy or a tabula rasa then he/she according to Bruner (1996) will adopt a traditional pedagogical approach to teaching and learning. This theory of learning Bruner (1996) refers to is based on externalist theories which focus on, what educators can do for children from the outside to foster learning. The pedagogical approach centres on the teaching of skills and transferring knowledge to the passive learner. The success of this pedagogical approach is based on measurable outcomes such as the acquisition of knowledge, rather than knowing (Zufiaurre, 2007).
In contrast when the educator sees the child as a ‘thinker’ or knowledgeable, the child’s perspective in the learning process is recognised. The learning environment which supports this image of the child as a learner is according to Bruner (1996) an autonomy supportive active learning environment. In an autonomy supportive active learning environment understanding and meaning making is fostered through discussion, collaboration and negotiation. The voice of the child is heard, and the child’s interests are followed (Bruner, 1996). The curriculum emerges from the curiosities and interest of the child and a shared frame of reference is nurtured through positive interactions and ‘sustained shared thinking’ between the child and the educator (Siraj et al., 2015, p.7). In this learning environment, the child is an active participant in his/her own learning. The curriculum approach is child centred and the child is seen as a subject of learning who actively acts upon and transforms his or her world (Freire, 1994). Within an autonomy supportive active learning environment, the child's three basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness are met (Ryan and Deci, 2017). However, learning environments which support children’s autonomy, competence and relatedness do not exist in isolation there are several factors which influence the development of these environments from a macro to a micro perspective. These influences are dynamic and bidirectional as outlined in Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) Bioecological Theory.

‘Relationships are the ‘active ingredients’ of an environment’s influence on healthy development; they incorporate the qualities that best promote wellbeing’ (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004, p.1). Based on an image of the child as competent and an active participant in his or her own learning and development, Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998, 2006) confirm that development is influenced by context but also by the reciprocal interactions which occur between an individual and environments, which includes people, objects and symbols.

‘human development takes place through processes of progressively more complex reciprocal interaction between an active, evolving biopsychological human organism and
the persons, objects, and symbols in its immediate external environment’. (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006, p. 797)

The pedagogical approach in the participating Montessori preschools was a very traditional approach. There was a focus on whole and large group activities. The approach to teaching and learning was didactic, with children imitating, repeating and practicing skills. The programme was rigidly timetabled, and adult directed. In the controlling learning environment of the participating Montessori preschools, children’s emergent interests were not followed. This has been demonstrated in the case studies. There was an emphasis on extrinsic motivators such as the ‘special books’ or the ‘golden chair’ or the ‘star chart’ as a means of controlling behaviour. This, Ryan and Deci (2017) suggest disincentivises children and reduces their intrinsic motivation to learn. The use of extrinsic motivators in both Montessori preschools participating in the study resulted in high levels of competition between children and exclusion of children who will never be so ‘good’ or do the ‘right thing’ to get a star or sit on the ‘golden chair’. This resulted in high levels of behaviour management as children became frustrated when the learning environment was controlling and authoritative. All the Montessori preschool educators confirmed a belief that children learn through play, However, based on observation of practice, play was considered in the participating Montessori preschools as a break from the real ‘work’ of learning (Bruner, 1996).

The philosophical approach of a Play-based preschool is according to Rogers (2011) problematic, traditionally she suggests that in western discourses of early childhood, the concept of play has been positioned in opposition to what some would consider more worthwhile counterpoint of work. This division she suggests results in play being relegated to specific times and places. Other reasons why Rogers (2011) has argued that the coupling of play and pedagogy is problematic is the fact that by theorising play as work as Gibbons (2007) suggests, play is no longer about choice and could be seen as a method of social control (Rogers, 2011). The evidence from observation, questionnaires and discussion with the educators in the participating Play-based settings confirmed that play was being used to
teach children and prepare them to attend primary school. This approach to teaching through play was premised by some of the educators, as meeting parents’ expectations of school readiness.

Gray (2015) confirms that the fundamental premise of play is that it is self-chosen and self-directed. The observations in the Play-based settings identified that children’s play was primarily adult-led, educators were engaged and directing the play and identifying the rules. Play was in the most part not spontaneous, it was on the admission of the Play-based educators, goal directed. There were different degrees of time tabling and structure in each of the settings, which impacted on children’s play (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). Timetabling of the daily planned programme did not offer opportunities for children to take time to explore and think or to leave work in progress and return to it later (Laevers, 2012, 2017; Bruner, 2016). There was significant adult direction of children’s play in all three settings to varying levels. Play was used in all three settings as a teaching tool (Singer, 2013). While the Play-based environments offered varying levels of wonder and delight for children’s play the absence in two of the three Play-based preschools of natural and open-ended materials reduced the opportunities for children to explore, think and make meaning. Plastic materials or materials which have only one function, do not stimulate or ignite children’s curiosity and intrinsic motivation to explore, analyse, evaluate, interpret or innovate. The lack of open-ended materials and natural materials resulted in the play environments lacking provocations for children to engage in deep meaning making, and as a result through onsite observation children’s play experiences lacked the essential ingredients of choice, wonder and delight (Mardell, 2016).

The underpinning philosophy of the Reggio approach is based on an image of the child who is ‘rich in potential, strong, powerful, competent and most of all, connected to adults and other children’ (Malaguzzi, cited in Edwards et al., 1998, p.275). The Reggio inspired preschool environments were rich in both natural and open-ended materials. The educators considered the learning environment as the ‘third teacher’. Within this active learning
environment educators offered several different provocations daily to support and ignite children’s curiosities (Malaguzzi, 1998). Children’s emergent interests were followed in most cases, and the role of the adult was to stand back, observe, trust and give children time to ‘work out’ the numerous possibilities of their play. The active partnership with parents in the Reggio inspired settings enhanced the quality of the teaching and learning environment for young children (Rinaldi, 2006).

When asked about what exactly the pedagogical approach was in one of the Reggio inspired settings, the educator confirmed that “what we do here is play, but parents will not pay for their children to play” (B, R, 11). The role of the educator in the Reggio preschools was that of a co-researcher with the child, and learning was recognised as being reciprocal. This was evidenced in the onsite observations. The educators trusted children in most cases to make decisions; children were free to choose what they wished to do and who they wanted to play with in the setting. Educators facilitated and scaffolded play and they supported and empowered children to reach their full potential, this was evident through the observations where educators extended children’s thinking by providing further resources from the internet, books and speaking with parents and other educators. The Reggio educators observed were always one step ahead of the child, provoking thinking and igniting curiosities (Vygotsky, 1979; Bruner, 1996; Malaguzzi, 1998).

7.3.3 Theme 3 - Wellbeing and Involvement of Preschool children

Laevers (2017) has identified that levels of wellbeing and involvement are the most direct reliable signals of quality ECEC provision. A detailed review of the literature pertinent to wellbeing in preschool education was undertaken for this study. Findings from the literature and data analysis confirm that high levels of wellbeing are present when the children’s three basic needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness are met in the active learning environment, within a nurturing, relational pedagogy (Laevers; 2012; Ryan and Deci, 2017). The child’s basic psychological needs, according to Laevers (2017), will be met when the learning environment is
an autonomy supportive environment, resulting in high levels of wellbeing. A study by Sandseter and Seland (2015), conducted with preschool children age 4-6 years in Norway, confirms that children have higher levels of subjective wellbeing when they enjoy what they are doing, equally they have lower levels of wellbeing if they do not like or enjoy what they are doing. The study identifies the things that children do not like or would prefer not to do in preschool; this includes spending excessive time in large group activities such as circle time and not having autonomy or choice to choose what they wish to do and with whom.

The findings from the two Montessori preschools identified that the mean scores for children’s wellbeing levels were lower than the acceptable level. This was correlated to learning environments which were controlling and passive. Ryan and Deci (2017) suggest that when elements such as curiosity, creativity, productivity and vitality are present, then social integration, wellbeing and compassion are heightened. Equally, factors which hinder human flourishing, such as lack of autonomy, poor quality relationships or feelings of being ineffective, can contribute to depletion, fragmentation, antisocial behaviours, and unhappiness (Ryan and Deci, 2017). The mean results for wellbeing based on the observations of practice highlighted that children did not have high levels of autonomy, the activities in some cases, were not challenging or meaningful for children. One example of this was the digging for dinosaur’s bones in the sand, when there was a fabulous digger working in the field next door. The over reliance on large group time and extrinsic motivators, together with the low levels for children’s choice impacted on children’s levels of wellbeing. Children in the participating Montessori preschools were being moulded and rewarded for being passive, compliant learners (Kang and Wallace, 2005). Learning in the Montessori preschools was adult directed; as a result, children did not have an opportunity to become, ‘mastery’ learners (Dweck, 1986).

The mean scores for children wellbeing in participating Play–based settings were recorded at an acceptable level. The findings identify that when the learning environment was autonomy supportive, when children had choice
and autonomy and where there were nurturing relationship then the levels of wellbeing as calculated using the Respect Reflect Relate Observation tool (State of South Australia, Department of Education and Children’s Services, 2008) were higher than the lowest acceptable score for wellbeing levels. One of the Play-based preschools, the Indigo playschool, did not attain an acceptable score for wellbeing. This was due to the play environment as evidenced through onsite observation being controlling, adult-directed and based on a traditional pedagogical approach. The findings also confirm that when children had high levels of autonomy, competence and relatedness in the Play-based settings they had higher levels of wellbeing. Children in the Play-based settings did enjoy their play, when they had the opportunity to play within the timetable of the preschool day. Lower levels of eudemonic wellbeing were evident in the playschools where the play was primarily adult-directed. These lower levels of eudemonic wellbeing were correlated with lower levels of involvement in play, due to timetabling or the play being adult directed. This verifies Csikszentmihalyi’s (2008) suggestion that a state of flow or involvement is the secret to happiness or wellbeing.

The findings from the Reggio inspired preschools confirm that high levels of wellbeing were recorded in both preschool settings, above the minimum levels. This was correlated to the autonomy supportive environment in the two Reggio inspired settings as evidenced through the onsite observations. Children in the Reggio inspired settings were supported by the rich learning environment to be competent. They had personal power to make decisions and choices and their play was meaningful as it emerged from their interests. These are some of the elements which Fattore et al. (2007) suggests are necessary for children to build resilience through their experiences and support high levels of wellbeing. Children in the Reggio inspired preschools were afforded the opportunities to make decisions; their emergent interests were followed. There were however times when the educator re directed children’s play as outlined in the case study of the Violet preschool. While the decision to change the game from policemen ‘killing baddies’ to policemen controlling traffic was done in consultation with the children, the children complied with the educator and changed the
direction of their game. This highlighted the power relationship between the educator and the children and questions what true consultation with children really is. Levels of eudemonic wellbeing were high in the Reggio inspired preschools as children were challenged in their thinking and had opportunities to experience success (Laevers, 2012). There was a balance between the skills of the children and the level of challenge or provocation presented by the educator. This meaningful learning resulted in high levels of self-actualisation and eudemonic wellbeing.

When measuring wellbeing in all the preschools using Reflect Respect Relate Observation Scales (State of South Australia, Department of Education and Children’s Services, 2008) children’s levels of wellbeing was measured based on three domains. These included happiness and satisfaction levels, social functioning, and children’s learning dispositions. Children’s wellbeing was also influenced by the proximal processes, person, context and time as outlined by Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006). Children in the preschools which were autonomy supportive were confident to express their needs, ideas and feelings as the educators welcomed and asked for children’s contributions. The children in these preschools initiated activities in individual, small and large groups. In the autonomy supportive learning environments there were some large group activities, however being part of a large group was never compulsory. Children made their own decisions and their decisions were respected in most cases. Educators provided realistic challenges for children’s learning and the children actively participated in their learning. Relationships were reciprocal and dynamic, supporting young children’s self-esteem and intrinsic motivation to learn (Hayes et al, 2017).

In contrast, in preschools where the pedagogical approach was traditional or controlling, children had lower levels of wellbeing. This was correlated with children having little autonomy or choice, there was a focus on large group activities and the activities did not challenge children’s thinking and as such were not meaningful. The relationships were authoritarian based on an image of the child as being needy and innocent, in need of protection and
management, which resulted in the use of extrinsic motivators to control and manage children’s behaviour.

Turning attention to the children’s involvement levels, Laevers (1993) suggests that high levels of involvement are characterised by deep concentration, intense energy persistence and determination and a high degree of satisfaction. The research identifies that measuring the levels of wellbeing and involvement provides an estimation of the power of the learning environment and informs us about how the pedagogical approach impacts on children’s experience. Csikszentmihalyi (1975) confirms that for high levels of involvement to occur there are factors which must be in place in the preschool setting. These factors include an environment which ignites children’s curiosities to explore, think and make meaning. Learning activities should be meaningful, and the demands of the task should be challenging, but should also be well matched to the child’s capacity or competence. When children are secure and feel valued in the preschool environment, where the relationships are nurturing and respectful, then children will feel confident to make mistakes and learn from the experience (Laevers, 2017). Csikszentmihalyi (1975) refers to autotelic activities which are activities where the emphasis is on the process rather than the product or outcome. These autotelic activities Csikszentmihalyi (1975) suggests, inspire ‘flow’ or involvement. When children are engaged in these autotelic activities and experience sustained, shared thinking (Siraj et al., 2015), Laevers (2017) confirms that they exhibit high levels of involvement.

The findings from this research identify that, children exhibited high levels of involvement when the preschool environment was autonomy supportive and in contrast low levels of involvement were recorded when the learning environment was controlling. Observation and scoring of children’s involvement levels was based on nine indicators: concentration, energy, facial expression, persistence, precision, reaction time, verbal utterance and satisfaction (State of South Australia, Department of Education and Children’s Services, 2008). High levels of involvement were recorded in preschool settings which where autonomy supportive. In these settings
activities were challenging and new provocations were added daily to inspire children’s curiosities. Children were provided with the time and space to engage deeply in their meaning making processes. Laevers (2012) suggests that alternative teaching strategies such as showing an interest in the child’s activities, making suggestions on how play might be expanded, posing questions, offering provocations and encouraging discussion and dialogue are decisive factors in the overall quality of the curriculum and levels of involvement.

In autonomy supportive environments, children’s autonomy, choice and competence were supported. Children were observed learning through collaborative, hands-on experiences with the educator and peers, which according to Shernoff et al. (2014), results in higher levels of ‘flow’. Andersen (2004) confirms that when there is an emphasis on student autonomy and the student’s emerging interest and there is an appropriate balance between teacher-led and student-led learning activities, then students exhibit higher levels of involvement in their learning. In autonomy supportive learning environments children’s emergent interests were supported, facilitated and extended by the educator. The findings for children’s levels of flow in autonomy supportive learning environments confirms the findings of Rathunde and Csikszentmihalyi (2005) that, students in non-traditional learning environments which emphasise active learning, tend to experience more flow in comparison to the experience of students in traditional schools.

The findings suggest that in learning environments which were controlling, based on a traditional pedagogical approach, where teaching was based on a didactic approach and the preschool educator transmitted the knowledge to the children, levels of involvement were low. In these controlled environments the teaching was adult-directed, and children’s emergent interests were not considered. The children in the preschools using a traditional pedagogical approach did not have choice or autonomy and activities were primarily large group activities, as opposed to following children’s emergent interests. The findings suggest that this traditional didactic approach to teaching where the curriculum was timetabled with
long-term learning goals and outcomes in keeping with Schmidt (2010) findings are correlated with low levels of flow. Levels of flow in the preschools where the pedagogical approach was controlling were low as a direct result of the controlling nature of the environment, the use of extrinsic motivators and children being seen as passive objects of learning.

7.3.4 Theme 4 - Ecological Influences on the Image of the Child as a Learner

There are several external factors which have influenced how the child is perceived as a learner. However, placing the child in the centre of an ecological model, clarifies that historical, political, social, cultural and personal influences which change over time directly or indirectly influence children’s preschool experiences. As identified in Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) Bioecological theory, the relationships that the preschool educator has with parents, guardians and families is core to quality experiences for young children. In total across the seven preschool settings participating in this study in the two geographical locations the west of Ireland and Boston, 87 parents completed a parental questionnaire. The questionnaires provided insight into parents’ expectation of the preschool settings and their expectations of the educators. The questionnaires also demonstrated parents’ understanding of how their child learns and the level of their engagement in their child’s learning and development in the preschool setting. These findings also highlight parents’ understanding of the value of play in supporting their child’s learning and development. The lack of understanding of the value of play by parents as identified in the questionnaires is concerning, particularly in Ireland where the early years curriculum framework Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009) is a Play-based curriculum. It is also concerning in relation to the Reggio inspired preschools as the observed practice in the Reggio inspired preschools was strongly focused on play, but not named as play.

The different contexts of early childhood education and care in Ireland and Boston also influenced the findings of this study, directly impacting on the structural, process and outcome quality of children’s preschool experiences.
Parents of children who accessed preschool in Ireland were availing of the ECCE scheme. Parents of children attending Reggio inspired preschools in Boston, paid high fees and were actively involved in their children’s preschool education. Parents’ expectations were remarkably different. In Ireland 82% of parents (n=32) of children who attended a Play-based preschool, who completed the parental questionnaire confirmed that they send their child to preschool so that they would be ready to attend primary school. Parents of children attending a Montessori preschool confirmed that 38.5% (n=11) confirmed that they send their child to preschool to prepare them to attend primary school. In Boston none of the parents of children in the Play-based preschool did so to prepare their child to attend primary school, therefore the results are reflective of the Irish context only. In the Reggio inspired preschools 94.44% (n=17) of parents who had a child attending the preschools confirmed that they send their child to a Reggio inspired preschool to explore, think and learn. The context, social and cultural values identified in this one question, highlight clearly how the context from micro to macro, impacts directly on young children’s early years experiences and their levels of wellbeing and involvement.

At a macro level, the policies, values and commitments to ECEC have a significant influence on the quality of provision and young children’s ECEC experiences. The rapid policy changes in the ECEC sector in Ireland, underpinned by international research and theory, have and continue to impact on the quality of preschool children’s experiences. The historical, cultural and changing social context in Ireland and internationally, together with the rapid changes over time in policy and practice, continues to influence the educator’s image of the child as a learner, the pedagogical approach and children’s subsequent levels of wellbeing and involvement. Core to these influences are the quality of the relationships or proximal processes which includes the processes, person, context and time.

The knowledge and understanding that the educator has about how children learn and the role of the educator in children’s learning is also significant when considering the pedagogical approach and children’s learning experiences. As outlined in the CoRE report (Urban et al., 2011) the
competence of the workforce is one of the most salient predictors of the quality of ECEC provision. The educator’s knowledge, practice and values which are developed through critical reflection are, according to Urban et al. (2011), at the very core of professional competence. The educators in the Reggio inspired preschool were highly qualified; they had allocated paid noncontact time, one hour for every hour teaching. Preschool educators in Boston are required to undertake a minimum of fifteen hours of professional development annually. This contrasts with the situation in Ireland where the poor terms and conditions of preschool educators has been highlighted, where there are few monetary or professional incentives to engage in further education, professional learning or critical reflection.

Parents across the three setting types confirmed that the qualifications of the staff, was very important to them. The influence and expectations of parents was identified by educators as an important consideration and one that can and does influence directly or indirectly the choices educators make and their pedagogical approach. In the Reggio inspired preschools in Boston, before children start in the preschool, the preschool educators undertake a home visit to meet the child in his or her own home and get to know the family. Parents commit to working / volunteer in the preschool one day per month and provide the lunch for the group on that day. Parents advised that as a result of being a parent helper, they had a greater understanding of the work of the preschool educator and their child’s experiences in preschool. Educators confirmed that having parent helpers in the preschool supported positive relationships with parents and families. Parents of children attending the Reggio preschools choose this pedagogical approach for their child and as such both the parents and educators had a shared vision for the child’s preschool experience. It must be acknowledged that the families of children attending the Reggio inspired preschools in Boston were all from a similar socio-economic group, which confirms the two-tier system of ECEC in Boston. There is no requirement or policy supports for parents to engage in active partnership with early childhood education and care settings and their child’s preschool experience in Ireland,
however access to, two years of free preschool, through the ECCE scheme is a universal provision for children in Ireland.

7.4 Adding to the Knowledge Base – Moving from a Tentative Conceptual Framework to a Tentative Practice Design Framework

This research study was undertaken to answer the following research question. How does the educator’s image of the child as a learner influence her/his pedagogical approach and how does the preschool educator’s pedagogical approach subsequently impact on children’s level of wellbeing and involvement in the preschool setting? The overarching aim of the research was to ‘Explore the preschool educator’s image of the child as a learner on the choice of her/his pedagogical approach, (Montessori, Play-based or Reggio inspired) and the subsequent influence on preschool children’s levels of wellbeing and involvement’.

There was evidence of very good practice across each of the seven preschool settings participating in this research study. All the educators confirmed that they wanted the children in the preschool settings to have quality preschool experiences. The learning environments in all seven participating preschools were autonomy supportive to varying degrees. The educators participating in this study regardless of the pedagogical approach they were practicing confirmed that, they believed that children were competent. This study has identified that there are differences between the espoused views of the preschool educators and those practiced in the preschool settings, as evidenced through the onsite observations. The quality of the pedagogical practice was explored taking the two indicators of quality, the active learning environment and relationships, while the outcomes for children were considered based on the quality outcome indicators of wellbeing and involvement. When the active learning environment was autonomy supportive, this resulted in children having high levels of wellbeing and involvement.

Equally when the learning environment was controlling children’s levels of wellbeing and involvement were reduced. The findings suggest that,
children’s, levels of wellbeing and involvement cannot be based on whether the preschool setting offers a Montessori, Play-based or Reggio inspired philosophy. The differences as identified in this study were as a result of the learning environments provided by the preschool educators. These learning environments varied along a continuum between authoritarian or controlling or autonomy supportive. The preschool educator’s interpretation of the principles and values of the chosen philosophical approach and other variables as outlined in this study were reflected in the preschool educator’s pedagogical practice.

It is time now to return to the tentative conceptual framework developed in Chapter 3. The tentative conceptual model was developed based on the theories outlined in the literature. However, following the data collection in the seven preschool settings it was evident that this tentative conceptual model did not fully represent the complexities which were evidenced in practice, to answer the research question. Following the data collection, it became clear that this model was too simplistic to capture the nature of the images of children that educators hold and the associated pedagogical approaches practiced by preschool educators across the three setting types Montessori, Play-based and Reggio inspired. Therefore, the tentative conceptual model together with the learning based on the findings of this study have been used to develop a tentative practice design framework which can be applied to support improved quality practice with increased levels of wellbeing and involvement for children in early years settings (See Figure 7.52).
Figure 7.51: Learning for wellbeing tentative practice design framework
As shown in Figure 7.52; Learning for wellbeing tentative practice design framework, the chronosystem identifies the change or continuity across time and how these impact on the other systems. The learning for wellbeing practice design framework recognises that over time there is constant change, in relation to policy, research and practice. Our beliefs, values and understandings also change over time, due to increased knowledge, societal influences and the changing contexts of the other systems. Change also occurs across the life course from birth to death and is influenced by our lifelong learning.

At a macro level national and international policy, political context and societal values impact significantly on ECEC provision. In Ireland the vision of; First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028 (Government of Ireland, 2018, p.12), is that ‘those providing services for babies, young children and their families will be equipped to contribute to their learning, development, health and wellbeing’. Equally at a policy level, committed to in; Better Outcomes Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People, 2014-2020 (DCYA, 2014) the vision is that children will be active and healthy, with positive physical and mental wellbeing and will achieve their full potential in all areas of their learning and development. This is the aspiration for quality ECEC in Ireland, the findings of this study further support this vision and the implementation plan for; First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028 (DCYA, 2018, p.12). From an international perspective the recognition by the OECD (2020) and the European Commission (2014) of the importance and value of quality ECEC provision in supporting children’s development and wellbeing also gives recognition to its importance.

The exo level outlines the indirect influences on young children’s ECEC experiences. At this exo level there are also policy commitments in; First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028 (Government of Ireland, 2018, p.12) to support families with options to balance work and care, this will further support parents to
access opportunities to become more engaged as active partners in their child’s early childhood education and care experiences.

The tentative practice design framework outlines at a meso level, the interactions and relationships between micro systems which support children’s holistic development. The importance of positive interactions and relationships between all parties involved in the child’s holistic development is captured here. The relationship between the ECEC setting and home through active participation of parents and families, this includes the level of active participation and engagement that parents, and families have with the ECEC setting, management and staff. The benefits of parents’ active participation in their child’s ECEC experiences has been documented in the literature and highlighted in this study. Parents in the Reggio inspired settings confirmed that they had a better understanding of the role of the educator as a result of their active participation in their child’s ECEC experience. Equally staff, highlighted that the active involvement of parents supported them in their role and daily practice. This was also the case for the Yellow Play-based setting where educators had recognised, the value of active parent participation and partnership. The quality of the relationships and interactions between microsystems such as the ECEC setting, management and staff, early intervention teams and families also impacts on the quality of young children’s ECEC experiences. Quality relationships support each child’s individual right to inclusion and to actively participate in his or her ECEC experience.

The micro system considers the most direct influences which impact and directly influence the child’s holistic development. These include the child’s parents, their family, the preschool setting, the ECEC educators and other children. Crucial to this study is the educator’s image of the child as a learner and how this influences her / his pedagogical approach and children’s subsequent levels of wellbeing and involvement.

Based on the pedagogical practices in the ECEC settings participating in this study, there are a number of areas which must be considered here. These include current theories of teaching and learning, in the western world
which are based on an image of the child as being competent from birth. These theories of teaching and learning underpin the Montessori, Play-based and Reggio inspired approach to ECEC. However, there must be recognition of the continuum in preschool settings between the espoused philosophy and the actual practice of the preschool educators. When the preschool educator’s image of the child is that of a competent child, the learning environment will be an active, autonomy supportive learning environment. Within this active autonomy supportive learning environment each child’s basic needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness will be met. The values and the cultures of the setting and the individuals in an autonomy supportive active learning environment will support high quality nurturing relationships between the preschool educators, children, parents, families and the broader community as identified in Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) Bioecological theory and proximal processes. This will result in higher levels of both structural and process quality.

A further direct influence on the quality of the pedagogical approach as identified in the literature (European Commission, 2014; Urban et al, 2017) is the qualification levels of the educators. The greatest impact on practice according to the CoRE report (Urban et al., 2011) is a competent workforce. An enhanced focus on the quality of the active learning environment, relationships and children’s levels of wellbeing and involvement during initial training, followed on through in-service training and continual professional learning will further support quality ECEC practice with increased levels of wellbeing and involvement. The revised model which is a tentative practice design framework as outlined in Figure 52 identifies how the addition to knowledge from this study can influence practice in ECEC settings to enhance process quality, resulting in children having increased levels of wellbeing and involvement in their meaning making processes.

Taking the findings from this study which are based on a small sample of seven preschool settings, it must be noted that the findings do not claim to be representative of all settings which identify as Montessori, Play-based or Reggio inspired. The findings confirm that when the learning environment
is an active, autonomy supportive learning environment and there are high quality relationships and interactions, then children will have higher levels of wellbeing and involvement. The tentative practice design framework identifies the level on a continuum of the quality of the active learning environment and relationships and how these impact on children’s levels of wellbeing and involvement. The model shows by using the bidirectional arrows that different pedagogical approaches may be placed on a continuum between a controlling and didactic pedagogy and an autonomy supportive pedagogy.

The findings of this study identified that in the Montessori preschools participating in this study where the pedagogical practice was based on a traditional approach which was didactic, the mean score for children’s levels of involvement was low. This can be correlated with children not having choice or autonomy with reduced opportunity to explore, think and make meaning with friends. The relationship scores were correlated to the levels of children’s wellbeing. The relationships in the Montessori preschools participating in the study were at an acceptable level, relationships were a mix of nurturing relationships and relationships which were authoritarian, and this was reflected in the scores.

The scores for the Play–based preschools identified similarly that the quality of the active learning environment reflected in the scores for children’s involvement levels. The learning environments in two of the Play-based settings were a mix of autonomy supportive and controlling practices. The third Play–based setting had a very controlling environment; this was reflected in the involvement level scores as identified in the findings when environments were controlling children did not have high levels of involvement. The relationship scores in the Play-based settings were reflective of both nurturing and authoritarian pedagogical practices and were at an acceptable level as reflected in the findings. In the two Play-based settings where the relationships were more nurturing as opposed to authoritarian, this was reflected in children’s higher levels of wellbeing.
Finally, the scores for the quality of the Reggio inspired active learning environment were high as the environments were highly autonomy supportive and children’s basic needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness were met. This reflected in children having high levels of involvement. The quality of the relationships which were reciprocal and nurturing reflected in children having higher levels of well-being.

The findings clearly show that active learning environments which support children’s basic needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness, where there are high quality relationships have a significant positive impact on children’s levels of well-being and involvement. Environments which are controlling and didactic have a negative impact on children’s levels of wellbeing and involvement. If our vision is to ensure that all children attending an ECEC setting have learning and development opportunities to reach their full potential, then we must ensure that children have high levels of wellbeing and involvement to achieve this vision. This study identifies that autonomy supportive active learning environments and high-quality relationships will support high levels of wellbeing and involvement in early years provision.

There are other contexts which influence quality ECEC provision. At a macro level, national and international policy, societal values, economics, history, culture and policies on family friendly work practices all directly impact on the quality of young children’s early years experiences. Nelson Mandela (1995) confirmed that, “There can be no keener revelation of a society’s soul than the way in which it treats its children” (May 1995). Political and societal values are the most critical influencers on the quality of children’s ECEC experiences. Spaggiari (1998) suggests that the years between birth and six years should be seen at a political and societal level as a precious resource of human potential, which all forward looking societies should invest in responsibly. The findings of this study identify that quality early childhood education and care provision has a significant cost implication, however the cost benefit analysis, economic and societal has identified the benefits of quality ECEC provision (Heckman, 2016). If as a
society in Ireland or in Boston we can commit to valuing all children equally, then, ECEC provision must be invested in appropriately.

7.5 Conclusion

This research study asked the research question. How does the educator’s image of the child as a learner influence her/his pedagogical approach and how does the preschool educator’s pedagogical approach subsequently impact on children’s level of wellbeing and involvement in the preschool setting? The study identified the educator’s image of the child in three preschool setting types; it considered the pedagogical approach or the active learning environment and children’s levels of wellbeing and involvement. The literature review, theory and data which were triangulated confirmed that an autonomy supportive learning environment which supports young children’s basic needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness results in children exhibiting high levels of wellbeing and involvement. This is significant in light of the fact that 118,899 children accessed the ECCE scheme in 2017/2018 (Pobal, 2018). However, we do not have an evaluation or measure of the quality of that provision or children’s experiences in the 4,242 settings registered to provide the ECCE scheme in Ireland (Pobal, 2018).

I have identified a number of policy, practice and research recommendations which will enhance ECEC provision. These will be presented in the conclusion chapter, chapter 8. The recommendations from this study will focus on the implications for policy, practice and research in the Irish context. However, some of the recommendations will be applicable to the context of ECEC in Boston and internationally. This research provides a critical starting point towards reflecting on the evaluation of the quality of preschool provision in Ireland. The study has answered the research question, confirming that, the preschool educator’s image of the child as a learner influences her / his pedagogical approach and that the educator’s pedagogical approach significantly impacts on, children’s level of wellbeing and involvement.
Chapter 8: Conclusion

8.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an overview and summary of the thesis. Starting with chapter 1, the study was introduced, and an outline of the study was presented. Chapter 2 and 3 identified and reviewed the literature pertinent to this study and a tentative conceptual model was developed based on the theories identified in the literature. Chapter 4 provided a comprehensive overview of the context of early childhood education and care in Ireland and Boston. The research methodologies employed to undertake this study were discussed in chapter 5. This was followed by chapter 6 where the findings of the study were presented. In chapter 7, the discussion chapter, four key high-level findings of the study were discussed, and the findings together with the theory and knowledge gained from the literature review were used to develop a tentative practice design framework. Recommendations for policy, practice and research were presented based on the theory and findings of this research study.

This final chapter, the concluding chapter of the thesis, presents reflections and recommendations derived from the study. Section 8.2 will recap on the aim and objectives of the study which have been addressed through the theory, data collection and analysis phases of the research. This will be followed by section 8.3 which outlines the methodological approach to conducting this study. Section 8.4 will provide the key findings from objectives 1 to 3. Recommendations for policy, practice and research are provided in Section 8.5 and section 8.6 concludes the thesis.

8.2 The Rationale, Aim and Objectives of the Thesis

The number of children attending out of home early childhood education and care before starting in primary school in Ireland has been continually increasing since the 1960s. Following the introduction of the free preschool year in Ireland in 2010, the numbers of children accessing preschool early childhood education and care has increased year on year. The Annual Early Years Sector Profile Report 2017/2018 (Pobal, 2018) confirms that 118, 899

This is a high level of investment in early childhood education and care which must be recognised and welcomed. However it is difficult therefore to comprehend based on the numbers of children accessing a government funded ECEC programme that there is no process to evaluate the quality of the ECEC provision or to evaluate the experiences of young children accessing their free preschool education through the ECCE scheme. In essence, there is no verifiable evidence of what it is like to be a child in a preschool setting in Ireland. Equally, there is no evaluation of the quality of the pedagogical approach or if it is ‘fit for purpose’ in supporting and nurturing children’s learning and development.

This study asked the research question. How does the educator’s image of the child as a learner influence her/his pedagogical approach and how does the preschool educator’s pedagogical approach subsequently impact on children’s level of wellbeing and involvement in the preschool setting? The overarching aim of this research therefore was to ‘Explore the preschool educator’s image of the child as a learner on the choice of her/his pedagogical approach, (Montessori, Play-based or Reggio inspired) and the subsequent influence on preschool children’s levels of wellbeing and involvement’.

Malaguzzi (1994) suggests that the educator’s image of the child is where his or her teaching begins. Bruner (1996) also confirms that the educator’s beliefs and understandings about how children learn and their image of the child as a learner directly influences their pedagogical approach. While Laevers (2017) posits that the most effective way to evaluate the quality of the ECEC provision and the pedagogical approach is to measure the levels of children’s wellbeing and involvement. High levels of wellbeing and
involvement, according to Laevers (2017), confirm high quality provision and are the best indicators that the ECEC programme is effective.

To address the overall aim of this research study and in the context of the reviewed literature, the following set of objectives were considered:

- **Objective 1** - To explore the preschool educator’s, understanding of her/his role as an early childhood educator in a sample of preschool settings in the west of Ireland and Boston.

- **Objective 2** - To identify the preschool educator’s image of the child as a learner and explore how this influences the pedagogical practice in the preschool settings in the west of Ireland and Boston.

- **Objective 3** - To compare children’s level of wellbeing and involvement as a result of the quality of the relationships and the active learning environment in settings offering different pedagogical approaches, (Montessori, Play-based, Reggio inspired).

- **Objective 4** – To examine the implications for ECEC policy and practice as a result of the addition to knowledge of this study.

Based on the findings and discussion (See Chapters 6 and 7) of this study, each of these objectives has been achieved and the research question has been addressed.

**8.3 Methodological Approach**

This comparative ethnographic study was conducted in a total of seven preschools in the west of Ireland and Boston. The study sought to understand how the preschool educator’s image of the child as a learner influenced the educator’s pedagogical approach and how as a result the learning environment impacted on children’s levels of wellbeing and involvement in the preschool setting. The study sought firstly to interrogate the preschool educators’ understanding of their roles as educators and their associated pedagogical approach. This was done taking into consideration the macro and micro influences which impact on the educators’ approaches.
to teaching and learning. Taking a mixed methods approach, findings from the data collated from questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and onsite observations was triangulated to weave a rich picture or tapestry. The findings provide important new knowledge collated from theory and the research data about how young children learn and the critical influence of the preschool educators’ pedagogical approach on children’s levels of wellbeing and involvement.

8.3.1 Gaps in the Literature

Based on the review of the literature, a dominant gap was identified in literature which specifically considers how the child is perceived and the image of the child as a learner. While there was literature which explored the concept of children and childhood, this relatively new term of the image of the child as a learner is not very evident in the literature. There is a significant amount of literature which examines Self-Determination Theory; this includes literature in relation to Self-Determination Theory in psychotherapy and behavioural change, health care, sport, motivation, work and organisational practice and education. There is however an obvious gap in the literature which links Self-Determination Theory with theories of pedagogy and practice in early childhood education and care settings. There is also a gap in the literature in linking autonomy supportive learning environments with children’s levels of wellbeing and involvement.

8.3.2 Limitations and Challenges

All research has limitations and this study is no exception. This section outlines the primary limitations of this study. The most significant limitation of this study was the different social, economic and ECEC contexts between preschools in Ireland and Boston. In Ireland there is universal free preschool provision for up to two years for every child prior to attending primary school. As such, ECEC is considered to be a societal responsibility, funded by the exchequer. In Boston preschool education is based on a market or business model (Moss, 2009). The OECD (2006) has highlighted the promotion of the marketisation of early childhood services in what Esping-Andersen (1999) refers to as liberal welfare states. A
critique of a market model of ECEC is its competitive nature, which separates ‘the sheep from the goats, the men from the boys’ (George, 1999, p.3). In the case of this study in the Boston context, it separates those who can or choose to pay and those who cannot or choose not to pay for ECEC provision. Within this market model ECEC is treated as a commodity and the individual in this case parents, are empowered by the market. This study as have many others (Sylva et al., 2004; Bradley and Vandell, 2007; Litjens and Taguma, 2010; OECD, 2012; Phillips and Lowenstein, 2011; Melhuish, 2015), have identified the value and importance of quality ECEC provision for children’s wellbeing, accrued wellbeing and lifelong learning trajectories.

Every child has an equal right to quality ECEC experiences (UNCRC, 1989). We know from the research (European Commission, 2014; Melhuish, 2015; Urban et al, 2015, 2011) the essential structural and process elements of quality which result in positive outcomes for children. This study clearly identifies, based on the literature and observed practice that, qualifications, access to continual professional development and staff terms and conditions are core indicators which support quality ECEC provision. A challenge I experienced while undertaking this study was that of being in a position of observing practice which at times did not support high levels of structural or dynamic quality. As an early years specialist, I have a duty of care to children accessing ECEC settings in Ireland to try to influence policy and practice to ensure that all children, attending ECEC provision have quality early childhood education and care experiences.

A limitation of this study was the number of ECEC settings which participated in the study. Educators, children and families from three play-based, two Montessori and three Reggio inspired settings participated in the study. This small number is not representative of all of the three setting types. However, it is important to highlight that this study was not comparing different approaches, such as, Montessori, Play-based or Reggio inspired. The study compared how different learning environments, a controlling learning environment, an autonomy supportive learning environment or a learning environment which is a mixture of both
approaches, supports or inhibits children’s levels of wellbeing and involvement.

The findings in the study identified variations across the different philosophical approaches, with some settings providing autonomy supportive environments, others providing controlling environments and some settings were a mix of both autonomy supportive and controlling learning environments. Therefore, the findings have indicated that regardless of the philosophical approach, it is the learning environment, be that autonomy supportive, controlling or mixed which impacts on children’s levels of wellbeing and involvement. This research will further strengthen the need for a national evaluation of the quality of the learning environments based on children’s levels of wellbeing and involvement as a quality outcome in Irish preschool settings.

A further limitation of this study was the need to adapt the observation tool in the context of updated knowledge in relation to conducting observations in preschool settings (Siraj et al., 2015). Recent guidance for conducting onsite observations with young children (Siraj et al., 2015) suggests that observations should only be scored when the observer has an opportunity to reflect on the practice and make an informed decision of what he / she has observed. This was the guidance taken for this study with the intention of improving the ability of the measurement tool to answer the research question (Stewart et al., 2012).

As a person, with what Dweck (1986) describes as a ‘growth mind-set’, I see an opportunity in most challenges, and it was no different in this case. The challenges can be considered under policy, practice and personal. At a policy level, the unprecedented changes to policy in the ECEC sector in Ireland from 2013 until the present, throughout the life of this study, have presented challenges. These challenges included trying to keep abreast of the policy and practice changes which have in most cases been foisted on the Irish ECEC sector. The opportunity in this case was the opportunity to keep up to date with all changes in the sector. At a practice level, engagement of participants in the study was difficult, as at the time of data
collection there were so many competing policy and practice requirements which were putting the preschool educators under increased pressure and stress. The opportunity here was having the good fortune to meet preschool educators who had not previously engaged and were delighted to be invited to participate.

The onsite observations highlighted a few challenges; these include the level of one-to-one interaction in some of the preschool settings. This resulted in missed opportunities and some children becoming invisible in the larger group. A second challenge noted during data collection was the recording of a mean score for the setting based on the addition of scores from each of the children’s observed mean scores. If one child had a low level for wellbeing or involvement, perhaps due to a situation outside the control of the educator or the preschool setting, then the child’s mean score for that variable was reduced, thus affecting the mean score for the setting.

From a personal perspective the challenges were all considered as opportunities. This Aistear, or journey, was a challenge, full of self-doubt. However, the opportunities to travel to the USA, Australia, Belgium and Holland in my quest to gain an in-depth knowledge and understanding, while challenging, has been the most wonderful opportunity.

8.4 Research Findings from the data - Objectives 1 to 3

Key findings based on testing of the theory and the data collated in the study on the tentative conceptual model presented in Chapter 3 confirms that the educator’s image of the child as a learner significantly impacts on his or her pedagogical approach. However, as the findings of this study identify, the espoused image of the child as identified by the preschool educators was not always the image of the child as a competent child based on observation of the preschool educators’ practice and pedagogical approach. The findings also highlight that the learning environment be that an autonomy supportive learning environment, a controlling learning environment or a mixture of both has a significant impact on children’s levels of wellbeing and involvement and their development and learning. The findings identify that if the preschool educator’s image of the child as a learner is based on an
image of a competent child and this is reflected in his or her practice, then the learning environment which she or he creates will be an active autonomy supportive learning environment. In this type of environment, children’s basic needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness are supported. This results in children being intrinsically motivated and active learners. As a result of this engagement and autonomous learning, children exhibit high levels of wellbeing and involvement.

While the study was conducted in three different types of preschool settings, Montessori, Play-based and Reggio inspired the study did not seek to evaluate different approaches. The study explored the teaching and learning environments, in the three setting types Montessori, Play-based and Reggio inspired preschools. The learning environments provided by the preschool educators were influenced by their implicit and explicit image of the child as a learner (Bruner, 1996, Malaguzzi, 1998, Moss et al., 2013). There were also other influences such as the quality of the relationships and interactions and bioecological factors as outlined in the study, which impacted on children’s levels of wellbeing and involvement. If the interpretation of the educational philosophies of the preschool educators in all three setting types Montessori, Play-based and Reggio inspired preschools was a true reflection of the underpinning philosophies as outlined in the literature, then it can be agreed based on the findings of this study that children in each of the setting types would have high levels of wellbeing and involvement.

This deduction is based on the principle that when educators see the child as competent, they provide autonomy supportive learning environments. The philosophies which underpin the three pedagogical types, Montessori, Play-based and Reggio inspired are all based on a social constructivist approach to teaching and learning and an image of the child as a competent learner. The key finding here is that the educators’ interpretation of the educational approach has significant impact on praxis and the learning environments which they provide for preschool children. A tentative practice design framework, learning for Wellbeing was developed based on the theory and the data, which outlines how the findings from this study can be used to impact on ECEC practice. The Learning for Wellbeing practice design
framework will support higher quality ECEC provision with better outcomes for children based on increased levels of wellbeing and involvement.

8.5 Recommendations for Policy, Practice and Research

8.5.1 Policy Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, and to answer the research question. How, does the educator’s image of the child as a learner influence her/his pedagogical approach and how does the preschool educator’s pedagogical approach subsequently impact on children’s level of wellbeing and involvement in the preschool setting? The findings conclude that when the educator provides an autonomy supportive learning environment for children, he or she does so because of her / his implicit or explicate image of the child as a learner. The findings also highlight when children have access to autonomy supportive learning environments; they have high levels of wellbeing and involvement. If we want children to have high quality preschool experiences it is critical that, all preschool learning environments regardless of the philosophical or pedagogical approach should be autonomy supportive active learning environments.

Considering the findings of this study, it is important to recognise the impact of young children’s ECEC experiences on their wellbeing and lifelong learning trajectories. It is therefore essential that every child has a right and access to autonomy supportive quality ECEC provision. Quality ECEC is supported in preschool settings based on the findings of this study, when the learning environment is autonomy supportive, where the preschool educator recognises, values and nurtures children as competent individuals. When the educator sees the child as competent, then she/he will provide an autonomy supportive learning environment based on a social constructivist approach to teaching and learning. This is in contrast to a traditional approach where the learning environment is controlling, and teaching is adult directed.

The findings of this study, when viewed in light of the revised framework and associated data and theory, bring to light a number of key
recommendations for policy, practice and research in Ireland which will now be presented across the three areas in order of importance. These recommendations will support the vision of; *First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and Their Families 2019-2028* (Government of Ireland, 2018) that ‘children make the most of their early years and fulfil their potential’ (Government of Ireland, 2018, p.12). Many of these recommendations are specific the Irish ECEC context, however there are a number of recommendations which are also applicable to the ECEC context in Boston and internationally.

### 8.5.2 National Evaluation of Quality

**Undertake a national evaluation of the levels of process quality in all ECEC settings in Ireland:** *First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and Their Families 2019-2028* (Government of Ireland, 2018) has committed in its implementation plan (DCYA, 2019) to develop a national monitoring and evaluation framework by 2021. The findings from this study further support the need for an evaluation of process and outcome quality in early years settings. By measuring children’s levels of wellbeing and involvement to ascertain what it feels like to be a child in an ECEC setting in Ireland and thereby evaluating the quality of the ECEC provision we will have a baseline to measure if ECEC settings in Ireland which are receiving funding such as the ECCE scheme or other national funding are effective.

There were 185,580 children who availed of at least one of three government programmes in, 2017/2018 (Pobal, 2018). There is currently no evaluation of the process quality of the ECEC provision in Irish ECEC settings nor is there confirmation that the pedagogical approach in preschool settings in Ireland is effective and supporting 21st century skills. An evaluation of the quality of the provision in preschool settings should be prioritised at policy level.

An action research study similar to the Milton Keynes study conducted by Laevers et al. (2009-2010) should be initially piloted in conjunction with Better Start the National Early Years Quality Improvement Development Service to support self-assessment by Irish preschool educators of the
quality of their provision. This would meet the commitment made in; *First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and Their Families 2019-2028* (Government of Ireland, 2018) for self-assessment of quality in ECEC provision.

8.5.3 Workforce Development

**Coordination of a development and training programme for Better Start Quality assurance mentors:** A policy commitment and associated funding to support Better Start mentors and associated groups such as Childcare Committee staff and National Voluntary Childcare Organisation mentoring and support staff to effectively evaluate, mentor and support the quality of ECEC services based on children’s levels of wellbeing and involvement.

**Training and support for ECEC providers:** A policy commitment and associated funding for training and support for ECEC providers to be cascaded down from Better Start mentors, a training programme on how to self-evaluate the quality of the ECEC setting based on quality outcomes, children’s levels of wellbeing and involvement. A self-assessment and self-evaluation have been committed to in; *First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and Their Families 2019-2028* (Government of Ireland, 2018). The findings from this study further supports this policy initiative.

**Parents:**

8.5.4 A media campaign targeted at parents to raise awareness of what quality preschool provision should look like in practice.

This campaign should focus on what quality preschool provision looks like in practice, at a structural, process and outcome level. The aim of this campaign should be to raise parents’ awareness of the importance of quality provision in ECEC to support their child’s holistic development and learning.
8.5.5 Support parents to participate in their children’s learning and development

In recognition of the primary role of parents in their child’s development and learning, there should be a legislative requirement of all early years settings to engage in active partnership with parents, similar to the Boston model. Parents should be supported at a policy level to actively participate and engage with their children’s early learning and development. This will provide parents with increased knowledge of practice in preschool settings and further develop trusting relationships.

8.5.5.1 Raise parents' awareness of the importance and value of play:

Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum framework (NCCA, 2009) is based on a Play-based curriculum. The importance and value of play, while espoused in the policy documents, needs to be transferred to practice. Therefore, an important piece of work needs to be conducted at policy level, to increase parents’ knowledge about the importance and value of play.

Children:

8.5.6 Children’s early learning environments

All children accessing any government funded scheme should have access to autonomy supportive learning environments which supports high levels of wellbeing and involvement. Policy makers should have knowledge of the quality provision being provided and if it is effective to support high levels of wellbeing and involvement. The quality of the ECEC provision should influence the level of funding provided.

8.6 Practice Recommendations

8.6.1 Training and Development

All ECEC providers should have the opportunity to avail of accessible funded training to empower them to assess the levels of children’s wellbeing and development in the setting as outlined above as a policy recommendation.
This training which all ECEC educators should be supported to undertake should be recognised through a national continual professional learning accreditation programme. The training should support ECEC educators understanding of the importance and value of providing autonomy supportive learning environments to enhance quality provision and support young children’s holistic development and learning.

**8.6.2 Mentoring and Quality Supports**

All ECEC educators should have the opportunity to access mentoring supports through Better Start, the National Early Years Quality Development Service to support them to, self-evaluate the quality of their ECEC provision and to identify and evaluate children’s levels of wellbeing and involvement in their preschool settings. This recommendation has also been outlined above as a policy recommendation.

**8.7 Research Recommendations**

**8.7.1 Evaluation of Quality**

As outlined above as a policy recommendation, a national evaluation research study on the quality of preschool provision in Ireland and the effectiveness of the pedagogical approach must be prioritised and invested in.

**8.7.2 Researching with Children**

Researching with children on their subjective wellbeing in preschool settings should be conducted, if as a society we are committed to children’s right to a voice and participation as outlined in the UNCRC (1989). This study was a small scale first step, it is now time to actively engage with preschool children and hear from them what they like and dislike about their preschool provision. This has also been committed to in: *First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028* (Government of Ireland, 2018). The findings from this research further support this commitment.
8.7.3 Action Research with ECEC Educators

First 5: A Whole- of -Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028 (Government of Ireland, 2018) has committed to developing a self-evaluation tool for early learning and care providers to support them to access the quality of their provision. A recommendation of the study is that an action research project should be conducted to support preschool educators to evaluate the levels of outcome quality, wellbeing and involvement in their preschools and implement change based on the findings to support and improve the quality of the pedagogy and practice.

8.8 Chapter Summary

This chapter firstly recapped on the rational, aim and objective of the study. The methodological approach and the gaps in the literature were highlighted in section 8.3. The limitations of the study were identified, and the key findings were presented. Following on from the key findings a number of key recommendations for policy, practice and research were presented.

This study set out to answer the research question. How, does the educator’s image of the child as a learner influence her/his pedagogical approach and how does the preschool educator’s pedagogical approach subsequently impact on children’s level of wellbeing and involvement in the preschool setting? The overarching aim of this research therefore was to ‘Explore the preschool educator’s image of the child as a learner on the choice of her/his pedagogical approach, (Montessori, Play-based or Reggio inspired) and the subsequent influence on preschool children’s levels of wellbeing and involvement’. The exploration of this topic required a number of objectives to be considered to reach a conclusion and present the findings of this study. The educators’ image of the child as a learner and their understanding of their role as preschool educators was undertaken using both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. This ethnographic study provided rich data which was triangulated to present significant findings which add to knowledge and understanding of the critical importance of quality early childhood experiences and the lifelong impact on children’s wellbeing and involvement in their learning.
“Education is the kindling of a flame, not the filling of a vessel”.

Socrates (469-399 B.C.)
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Appendix A: Supports for quality (European Commission, 2014)

Structural supports for quality: European Commission, (2014)

- An entitlement to ECEC provision which should be universal rather than targeted.

- Workforce qualifications (at least half the staff should hold a bachelors’ level degree) and working conditions which ensure low turn-over rates (ideally the same status and pay as compulsory schoolteachers).

- Adult-child ratios and group sizes that are appropriate for the age and composition of the group of children.

- Curriculum guidelines which combine a broad national framework with a range of local arrangements.

- Quality monitoring systems that are implemented at the local/regional/central government level (and use appropriate tools).

- Governance mechanisms which are part of a coherent system of integrated public policies and which ensure that adequate funding is provided for ECEC services especially in deprived areas.

Process Quality Indicators (European Commission, 2014).

- A pedagogical approach that combines education and care for nurturing the holistic development of children’s potential.

- Staff who’s initial and continuing professional development opportunities support reflection and innovative practice; accompanied by a strong leadership and an ethos that is shared by all members of staff in an ECEC centre or setting.

- The way in which adults respond to the needs of young children, promote their emotional wellbeing and encourage them to engage actively in their learning.
• Educational practices and learning strategies which respond to the needs of young children and sustain their curiosity rather than focusing on formalised learning which does not meet children’s developmental potential.

• A curriculum that combines staff-initiated and child-initiated activities in order to sustain children’s active engagement in the learning process. This includes encouraging children to make their own decisions about their learning, organising group interactions, providing a variety of resources which respond to children’s interests, and valuing play as a way in which children understand their world and develop their knowledge with adult support.

• A curriculum that is designed by children, parents, professionals and local communities whose voices, opinions and perspectives are valued for promoting diversity and furthering democratic values.

• Centres’ policies which are committed to reaching out and including children from different social, ethnic or cultural backgrounds.

• A strong commitment to working with parents – including the involvement of parents in making decisions about the education and care of their children which can promote higher levels of parental engagement in their children’s learning at home. Where there is cultural diversity, particular attention needs to be given to the development of parental partnerships in order to encourage and promote children’s participation in ECEC.

• Partnerships with parents and stakeholders which include the use of accurate and clear documentation of children’s activities, learning and socialising experiences.
Appendix A 1: OECD Spending on ECEC
Appendix B: Certified Leuven Scales Observer Certificate

Certified Leuven Scales for Early Years (0-6) Observer

Rita Melia

Has demonstrated proficiency in observing and coding Early Childhood observations using the Leuven Scales for Early Years (0-6 years), i.e. Leuven Involvement Scale, Leuven Well-being Scale, Leuven Adult Style Observation Schedule.

This Certified Leuven Scales Observer demonstrated this proficiency during a successful participation in the Intensive Training Seminar, organised May 9-11, 2016, in Leuven, Belgium.
Appendix C: Fulbright Certificate

Certificate of Completion
The J. William Fulbright Foreign Scholarship Board
and The Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs
of the
United States Department of State
award this certificate to
Rita Mary Melia
in recognition of successful completion of the
Fulbright Scholarship Program

January 2017
Washington, DC

Chair, J. William Fulbright
Foreign Scholarship Board

Deputy Assistant Secretary of State
Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs
Appendix D: Harvard Invitation

October 27, 2015

Rita Melia
Doctoral Researcher
UNESCO Child & Family Research Centre
Institute for Lifecourse and Society
National University of Ireland, Galway
Galway
IRELAND

Dear Rita,

On behalf of Project Zero and the Harvard Graduate School of Education (HGSE) at Harvard University, I am pleased to invite you as a visiting researcher for a period of four months between August 2016 and August 2017 (dates to be agreed) as part of the Fulbright Scholar Program.

I will be your research supervisor for the duration of your stay, in conjunction with researchers Mari Kerecurel and Benjamin Mandell. My understanding is that the international representative for North American Reggio Emilia Alliance (NAREA), Angela Ferrario, will coordinate your placements in four preschools in the Boston area. We hope that your placement here will open the possibility for further collaboration with the UNESCO Child & Family Research Centre, the Institute for Lifecourse and Society at NUIGalway, and Early Childhood Ireland.

Your research resonates with our ongoing research in early childhood education, and your personal and professional interest in the Reggio approach to early childhood education is relevant to our own interests. The proposed research study (the preschool educator’s image of the child as a learner in the cultural context of the United States) will support your current course of doctoral student and your subsequent work with early childhood professionals in Ireland. This study will offer opportunities for discussion, dialogue, and reflection.

Please be aware that you will not receive any payment or salary from HGSE during the course of your visit. You are personally responsible for all housing, living, medical, travel, and other expenses during your stay.

We look forward to welcoming you to our research team and trust that you will benefit substantially from your time with Project Zero. I am certain that you will have a productive and rewarding experience and that we will benefit from your presence.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Howard Gardner
Hebb Professor of Cognition and Education
Senior Director, Harvard Project Zero
Harvard Graduate School of Education
Appendix E Invitation to Preschool Settings

Invitation to Participate for Preschool Settings.

Dear …….

I am writing to you today to invite you to participate in an important research study which I am conducting as part of my studies under a structured PhD programme in Child and Youth Research, based at the UNESCO Child & Family Research Centre NUI Galway.

I am an Early Childhood Specialist employed by Early Childhood Ireland and this research is a collaboration between NUI Galway and Early Childhood Ireland. The focus of this research is to explore the impact of the preschool educator’s image of the child as a learner on children’s wellbeing.

The research title:

‘My self-image and your interactions; A study exploring the impact of the preschool educator’s image of the child as a learner, on children’s wellbeing’.

I am seeking to conduct this academic research in six preschool settings which offer the ECCE scheme in Galway city and county. To ensure as broad a sample as possible I am inviting two community managed preschool settings, one stand alone and one within a full day care setting. Two privately managed preschool settings, one stand alone and one within a full day care setting and two preschools which are located within the grounds of a primary school setting. I have further differentiated the invited participants to include a preschool which undertakes a play-based programme and a preschool which engages with the Montessori approach in each of the three setting types (community, private, attached to a primary school).

The rationale for this study is that the rapidly changing, political, social and economic climate in Ireland has resulted in new realities for children, families and early childhood providers. This has resulted in a change in the way we think about children and childhood and this change is reflected in Irish early childhood care and education policy documents and frameworks. The image of the child in Irish early childhood practice and policy frameworks presents an image of the child as ‘competent and confident learners’ (NCCA, 2009, p.6) and as ‘an active agent of her/his own development through her/his interactions with the world’ (CECDE.2006, p.6). But is this shift in the image of the child in policy and practice frameworks reflected in the personal epistemologies and pedagogical relationships of preschool educators in practice in Irish preschools. This research will go some way in addressing these issues.

‘Childhood has changed and so too have the scientific views of children and their development (Sommer 2012, p., 14).This shift in the way that children and their development is portrayed in Irish early childhood care and education policy documents and frameworks challenges the way early childhood educators think about children and childhood and suggests a new set of professional understanding of children and their development to the early childhood sector. This research will explore the impact of the preschool educator’s image of the child as a learner, on children’s wellbeing.

What does participation involve?
If you decide that you would like: xxxxxxx Community Crèche Preschool to be one of six participating preschools in Galway city and county and one of two community managed preschools. The following is the proposed plan. I will call you over the next week to offer further details on the study and to answer your questions; I can arrange to meet you if this is more suitable. You will then be invited on behalf of: xxxxxxx Community Crèche Preschool to consent within a two-week period of our meeting/phone call to the preschools participating in the research study.

Following consent for: xxxxxxx Community Crèche Preschool’s participation in the research study the researcher will visit the preschool at a time and date that is convenient to you and your staff in May/early June to meet you if you wish. The aim of this meeting is to introduce myself to the staff; children and/or parents explain the research and answer questions. If you would like me to host a meeting with relevant stakeholders, parents, staff, boards of management etc, to explain the research and what participation involves, I am happy to do this also. This introduction will ensure that all proposed research participants are fully informed about the research and are in a position to make an informed decision to consent to participate.

I propose to use the following methods to collect the data.

- Questionnaire for preschool educator
- Semi-structured interview with preschool educator
- On site observation
- Children’s participation
- A parental questionnaire

**Questionnaire for the preschool educator.**

(Time approx: 15 minutes for meeting, 15 minutes to complete questionnaire.)

When I visit the preschool setting to introduce myself, it would be important to have an opportunity to meet and speak with the preschool educator, if the educator is different from the manager. This meeting can occur at a time that suits the preschool and the educator. The aim of this meeting is to explain the research to the preschool educator, answer questions and provide contact details for the researcher and research supervisors. The preschool educator will be invited to participate in the research study and will receive an information leaflet and a consent form which offers two weeks to decide to consent to participate in the research study. When/if the preschool educator/educators consent to participate in the study they will receive a questionnaire which is designed to support their reflection on their role and the image of the child which they consciously or unconsciously hold.

**A semi-structured interview with the preschool educator.** (Time approx. 30 minutes).

Following on from the questionnaire, preschool educators will be invited to participate in a semi-structured interview to further explore the educator’s image of the child. This semi-structured interview can be facilitated at a time to suit the preschool and the educator.

**Participant Observation:** (Time 15 hours)

The relationships that educators build and the style of their interactions with young children are critical to children’s present and future wellbeing (Reflect, Respect, Relate, 2008). The researcher will spend one week, fifteen hours in total in the preschool setting observing the educator/child relationships and children’s wellbeing. The researcher will use an observation tool to measure the overall
educator/child relationships and children’s wellbeing in the preschool. A mean score for relationships and wellbeing will be calculated for each setting.

**Children's Participation:**
Children will be invited to draw a picture; these drawings will be photographed by the researcher with children’s assent and used to explore children’s wellbeing and their developing self-image.

**A parental questionnaire** (Time approx. 15 minutes).
If xxxxxxx Community Crèche Preschool consents to participate in this research study, I will request that the preschool will distribute an information pack to parents/guardians of children in the preschool offering the ECCE scheme. The parent pack contains an information leaflet which explains the research, a parent consent form, parental questionnaire, children’s information booklet and a child’s assent form. The aim of the parental questionnaire is to hear about parents’ expectations for their children’s learning in the preschool setting. A collection box to facilitate collection of the questionnaires and signed consent forms will be provided to the preschool setting by the researcher.

**What will happen to the information?**
All information will remain confidential; data collated in the setting will not be shared with owner/managers/parents or others except in the case of a duty to care issue, then child protection policy and procedure will be adhered to. The preschool setting will not receive individual feedback, but will receive an executive summary of the overall research findings on completion of the research. The preschool setting or individuals will not be identifiable in the final report.

The information from the questionnaires will be stored in a locked filing cabinet. The findings of the research will be written up and presented at conferences and published in an academic journal. When these reports have been written the data will be securely destroyed. It is estimated that the researcher will keep the information for no more than five years. Electronic information will be stored in password-protected files on a password protected computer. Only the researcher, the research supervisor and the examiner will have access to the non-identifiable information gathered during the research process.

Recordings from the interviews will be transcribed by the researcher, and data from each participant will be assigned a confidential ID number. The educators name or the name of the preschool will not be used in any publication or report; no identifying information will be used. Participating preschools will receive a summary of the findings at the end of the research process, and individual participants may also request a copy.

**Will what I say and do be kept confidential?**
Everything you say and do will remain confidential, unless there is a child protection issue, in such a case the Children First, child protection guidelines and policy will be adhered to. All information collected will be protected by an identity number. All names will be changed and pseudonyms used on any written material in reporting the study. All data collected during this study will only be used for the purpose of this study.

**Guidance on Research Project:**
This study, as with any research carried out through the UNESCO CFRC and through NUI Galway, is governed by the Research Ethics Committee (REC) of the
college. Full ethical approval has been received from the Research Ethic Committee NUI Galway to conduct this study.

The following policies/practices guide this study:

- UNESCO CFRC Child Protection Policy for Research and Teaching Staff, underpinned by the NUI Galway
- Child Protection Policy.
- Garda Vetting of all research and teaching staff and post-graduate students.
- NUI Galway Data Protection Policy.
- NUI Galway Indemnity Policy. Oversight of work conducted by supervisor as well as by graduate research committee.

The Researcher:

As an early childhood specialist I have over twenty years’ experience working and training in the early childhood care and education sector, having owned and managed my own full day care setting in Galway and as a mentor and manager with Early Childhood Ireland. I have experience of working on the ground in early childhood settings and I appreciate the daily challenges that early childhood providers face on a daily basis in their settings. I would be honoured if you would consider participating in this research study and provide me with the opportunity to conduct my PhD research in your setting where I can learn from the expertise of the preschool educator’s. I will remain as unobtrusive as possible as I conduct the research.

This research is being funded by the Irish Research Council Employment Based Postgraduate Research Programme. I believe that having been awarded this scholarship to conduct this research by the Irish Research Council that there is some recognition at a policy level of the importance of research in the area of early childhood education and ongoing professional development for individuals working in the sector. I would be indebted to you and your staff if you consider participating in this research study. The findings of this study will add to knowledge, of the importance of pedagogical relationships on children’s wellbeing in preschool settings and influence the development of training programs, supports and advocacy for the early childhood sector in Ireland.

Why Participate?

By participating in this research study: xxxxxxxCommunity Crèche Preschool, will help to add to the body of knowledge and understanding of young children’s experiences in early childhood education settings and the important role of the preschool educator.

The finding of the research will be used to support training, supports and advocacy for the sector.

Participant preschool settings will not receive feedback on their individual settings, all data will remain confidential unless there is a duty of care situation then the child protection policy and procedure of NUI Galway will be adhered to. Participating preschools will receive an executive summary of the overall research findings on completion of the research. All data collected, including names of participants and services, will remain confidential at all times in the research and reporting stages and following completion of the study.

Participating preschools can avail of one free professional development workshops for staff and/or parents provided by the researcher on a topic of your choosing.
Invitation:
Please feel free to contact me by email or phone to discuss or clarify any of the above.
I look forward to hearing from you and hopefully meeting you in the near future.
Many thanks for taking the time to read my proposal.

Kind Regards:

Doctoral Researcher.
UNESCO Child & Family Research Centre NUI Galway.
Early Childhood Specialist.
Early Childhood Ireland
Irish Research Council Scholar:
Employment Based Postgraduate programme.
Appendix E.1 : Consent Form Preschool Setting

Consent Form: Preschool Setting

Re; Study Title: ‘My self-image and your interactions; A study exploring the impact of the preschool Educators’ image of the child as a learner on children’s wellbeing’.

Name of Researcher: Rita Melia.

Name/Address of Preschool:

Please initial box.
I confirm that I have read the Participant Information Sheet provided to me regarding the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions. ☐

I am satisfied that I understand the information provided and have had enough time to consider the information. ☐

I agree to the research taking place within the named preschool, providing staff, children and families agree to participate ☐

I have the authority to agree to this research taking place within this service ☐

I understand the findings will be published as a thesis by the researcher and may also appear in research journals or in other publications. ☐

I understand all efforts will be taken by the researcher for identities of services and participants to remain confidential ☐
Signed: 

Date: 

On behalf of preschool setting: 

Role/Position in preschool setting: 

Researcher Name: Rita Melia. 

Signature: 

Date: 

October 23, 2015

Dear Rita,
As a Board Member of NAREA (North American Reggio Emilia Alliance) who lives and works in the Boston area, I would be pleased to assist you in locating four Boston preschools and making the introductions necessary to begin your important research. Please let me know more details as they develop and I will arrange the introductions and facilitate any logistical arrangements to support your work.

Best regards,
Angela

Angela Ferrario
U.S. Liaison for Study Groups to Reggio Emilia, Italy
Reggio Children International Network
Director, International Study Tours, LLC
Milford, MA 01757
USA
aferrario@comcast.net
phone: 508 473 8001
Appendix G: Preschool Educator Letter

Information Sheet for Educators:

Re; Study Title: ‘My self-image and your interactions; A study exploring the impact of the preschool educators’ image of the child as a learner on children’s wellbeing’.

Who is doing the research?
The research is being carried out by Rita Melia. Rita is a postgraduate student, in UNESCO Child & Family Research Centre, NUI Galway and an early childhood specialist with Early Childhood Ireland. The research is being carried out as part of her studies on the structured PhD programme in Child & Youth Research under the supervision of Dr Cormac Forkan. Rita has been awarded an Irish Research Council Employment Based postgraduate scholarship to conduct this research, her workplace mentor is Dr Carmel Brennan.

The background to the study?
The preschool educator’s image of the child as a learner is based on personal beliefs and values, it is influenced by historical, social, cultural and ideological views which have been either consciously or subconsciously created. In western society prior to and during the 1960’s the image of the child as a learner was based primarily on developmental theories which described normal child development based on predefined ages and stages of development. This historical image took a top down approach which focused mainly on the developmental theories of Piaget and Freud. A huge number of studies since the 1970’s have described children’s competencies, these studies have revolutionized perceptions of children’s psychosocial capacities providing evidence that babies are born with the prerequisites for actively engaging in genuine interpersonal interactions from the beginning of life (Stern, 2004; Baten 2007). This Growing knowledge about children and their childhoods has contributed to knowledge, expertise and theory and has influenced social and political policies and practice putting children on the public agenda.

The image of the child as a learner in Irish early childhood practice and policy frameworks presents an image of the child as ‘competent and confident learners’ NCCA (2009) and as ‘an active agent of her/his own development through her/his interactions with the world’ CECDE (2006). These images have challenged preschool educator’s personal and professional beliefs. This research will explore the impact of the preschool educator’s image of the child as a learner, on children’s wellbeing in
pre-school settings. Loris Malaguzzi (1994) founder of the Reggio approach to early childhood education suggests that the educator’s image of the child impacts both implicitly and explicitly on the assumptions and the choices that they make as educators and is a declaration of the educators ethical principles.

**What is the research about?**

This research is interested in exploring the preschool educator’s image of the child as a learner and considers how this image influences the adult / child relationships and children’s wellbeing. This research is being carried out in six preschools between May 2016 and June 2016.

**What will I be asked to do?**

If the owner /manager accepts the invitation to participate in this research study:

The researcher will visit the preschool and introduce herself to children, educators and parents. She will explain the research study, answer any questions and outline the expectations of participants engaged in the study.

Following an individual meeting, with the preschool educator working in the ECCE scheme room. The educator will receive a pack containing an information leaflet which outlines the study and a consent form. The preschool educator will have two weeks to consent to participate.

If you consent to participate in the research study, you will be requested to consent to;

**Answering a questionnaire (approx. 30 min).**

The aim of which is to explore your image of the child and your understanding of your role as an educator.

**Participate in a semi-structured interview. (approx. 1 hour).** This will follow on from the questionnaire. This interview will take place at a time and place convenient to the educator. The interview will be recorded with the educators consent so that the researcher is able to engage in a conversation with the educator and write up notes following from the recordings. The Preschool educator will receive a transcript of the interview to agree or amend following the interview.

**Consent to the researcher observing: the overall educator /child relationships and children’s wellbeing in the preschool setting for one-week Mon/Fri (fifteen hours).** The researcher will specifically observe educator /child relationships and children’s general wellbeing in the setting. A resource Reflect Respect Relate, which was designed by the Department of Education and Children’s services in South Australia will be used to observe the overall educator /child relationships and children’s’ wellbeing.

Onsite research/ data collection will take place for one week in the preschool in May/ June 2016, Mon –Friday preschool hours.

**What will happen to the information?**

All information will remain confidential; data collated in the setting will not be shared with owner/ managers/ parents or others except in the case of a
duty to care issue, then child protection policy and procedure will be adhered too. The Preschool setting will not receive individual feedback but will receive an executive summary of the overall research findings on completion of the research. The preschool setting or individuals will not be identifiable in the final report.

The information from the questionnaires will be stored in a locked filing cabinet.

The findings of the research will be written up and presented at conferences and published in an academic journal. When these reports have been written the data will be securely destroyed. It is estimated that the researcher will keep the information for no more than five years. Electronic information will be stored in password-protected files on a password protected computer. Only the researcher, the research supervisor and the examiner will have access to the non-identifiable information gathered during the research process.

Recordings from the interviews will be transcribed by the researcher, and data from each participant will be assigned a confidential ID number. The educators name or the name of the preschool will not be used in any publication or report, no identifying information be used. Participating preschools will receive a summary of the findings at the end of the research process, and individual participants may also request a copy.

**Will what I say and do be kept confidential?**

Everything you say and do will remain confidential, unless there is a child protection issue, in such a case the Children First, child protection guidelines and policy will be adhered to. All information collected will be protected by an identity number. All names will be changed, and pseudonyms used on any written material in reporting the study. All data collected during this study will only be used for this study.

**Guidance on Research Project:**

This study, as with any research carried out through the UNESCO CFRC and through NUI Galway, is governed by the Research Ethics Committee (REC) of the college. This study will commence only when ethical approval has been received.

The following policies/practices guide this study:

- UNESCO; CFRC Child Protection Policy for Research and Teaching Staff, underpinned by the NUI Galway Child Protection Policy.
- Garda Vetting of all research and teaching staff and post-graduate students
- NUI Galway Data Protection Policy
- NUI Galway Indemnity Policy
- Oversight of work conducted by supervisor as well as by graduate research committee.
How long will it take?
The questionnaire will take approximately 15 minutes to complete.
The interview will take approximately one hour.
The researcher will be an observer for a total of 15 hours, one-week Monday-Friday in the preschool room.

Can I change my mind about taking part?
Yes, you can change your mind at any point during the research process. If you choose to
Withdraw from the study you can withdraw your data.

What is the value of this research?
This research is an important piece of national research for the early childhood sector. The results of the study will provide useful information on how best to support early childhood educators in their role. The findings will also be used to support training, ongoing professional development, advocacy and support of early childhood educators.

How can I find out more?
You can contact me Rita Melia by email on
r.melia1@nuigalway.ie or r.melia@earlychildhoodireland.ie or you can ring Rita on 087 7817897.
You can also contact Dr Cormac Forkan (Academic Supervisor) by email. Cormac.forkan@nuigalway.ie or Dr. Carmel Brennan (workplace mentor) on cbrennan@earlychildhoodireland.ie.
Appendix H: Preschool Educator Questionnaire

Preschool Educators Questionnaire:

Re; Study Title: ‘My self-image and your interactions; A study exploring the impact of the preschool educators’ image of the child as a learner on children’s wellbeing’.

Name:

Preschool Setting:

Age Range of preschool educator;

- 20-29 years
- 30-39 years
- 40-49 years
- 50-65 years

Male                                    Female

No of years working in this preschool:
Please circle applicable year range.

- < 1 yr 11 months
- < 9 yrs, 11 months
- > 2 yrs > 4 yrs, 11 months
- > 5 yrs
- > 10 yrs
Highest early childhood qualification level; Please tick.

Level 5
Level 6
Level 7
Level 8
Level 9
Other.

1. My most recent relevant early childhood education training was;

Please tick relevant time scale.

- Within the last 12 weeks.
- Between 13-24 weeks
- Between 25-36 weeks.
- 52 weeks.
- Over 52 weeks.

2. I undertake professional development on average;

- 0 times per year
- > 0 < 1 per year
- > 1 < 5 per year.
- > 5 times per year.
3. Do you think ongoing professional development is important? Please tick;

- Yes
- No

Why you think ongoing professional development is / is not important?

4. Children learn best when the educator shows the child how to do the activity properly. E.g. learning to hold the pencil or crayon properly. Please tick one of the following.

Strongly Agree,
Agree,
Neither agree nor disagree,
Disagree.
Strongly Disagree.

Comment
5. Children learn best by practicing new skills until they learn how to perfect the skill.
Please tick one of the following.

Strongly Agree,
Agree,
Neither agree nor disagree,
Disagree,
Strongly disagree.

Comment.

6. As the preschool teacher I decide on the themes or topics which the children will learn about in preschool. I search different books, websites and other information sources to find out about the topic and then I teach the children all about it.

Please tick one of the following.

Strongly Agree,
Agree,
Neither agree nor disagree,
Strongly disagree.

Comment.
7. In my preschool room there is an atmosphere which encourages talk and discussion; I use strategies to help children to think about their theories, ideas and understandings.

Strongly Agree,
Agree,
Neither agree nor disagree,
Disagree,
Strongly disagree.

Comment:

8. In my preschool room, I offer opportunities for children to think about why and how things happen:

Children talk about their learning with their friends.

I listen and encourage the children to describe, explain, hypothesise, speculate, empathize and project.

Please tick one of the following:
Strongly Agree,
Agree,
Neither agree nor disagree,
Disagree,
Strongly Disagree.

Comment:
9. My role as a preschool educator is to teach the children and prepare them for big school.

Strongly Agree,
Agree,
Neither agree nor disagree,
Disagree,
Strongly Disagree.

Comment.

10. In my preschool room we have a strict timetable, to ensure that we get all our work done.

Strongly Agree,
Agree,
Neither agree nor disagree,
Disagree,
Strongly Disagree.

Comment.
11. I use checklist, (PILES) observations to measure children’s learning and development.

Strongly Agree,

Agree,

Neither agree nor disagree,

Disagree,

Strongly Disagree.

Comment.

12. In the preschool I am constantly observing and listening to children, I take quick notes to capture the moments.

Strongly Agree,

Agree,

Neither agree nor disagree,

Disagree,

Strongly disagree.

Comment:
13. I believe that children learn through their experiences, especially through play.

Strongly Agree,
Agree,
Neither agree nor disagree,
Disagree,
Strongly disagree.

Comment:

14. Open ended materials are freely available to children throughout the day.

Strongly Agree,
Agree,
Neither agree nor disagree,
Disagree,
Strongly disagree.

Comment:
15. My role as the preschool educator is to prepare the environment to encourage children to explore, think, investigate and question.

Strongly Agree,
Agree,
Neither agree nor disagree,
Disagree,
Strongly Disagree.

Comment.

16. In the preschool I use documentation as a tool to give visibility to children’s learning and wellbeing.

Strongly Agree,
Agree,
Neither agree nor disagree,
Disagree,
Strongly disagree.

Comment:
17. There are many challenges when working as a preschool educator, please indicate from 1-5 with 5 being the most challenging aspect.

Parents expectations.
Manager/owners expectations.
Compliance with regulations,
Quality improvement Programmes,

Comment:

18. Non-verbal and verbal cues and social signals are reacted to sensitively and promptly; child’s lead is followed.

Strongly Agree,
Agree,
Neither agree nor disagree,
Disagree,
Strongly disagree.

Comment:
19. Children are given encouragement through support and acknowledgement of effort and processes.

Strongly Agree,
Agree,
Neither agree nor disagree,
Disagree.
Strongly Disagree.

Comments:

20. In the preschool children are guided by suggestions of what to do rather than what not to do.

Strongly Agree,
Agree,
Neither agree nor disagree,
Disagree,
Strongly disagree.

Comment:
21. **Children receive support and guidance (rather than discipline) when overwhelmed.**

Strongly Agree,

Agree,

Neither agree nor disagree,

Disagree,

Strongly disagree.

**Comment:**


22. **In the preschool I encourage children to try out things, risking the possibility of being unsuccessful.**

Strongly Agree,

Agree,

Neither agree nor disagree,

Disagree,

Strongly disagree.

**Comment:**


23. **I offer opportunities for children to share their stories, Joys and successes with their friends.**

Strongly Agree,

Agree,

Neither agree nor disagree,

Disagree,

Strongly disagree.
Comment: Describe how you do this.

24. I include opportunities for physical activity and outdoor play daily.

Strongly Agree,
Agree,
Neither agree nor disagree,
Disagree,
Strongly disagree.

Comment:

25. The preschool environment reflects the identities of the children and adults.

Strongly Agree,
Agree,
Neither agree nor disagree,
Disagree,
Strongly Disagree,

Comments.
26. Children in my preschool room feel like ‘fish in water’, they have fun, enjoy each other’s company, they feel o.k. they radiate vitality and relaxation. They are spontaneous and feel comfortable being themselves.

| Strongly Agree, |
| Agree, |
| Neither agree nor disagree, |
| Disagree, |
| Strongly Disagree, |

Comments.
Appendix I: Interview Schedule

Preschool Educators Interview Schedule:

Interviews with Preschool Educators – Rita Melia Field Work Plans

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Preschool:</th>
<th>Date:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Name of Preschool Educator:</td>
<td>Name of Researcher:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Preamble: Confirm consent; re iterate Confidentiality, Permission to tape the interview, Thanks”.

Initial Introductory Question:

How long have you worked in the ECEC sector and what made you decide to become a preschool educator?

Image of the child:

The world is full of images of children- in advertisements, photos, television, artwork, books and so on. These images indirectly convey messages and concepts that people have about children. Educators and parents have their own inner ideas of their image of the child which is influenced by the world around us. In order to explore further how you think about or perceive children perhaps you could tell me……

1. Tell me about the children in the preschool what are they like?

Supplementary question.

Do they surprise you at times?

What is your approach to supporting children’s positive behavior?

Do you think there is a difference in how you see boys and girls?

2. What are your current theories/ beliefs about how young children learn?
Supplementary Question:
Are there differences in how children and adults learn?
If you were to think about something you learnt recently, how did your learning happen?
What made it possible?
Did others play a role in your learning? What motivated you to learn?
What motivates children to learn?

Preschool educators Role:
3. What role do you play in children’s learning?

Supplementary Question:
What do you do on a daily basis to support children’s learning?
Can children learn by themselves?
Do boys and girls learn in the same way?
Are parents involved in their children’s learning in your preschool?

4. What are the challenges which you perceive hinder you in supporting children’s learning?

Question: Interactions:
5. How would you describe your interactions / relationships with children in the preschool.

Supplementary Questions:
What are the values /principles which underpin your relationships and interactions in the preschool?

Wellbeing:

6. How would you describe children’s wellbeing? how do you support children’s wellbeing on a daily basis.
Supplementary Question.

On a scale of 1-5 with 5 being the highest what would you consider the average level of wellbeing to be in your preschool setting?

Thank you very much for your time, and for sharing your experiences and views with me. It has been really valuable and very interesting talking with you.

I wonder if there is something, I haven’t asked you that you feel I should have? Have I missed something important?

Anything else you would like to add or ask about?
Appendix J: Information Letter for Parents

Information Sheet for Parents:

Re; Study Title: ‘My self-image and your interactions; A study exploring the impact of the preschool educators’ image of the child as a learner on children’s wellbeing’.

Who is doing the research?

The research is being carried out by Rita Melia. Rita is a postgraduate student with the UNESCO Child & Family Research Centre, NUI Galway and an early childhood specialist with Early Childhood Ireland. The research is being carried out as part of her studies on the structured PhD programme in Child & Youth Research under the supervision of Dr Cormac Forkan.

The background to the study?

This study is interested in exploring the preschool educator’s image of the child as a learner and considering how this image of the child as a learner impacts on children’s wellbeing. The research is being conducted in six preschools in Galway city and county which offer the free preschool year or ECCE scheme. The research will involve, children, parents, preschool educators, early childhood trainers and policy makers. The research fieldwork will be conducted in the preschools in May and June 2016.

What is the research about?

The research aims is to develop a better understanding of how preschool educators think about children’s learning capacities and how this image of the child influences children’s wellbeing in Irish preschool settings.

What will be involved for my child?

The researcher will spend one week in the preschool Mon –Friday, during this time she will act as an observer in the preschool, she will use an observation scale, ‘Respect Reflect Relate Assessing for Learning and Development in the Early Years Department of Education and Children’s Services, Government of South Australia (2008) to measure the quality of the relationships between the preschool educator and children and the overall level of children’s wellbeing in the preschool setting. Evidence suggests that the relationships and the style of the educator’s interactions with young children are critical to children’s wellbeing. Taking this into consideration 25% of the children in the preschool group with parental permission will be randomly selected as the focus for observations to explore the overall educator /child relationships and children’s wellbeing in the preschool setting. To include children’s own voice and support their participation in this research study children will be invited to draw a picture.
of what they like to do to have fun, who they like to have fun with and or what they are brilliant at doing. The researcher will talk with the children about their pictures; she will record their comments and take photos of the pictures to support the analysis of children’s wellbeing.

**What am I as a parent asked to do?**

Parents are asked to consent to and complete the parental questionnaire which will take approximately fifteen minutes. The questionnaire will involve questions about your expectations of preschool and your opinion on the most effective strategies which may support your child’s learning. This can be completed at home at a time that suits you.

- Parents are requested to explain the research process to their child an information booklet which can be used as an aid is attached.
- To consent to your child’s participation in the research study, on one or two levels.

The researcher will visit the school prior to commencing the research to introduce herself, explain the research process and answer children’s and parents’ questions.

**What will happen if I do not consent to my child’s participation?**

If you do not wish your child to participate in the study, the researcher will not include your child’s name in the random selection of children identified for observation of adult/child interactions and the researcher will not use your child’s art work as data. However, as the setting and the educator have consented to participate in the study the research will continue, but your child’s data will be omitted from same.

**What will the preschool educator be asked to do?**

Preschool educators will be asked to complete a questionnaire followed by a short informal interview with the researcher. The preschool educator will also be requested to provide consent to the researcher to act as an observer in the preschool room.

**What will happen to the information?**

The information/data collected in the preschool will be used to conduct the research study. All information will remain confidential and anonymous and will not be shared except where there is a duty of care issue then the child protection policy and procedures of NUI Galway will be adhered to. Participants of the study will not receive feedback on individual findings; the overall findings of the study will be made available in an executive summary to participants on publication of the final report.

**Confidentiality and Anonymity:**

All data collected will remain confidential. Information will be protected by an identity number. All names will be changed, and pseudonyms used on any written material in reporting the study. All data collected during this study will only be used for this study. You, your child, the preschool educator or the setting will not be identifiable in the final report or any material reporting the study.
Guidance on Research Project:
This study, as with any research carried out through the UNESCO CFRC and through NUI Galway, is governed by the Research Ethics Committee (REC) of the college. This study will commence only when ethical approval has been received.

The following policies/practices guide this study:

- UNESCO; CFRC Child Protection Policy for Research and Teaching Staff, underpinned by the NUI Galway
- Child Protection Policy.
- Garda Vetting of all research and teaching staff and post-graduate students
- NUI Galway Data Protection Policy
- NUI Galway Indemnity Policy
- Oversight of work conducted by supervisor as well as by graduate research committee.

How long will it take?
The questionnaire will take approximately fifteen minutes.

Can I change my mind about taking part?
Yes, you can change your mind at any point during the research process. If you choose to
Withdraw from the study you can withdraw your data.

What is the value of this research?
This research is an important piece of research for the early childhood sector. The results of the study will provide useful information on how best to support early childhood educators in their role in providing quality early childhood educational experiences for young children. The findings will also be used to support training and ongoing professional development of early childhood educators.

How can I find out more?
Please do not hesitate to contact Rita Melia by email on r.melia1@nuigalway.ie or rmelia@earlychildhoodireland.ie or phone Rita on : 087 7817897.

You can also contact Dr Cormac Forkan (Academic Supervisor) by email on Cormac.forkan@nuigalway.ie or
Dr. Carmel Brennan (workplace mentor) on cbrennan@earlychildhoodireland.ie.
Appendix K: Parental Questionnaire

Parental Questionnaire.

Re; Study Title: ‘My self-image and your interactions; A study exploring the impact of the preschool educators’ image of the child as a learner on children’s wellbeing’.

Parent / guardians Name:

Name of Preschool Setting:

Childs name:

Male: Female:

Childs date of birth:

Childs Nationality:

Parents Nationality:

Date when son /daughter started in this preschool:

Is your child accessing the free preschool year? Yes No.
1. **Reasons for sending your child to preschool in preference from one to five, five being of the least importance.**

To access the free preschool year.
To play with friends.
To be ready to attend primary school.
To learn his colours, numbers and the alphabet etc.
To have fun.

2. **How important to you is the level of accredited qualification of the preschool teacher? From one to five, five being the most important.**

Very important.
Important.
Not so important.
Not important at all.
Experience more important.

**Comment:**
3. As a parent I know what my children are learning daily in the preschool. On a level of 1-5 how true is this statement with 5 being the absolute truth.

I know daily what my child is learning in preschool, I get feedback from the preschool educator and my child tells me.

I know what happens most of the time, fairly regular feedback and my child tells me.

I know what happens some of the time. Some feedback from preschool educator, my child tells me.

I do not know what my child is learning in preschool. No feedback from preschool educator, but my child tells me.

There are no opportunities for me to find out what my child is learning in preschool and my child does not tell me.

4. My child learns best by: Rank from 1-5 with 5 being the most important.

Playing with other children.
When the preschool educator teaches him something.
When the preschool educator creates opportunities for him/her to learn.
When he/she the preschool educator and other children explore and think together.
Learning alone, given time to work things out.

Is your child learning in preschool?
Describe:
5. When did you last discuss your child’s learning with the preschool educator?

Within the last week
Within the last month.
Within the last three months. Within the last six months.
Yearly at the parent teacher meeting.
No opportunity.

6. How do you know what is happening daily in the preschool?

Speaking with the preschool educator.
Photos.
Learning stories.
Written documentation.
Other.

Comment.

Thank you for your time, your contribution is very valuable.

Regards: Rita Melia.
Doctoral Researcher UNESCO Child & Family Research Centre. National University of Ireland Galway.
Early Childhood Ireland Early Childhood Specialist.

r.melia1@nuigalway.ie
Appendix K: Parent/Child Consent Form.

Parent / Child Consent Form

I have read the parent information sheet and I am happy that my child may be randomly selected by the researcher to observe the educator / child relationships and the wellbeing of the preschool group.

I [Name]___________________ give permission / do not give permission (please circle as appropriate) for my son / daughter [Childs name]___________________ to be invited to take part in the research study being conducted by Rita Melia, NUI Galway and Early Childhood Ireland. I understand that by giving my permission that my child may be randomly selected by the researcher to observe the educator / child relationships and the wellbeing of the children in the preschool group and to collate an overall score for the level of the educator / child relationships and children’s wellbeing in the preschool.

Signed parent/guardian.

Date:

I have read the parent information sheet and I am happy that my child’s comments and drawings may be used in this research study.

I [write your name here]___________________ give permission / do not give permission (please circle as appropriate) to the researcher to use quotations and drawings by my child___________________ to be used in the
production of journal reports and conference presentations. I understand that my child or the preschool will not be identifiable in any of the data.

Signed:

Date:
Parents Participation Consent Form.

Re; Study Title:

‘My self-image and your interactions; A study exploring the impact of the preschool educators’ image of the child as a learner on children’s wellbeing’.

Signing this form gives your consent to take part in the above study. Please read and sign this form only after you have read the enclosed information leaflet.

Parents Name:

Preschool Name:

Please tick appropriate box:

I confirm that I have read and understood the information leaflet for this research.

Yes: [ ] No: [ ]

I confirm that I have had time to consider whether I would like to
participate in this research. I understand that my participation in the study is voluntary.

Yes: [ ] No: [ ]

I understand that I can withdraw my data at any time.

Yes: [ ] No: [ ]

Signed:

Date:
# Appendix L: Relationships Scale Global Rating Sheet

## Relationships Scale: Cover sheet

<table>
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<th>Child:</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of sessions per week:</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Observer:</td>
<td></td>
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## Indicator Descriptions

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<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>√</td>
<td>positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✗</td>
<td>Negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>—</td>
<td>Missed opportunity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○</td>
<td>No opportunity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Rating Descriptions

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<th>Environment</th>
<th>Observation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>absent</td>
<td>No interactions with educator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>totally non supportive</td>
<td>Negative, restrictive, controlling, dominating interactions; social bids or cues for comfort are unnoticed or are rejected, discounted, avoided or ignored</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Mainly non supportive</td>
<td>Detached, delayed or brief interactions; minimal social or emotional involvement or direct contact/affection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Neither supportive or non supportive</td>
<td>Functional, interactions are routine, technical, mostly organizational or in response to physical need, superficial contact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Mainly supportive</td>
<td>Social bids and cues are responded to quickly and sensitively; some intense, reciprocal interactions, but with interruptions; educator initiates contact; not all signals are present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>extremely supportive</td>
<td>securely attached, social, responsive, and reciprocal warmth; initiates and shares positive reciprocal, sustained interactions; all signals present</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

573
Appendix M: Individual Mean Score Sheet

Rel Scale: Rating sheet

Using the results from the list, make a judgment of the global quality of each signal and assign low (1), medium (2) or high (3) for each signal.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating Observation 1</th>
<th>30 s</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brief description of Observation Content:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsiveness positive</td>
<td>1 m h</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>interactions Quality</td>
<td>1 m h</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>verbal exchange</td>
<td>1 m h</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>appropriateness</td>
<td>1 m h</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factors affecting observations:</td>
<td>9 1 3 2 5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating Observation 2</th>
<th>30 s</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brief description of Observation Content:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsiveness positive</td>
<td>1 m h</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>interactions Quality</td>
<td>1 m h</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>verbal exchange</td>
<td>1 m h</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>appropriateness</td>
<td>1 m h</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factors affecting observations:</td>
<td>9 1 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating Observation 3</th>
<th>30 s</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brief description of Observation content:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Wellbeing Observation Scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date/s</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean Score for Setting</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A mean score of 3.5 is considered to be the lowest acceptable score indicative of a supportive environment.

### Relationships Observation Scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date/s</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean Score for Setting</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A mean score of 2.5 is considered to be the lowest acceptable score indicative of a supportive environment.

### Active Learning Environment Observation Scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date/s</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean Score for Setting</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A mean score of 3.0 is considered to be the lowest acceptable score indicative of a supportive environment.

### Involvement Observation Scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date/s</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean Score for Setting</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A mean score of 3.5 is considered to be the lowest acceptable score indicative of a supportive environment.
Appendix O: Relationships Scale

**Relationships Scale: Cover sheet**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>✓</td>
<td>positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Indicator observed occurring positively</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✗</td>
<td>Negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Indicator observed occurring negatively</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>₹</td>
<td>Mixed opportunity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Indicator not observed through missed opportunity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○</td>
<td>No opportunity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Indicator not observed through no opportunity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Level Environment Observation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Environment</th>
<th>Observation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>absent</td>
<td>No interactions with educator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>totally non supportive</td>
<td>Negative, restrictive, controlling, dominating interactions; social bids or cues for comfort go unnoticed or are rejected, discounted, avoided or ignored</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Mainly non supportive</td>
<td>Detached, delayed or brief interactions; minimal social or emotional involvement or direct contact/affection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Neither supportive or non supportive</td>
<td>Functional; interactions are routine, technical, mostly organisational or in response to physical need; superficial contact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Mainly supportive</td>
<td>social bids and cues are responded to quickly and sensitively; some intense, reciprocal interactions, but with interruptions; educator initiates contact; not all signals are present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>extremely supportive</td>
<td>securely attached, special togetherness and reciprocal warmth; invites and shares positive reciprocal, sustained interactions; all signals present</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# Relationships Scale: Observation sheet

## SIGNALS WITH INDICATORS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator Observations</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Responsiveness</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receives reliable/predictable/consistent responses</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information from child’s family, home, culture is used</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>child has physical and emotional access to educator</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>signals and cues are observed and listened to with attention and respect</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-verbal and verbal cues and social signals (eye contact, waving, reaching, smiles, cries) are reacted to sensitively and promptly; child’s lead is followed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>temperament, current mood and situation is considered respectfully</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is comforted quickly when distressed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Positive interactions</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is engaged in interactive play with educator</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>communication towards the child has a happy, respectful tone (soothing/caring, not harsh, controlling, irritated)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welcoming gestures and eye contact (smiles, vocalisations) are directed towards child</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warmth and affection are shared with child</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>active interest is taken in the child’s activity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is involved with the educator 1:1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is given encouragement through support and acknowledgment of effort and processes (rather than products or attributes)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has access to models and help for peaceful resolution of conflicts</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receives expressions of positive feelings</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>positive feelings are directed towards child e.g. laughs/smiles together</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questions and comments of interest to the child are made</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>child’s social bids are extended/elaborated</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>guided by suggestions of what to do rather than what not to do</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality verbal exchanges</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>educator engages in respectful, reciprocal communication exchanges with parents</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is engaged in sustained two way, turn taking conversational interactions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>communication/interaction/conversations are initiated that reflect the child’s developing understandings and</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is given time to make expressions understood</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is given time to respond</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initiated interactions are built upon</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>engaged in discussions of an activity in which they’re both engaged, chatting about what’s going on, what’s being observed, what’s being experienced</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wonder, exclamations, questions and comments are responded to</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shares in social language games initiated by educator</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-verbal language is used to add meaning to words e.g. gestures</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>child’s home language (if other than English) is respectfully recognised and reflected in exchanges</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is greeted when arrives, awakens, leaves</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Appropriateness</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is spoken with in own home language (if other than English) where possible</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>close contact is in culturally familiar ways</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has access to models of caring behaviours amongst educators</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is engaged in sustained interaction</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>efforts (rather than attributes) are acknowledged</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is treated fairly (is not discriminated against or judged)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has access to models and guidance in the use of non discriminatory language and behaviour</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is told what is going to happen, what is happening (prepared for transitions)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There are realistic expectations of what a child can/will do</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receives indirect forms of support and guidance (rather than discipline) when overwhelmed – distraction, suggestion, choice, reminder, redirection</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

577
emotions are recognised, labelled and respectfully supported - trust and safety support harmful/overwhelming

Is called by name, correctly pronounced

Hostility and aggression are constructively discouraged

### Relationships Scale: Rating sheet

Using the results from the Indicator Observations make a judgement of the global quality of each signal and assign low (l), medium (m) or high (h) for each signal.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating Observation 1: Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brief description of Observation Context:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>positive interactions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality verbal exchange</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factors affecting observation:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating Observation 2: Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brief description of Observation Context:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>positive interactions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality verbal exchange</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factors affecting observation:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating Observation 3: Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brief description of Observation Context:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>positive interactions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality verbal exchange</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factors affecting observation:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating Observation 4: Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brief description of Observation Context:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>positive interactions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality verbal exchange</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factors affecting observation:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating Observation 5: Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brief description of Observation Context:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>positive interactions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality verbal exchange</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factors affecting observation:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating Observation 6: Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brief description of Observation Context:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Brief description of Observation Context:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>0</th>
<th>m</th>
<th>h</th>
<th>l</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Responsiveness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>positive interactions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality verbal exchange</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>appropriateness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors affecting observation:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**INDIVIDUAL'S MEAN SCORE:**
## Appendix P: Active Learning Environment

### Active Learning Environment Scale: Observation sheet (Domain 1)

**DOMAIN 1: SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONIST PEDAGOGY**

arises from a theory about how people learn. It asserts that people are active creators of knowledge, constructing understandings of their worlds through their experiences, social interactions and reflection with others. Learners build new or deeper understandings on the foundations of previous learning. It requires the educator to respond to initiatives taken by the child. It is different from a traditional idea of learning where knowledge is seen to be transmitted from teacher to learner. In constructivist approaches, the educator is a guide and co-constructor who encourages children to question and formulate ideas rather than instructs. Educators use a set of socially valued goals as well as following the development of children.

### SIGNALS WITH INDICATORS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Creates a learning environment</th>
<th>Indicator Observations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Provides choices and different activities/experiences for children</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses real life, relevant experiences for co-constructing understandings with children</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Makes accessible to children initiatives that can be used in multiple ways (informatory and manipulative, interactive and natural materials)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provides opportunities for shared activity/creativity and collaborative social environment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provides opportunities for and supports children’s decisions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promotes self regulation and self awareness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respects the child’s finished products and creative expressions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourages and accepts children’s autonomy, initiative and active participation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respects child’s choice to interact/observe/play alone</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenges socially diverse behavior and attitudes respectfully</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourages children’s creative expression and multiple representations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accepts adult representations, such as stories as not evident</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Co-constructs meaning**

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Uses a range of developmentally appropriate strategies/abilities to facilitate construction of deeper meaning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explores questions, prompts, continuations, affirmation, feedback, expansion, reflections, joint problem-solving, modeling, mediation and deconstructing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourages exploration/experimentation with cause and effect</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helps children use patterns and connections</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responds positively to and extends child-initiated explorations and ideas</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engages in active dialogue with children (levels of partners, turns, responses, extends)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourages children to engage in dialogue and share their understandings with both the educator and other children</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talks about what is happening (relates child in conversations and identifies what is going on, talks about what the child is engaging without deconstructing or deconstructing)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solicits children to find information</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Reflects and Plans**

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reflects on and observes children to gather information to monitor children’s construction of understanding and plans for their learning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses information from families</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follows up on child initiated ideas, questions, comments</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses meaningful goals and children’s interest and development in plan for the acquisition of valued skills</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observes for assessment purposes in authentic experiences</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changes plans in response to children’s deepening/changing needs/interests</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practices reflect planned goals</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourages children’s comments on how they arrived at decisions/choices</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Encourages children to talk about what they are doing/seeing and why things are happening</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changes direction as a result of reflection</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Appendix Q: Wellbeing Scale

### Wellbeing Scale: Cover sheet

**site:**

**Number of sessions per:**

**Observer:**

**child:**

**age:**

**sex:**

**Date:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INDICATOR</th>
<th>DESCRIPTION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>✅</td>
<td>positive <strong>Indicator observed occurring positively</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>❌</td>
<td>Negative <strong>Indicator observed occurring negatively</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>📡</td>
<td>Missed opportunity <strong>Indicator not observed through missed opportunity</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>🏛️</td>
<td>No opportunity <strong>Indicator not observed through no opportunity</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Rating Descriptions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Environment</th>
<th>Observation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>totally non-supportive</td>
<td>emotionally uncomfortable, displays of negative symptoms e.g. crying, hurting, withdrawn, unhappy, tense, easily overwhelmed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Mainly non-supportive</td>
<td>seldom displays enjoyment, signs of level 1 about half the time, alternating with neutral and some positive signals, may take pleasure in disrespectful ways or hurting others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Neither supportive or non-supportive</td>
<td>Occasional signs of emotional discomfort, generally appears 'quite happy', reasonable self-confidence and enjoyment without intensity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Mainly supportive</td>
<td>generally happy with few signs of emotional discomfort, adequately succeeds in meeting and regulating their own needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>totally supportive</td>
<td>High levels of trust and confidence. Initiates positive connections with others, radiates vitality and self-esteem, shows initiative, curiosity and pleasure in activities; receptive, communicative, self-guided and flexible, lots of positive interactions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Page 72 - Relationships, active learning environment, Wellbeing, Involvement.
### Wellbeing Scale: Observation sheet

#### Domains and Signals with Indicators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Happiness and satisfaction</th>
<th>Observations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Confidence, self esteem</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>trusts (biological needs are satisfied without anxiety – feeds, settles, toilets, cares for self calmly)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>expresses wants, needs, ideas, feelings</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tries out things, risking the possibility of being unsuccessful</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recovers from unsuccessful attempts relatively quickly</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>looks for/creates realistic challenges for self</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>asks for help when needed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initiates and engages in interactions, social and pretend play</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Sense of self

- Recognises and increasingly regulates own needs, wishes, feelings
  - confidently expresses wishes, preferences, opinions
  - shares the joy and success of self and others
  - accepts verbal and non-verbal attention from others

#### Vitality

- Is alert and active
- Is spontaneous
- Has lively posture and movements

#### Enjoyment/sense of humour

- Demonstrates pleasure in authentic experiences and ways
  - enjoys fun, jokes, humour
  - engages in experiences with enthusiasm

#### Ability to rest and relax

- signals need for rest, retreat
- Regulates rhythms of activity and rest (retreats when tired)
- Has periods of calmness

#### Social functioning

**Social initiative**
- Reaches out to others
- Is receptive and responds to the stimuli/suggestions of others
- Attracts other children
- Negotiates

**Assertive**
- Has a sense of own space
- Is not unduly pressured by claims of others
- Objects when personal rights are threatened
- Wants to be considered
- Asks for help/comfort
**Coping/flexibility**
- Is flexible, accepts help/support when needed
- Recovers from distress/excitement/confusion/frustration
- Can be comforted
- Calms/quietens (using own strategies)
- Can be distracted if appropriate
- Remains “accessible” when distressed
- Cooperates
- Accepts bottom lines/boundaries

**Positive attitude towards warmth and closeness**
- Enjoys being in close proximity with others
- Reaches out for physical contact
Wellbeing Scale:
Observation sheet (continued)

**DOMAINS AND SIGNALS WITH INDICATORS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator Observations</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dispositions</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Openness and receptivity/pleasure in exploring</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is alert, open, direct body language</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is aware of those around</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tries new and unmastered activity positively</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Takes time to wonder and experiment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is curious, questions, actively seeks out things to investigate/explore</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Considers alternatives</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pleasure in sensory experiences</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shows pleasure in being immersed in sensory experiences – taste, sound, smell, sight, movement and touch</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enjoys meals</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enjoys smelling things</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enjoys movement</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listens to music and nature’s sounds</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visually tracks and observes attentively</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses materials expressively and with enjoyment eg dough, clay, sand, paint, collage</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Persistence/Robustness</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tries again when faced with a problem</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persists with optimism</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not easily distracted when concentrating</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Wellbeing Scale: Rating sheet

using the results from the Indicator Observations make a judgement of the global quality of each signal and assign low (l), medium (m) or high (h) for each signal.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating Observation: Time</th>
<th>Brief description of Observation Context:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Happiness and satisfaction social functioning Dispositions</td>
<td>l</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating Observation: Time</th>
<th>Brief description of Observation Context:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Happiness and satisfaction social functioning Dispositions</td>
<td>l</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rating Observation 1: Time</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Brief description of Observation Context:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happiness and satisfaction social functioning Dispositions</td>
<td>l</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating Observation 1: Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Brief description of Observation Context:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happiness and satisfaction social functioning Dispositions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating Observation 1: Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Brief description of Observation Context:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happiness and satisfaction social functioning Dispositions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Rating Observation 1: *Time*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Brief description of Observation Context:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Happiness and satisfaction social functioning Dispositions</th>
<th>Factors affecting observation:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>m</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**INDIVIDUAL'S MEAN SCORE:**
Appendix R: Involvement Rating Scale

Involvement Scale: Cover sheet

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LEVEL</th>
<th>OBSERVATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>No activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>frequently interrupted activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>More or less maintained activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>activity with intense moments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>sustained intense activity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Involvement Scale: Rating sheet

using the results from the Indicator Observations make a judgement of the global quality of each signal and assign low (l), medium (m) or high (h) for each signal.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating Observation 1: Time</th>
<th>Factors affecting observation:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brief description of Observation Context:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>concentration</td>
<td>l     m     h     l</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in energy</td>
<td>m     h     l     m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>complexity &amp; creativity</td>
<td>h     l     m     h</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>facial expression &amp;</td>
<td>l     m     h</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>posture persistence</td>
<td>m     l     m     l</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>precision</td>
<td>h     l     m     h</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reaction time</td>
<td>l     m     h</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>utterances/language</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>satisfaction</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 2 3 4 5
Involvement Scale: Rating sheet (continued)

using the results from the Indicator Observations make a judgement of the global quality of each signal and assign low (l), medium (m) or high (h) for each signal.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating Observation 4: Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brief description of Observation Context:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>concentration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>energy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>complexity &amp; creativity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>facial expression &amp;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>posture persistence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>precision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reaction time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>utterances/language satisfaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factors affecting observation:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rating Observation 5: Time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Brief description of Observation Context:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>concentration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>energy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>complexity &amp; creativity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>facial expression &amp; posture persistence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>precision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reaction time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal utterances/language satisfaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factors affecting observation:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating Observation 6: Time</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Brief description of Observation Context:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>concentration</td>
<td>l</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>energy</td>
<td>m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>complexity &amp; creativity</td>
<td>h</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>facial expression &amp; posture persistence</td>
<td>l</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>precision</td>
<td>h</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reaction time</td>
<td>l</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal utterances/language satisfaction</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factors affecting observation:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

INDIVIDUAL'S MEAN SCORE:
Appendix S: Children’s Assent Form

Children’s Assent Form:

Hi there my name is Rita, I am writing a report for other adults about preschools. They want to know about how you learn in your preschool. To explain why I am in your preschool I want to show you these pictures, will you mark the happy face if you are happy for me to do this and the sad face if you are not.

Spend time in your preschool.

Look at you play and learn.
Write some notes.

Take some photos of your artwork.

THANK YOU
Appendix S

List of documents for introductory meeting

➢ Letter to parents.
➢ Info sheet for parents.
➢ Parents participation consent form.
➢ Parent/Child consent form.
➢ Parental questionnaire.
➢ Child info booklet.
➢ Preschool invitation to participate.
➢ Preschool consent form.
➢ Info for educators.
➢ Educators consent form.
➢ Children’s Assent Form.
Appendix T: Educator Information

Information Sheet for Educators:

Re; Study Title: ‘My self-image and your interactions; A study exploring the impact of the preschool educators’ image of the child as a learner on children’s wellbeing’.

Who is doing the research?

The research is being carried out by Rita Melia. Rita is a postgraduate student, in UNESCO Child & Family Research Centre, NUI Galway and an early childhood specialist with Early Childhood Ireland. The research is being carried out as part of her studies on the structured PhD programme in Child & Youth Research under the supervision of Dr Cormac Forkan. Rita has been awarded an Irish Research Council Employment Based postgraduate scholarship to conduct this research, her workplace mentor is Dr Carmel Brennan.

The background to the study?

The preschool educator’s image of the child as a learner is based on personal beliefs and values, it is influenced by historical, social, cultural and ideological views which have been either consciously or subconsciously created. In western society prior to and during the 1960’s the image of the child as a learner was based primarily on developmental theories which described normal child development based on predefined ages and stages of development. This historical image took a top down approach which focused mainly on the developmental theories of Piaget and Freud. A huge number of studies since the 1970’s have described children’s competencies, these studies have revolutionized perceptions of children’s psychosocial capacities providing evidence that babies are born with the prerequisites for actively engaging in genuine interpersonal interactions from the beginning of life (Stern, 2004; Baten 2007). This Growing knowledge about children and their childhoods has contributed to knowledge, expertise and theory and has influenced social and political policies and practice putting children on the public agenda.

The image of the child as a learner in Irish early childhood practice and policy frameworks presents an image of the child as ‘competent and confident learners ‘ NCCA(2009) and as ‘an active agent of her/his own development through her/his interactions with the world’ CECDE(2006). These images have challenged preschool educator’s personal and professional beliefs. This research will explore the impact of the preschool educator’s image of the child as a learner, on children’s wellbeing in preschool settings. Loris Malaguzzi(1994) founder of the Reggio approach to early childhood education suggests that the educators image of the child impacts both implicitly and explicitly on the assumptions and the choices that they make as educators and is a declaration of the educators ethical principles.
What is the research about?

This research is interested in exploring the preschool educator’s image of the child as a learner and considers how this image influences the adult / child relationships and children’s wellbeing. This research is being carried out in six preschools between May 2016 and June 2016.

What will I be asked to do?

If the owner /manager accepts the invitation to participate in this research study;

The researcher will visit the preschool and introduce herself to children, educators and parents. She will explain the research study, answer any questions and outline the expectations of participants engaged in the study.

Following an individual meeting, with the preschool educator working in the ECCE scheme room. The educator will receive a pack containing an information leaflet which outlines the study and a consent form. The preschool educator will have two weeks to consent to participate.

If you consent to participate in the research study you will be requested to consent to;

**Answering a questionnaire (approx. 30 min).**

The aim of which is to explore your image of the child and your understanding of your role as an educator.

**Participate in a semi-structured interview (approx. 1 hour).** This will follow on from the questionnaire. This interview will take place at a time and place convenient to the educator. The interview will be recorded with the educators consent so that the researcher is able to engage in a conversation with the educator, and write up notes following from the recordings. The Preschool educator will receive a transcript of the interview to agree or amend following the interview.

**Consent to the researcher observing;** the overall educator /child relationships and children’s wellbeing in the preschool setting for one week Mon/Fri (fifteen hours). The researcher will specifically observe educator /child relationships and children’s general wellbeing in the setting. A resource, Reflect Respect Relate, which was designed by the Department of Education and Children’s services in South Australia will be used to observe the overall educator /child relationships and children’s wellbeing.

Onsite research/ data collection will take place for one week in the preschool in May/June 2016, Mon –Friday preschool hours.

What will happen to the information?

All information will remain confidential; data collated in the setting will not be shared with owner/ managers/ parents or others except in the case of a duty to care issue, then child protection policy and procedure will be adhered too. The Preschool setting will not receive individual feedback, but will receive an executive summary of the overall research findings on completion of the research. The preschool setting or individuals will not be identifiable in the final report.

The information from the questionnaires will be stored in a locked filing cabinet.

The findings of the research will be written up and presented at conferences and published in an academic journal. When these reports have been written the data will
be securely destroyed. It is estimated that the researcher will keep the information for no more than five years. Electronic information will be stored in password-protected files on a password protected computer. Only the researcher, the research supervisor and the examiner will have access to the non-identifiable information gathered during the research process.

Recordings from the interviews will be transcribed by the researcher, and data from each participant will be assigned a confidential ID number. The educators name or the name of the preschool will not be used in any publication or report, no identifying information be used. Participating preschools will receive a summary of the findings at the end of the research process, and individual participants may also request a copy.

**Will what I say and do be kept confidential?**

Everything you say and do will remain confidential, unless there is a child protection issue, in such a case the Children First, child protection guidelines and policy will be adhered to. All information collected will be protected by an identity number. All names will be changed and pseudonyms used on any written material in reporting the study. All data collected during this study will only be used for the purpose of this study.

**Guidance on Research Project:**

This study, as with any research carried out through the UNESCO CFRC and through NUI Galway, is governed by the Research Ethics Committee (REC) of the college. This study will commence only when ethical approval has been received.

The following policies/practices guide this study:

- UNESCO CFRC Child Protection Policy for Research and Teaching Staff, underpinned by the NUI Galway Child Protection Policy.
- Garda Vetting of all research and teaching staff and post-graduate students
- NUI Galway Data Protection Policy
- NUI Galway Indemnity Policy
- Oversight of work conducted by supervisor as well as by graduate research committee.

**How long will it take?**

The questionnaire will take approximately 15 minutes to complete.

The interview will take approximately one hour.

The researcher will be an observer for a total of 15 hours, one week Monday-Friday in the preschool room.

**Can I change my mind about taking part?**

Yes, you can change your mind at any point during the research process. If you choose to Withdraw from the study you can withdraw your data.

**What is the value of this research?**
This research is an important piece of national research for the early childhood sector. The results of the study will provide useful information on how best to support early childhood educators in their role. The findings will also be used to support training, ongoing professional development, advocacy and support of early childhood educators.

**How can I find out more?**

You can contact me Rita Melia by email on

r.melia1@nuigalway.ie or rmelia@earlychildhoodireland.ie

or you can ring

Rita on 087 7817897.

You can also contact Dr Cormac Forkan (Academic Supervisor) by email. Cormac.forkan@nuigalway.ie

or

Dr. Carmel Brennan (workplace mentor) on cbrennan@earlychildhoodireland.ie.
Appendix U: Children’s Booklet

Hello!

My name is......

Rita.

I would like to come and visit: ________________

To see you playing and to hear about the things you like to do.
When I visit, I will.

Look...........................................

Listen...........................................

Write...........................................

Take a picture of your art.

When I come to visit

You can draw some pictures if you like.
I would like to talk to you about the Pictures you draw.

I would like to find out what you like to do to have fun.

Who you like to have fun with,

What you are brilliant at doing..........

if you don’t want to do or say anything, that’s ok

I look forward to visiting you soon!!

Rita.
Appendix V Qualitative Themes.

Qualitative analysis process:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Listen, transcribe, read</th>
<th>Sub themes assigned 59</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9 Main themes emerged</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysed based on objective 1 &amp; 2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sample of thematic analysis:

Competent child

Reference 1 - 0.64% Coverage
It was like a few minutes that the child

Reference 2 - 5.95% Coverage

It was like a few minutes that the child

Reference 3 - 0.84% Coverage
I suppose that it's initial curiosity

Reference 4 - 0.85% Coverage
The children have a lot to do with that when they get in there at home.

Reference 5 - 0.69% Coverage
There are a lot of children and there are a lot for those teachers.

Power Relations

Reference 1 - 0.60% Coverage
I have a very my kid who can't be doing that

Reference 2 - 0.50% Coverage

Reference 3 - 0.87% Coverage
The girls seem to be getting on great. I just have to try and calm the kids down at the moment.

Reference 4 - 2.70% Coverage
We did a big Christmas production with them and I did the three Christmas songs. I had Alannah singing solo on her own on the stage in front of all the parents and she didn't even think they all had 3 up on the stage at each go and they were all singing songs and I said it's just wonderful because that's one part they lose very quick so if they see each other the great fun, you know, and also she needs to be looking to that with every song.

Reference 5 - 1.50% Coverage
You know, you will always be the other one that will be a bit more dominating and it is important for me to make sure everyone gets the chance, and that's something I had to work on with a few of them now. I have got it but it's important that everyone gets a go.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How Children Learn</th>
<th>Pedagogy</th>
<th>Role of Educator</th>
<th>Parents</th>
<th>Expectation</th>
<th>Image of child as a learner</th>
<th>Relationships</th>
<th>Basic Need</th>
<th>Challenges</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beliefs</td>
<td>Cognitive Development</td>
<td>Defend</td>
<td>Role parents</td>
<td>competent</td>
<td>Peer interactions</td>
<td>Wellbeing</td>
<td>Regulations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passive/active</td>
<td>culture</td>
<td>Values</td>
<td>Deficit image</td>
<td>children</td>
<td>Deficit</td>
<td>Edu/child</td>
<td>Cost</td>
<td>Resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td>Listening Rights Democratic</td>
<td>Articulate Relationships Educators Curious Gender Security Money</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Innate/created</td>
<td>modelling Engaging experiential</td>
<td>Communication Engagement Rights</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Behaviour support</td>
<td>Identity belonging</td>
<td>Partnership</td>
<td>Happy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Manage challenging</td>
<td>Expanding thinking</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Negotiation behaviour</td>
<td>Questioning</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>play</td>
<td>transitions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>reflection</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Power control</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Transfer Knowledge Practice</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Independence</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Directing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rewards</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Skills</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Scaffold</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Appendix W: Scored Sheets

#### Relationships Scale: Cover Sheet

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✗</td>
<td>Negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>—</td>
<td>Missed opportunity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>◎</td>
<td>No opportunity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Rating Descriptions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Environment</th>
<th>Observation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>Absent</td>
<td>No interactions with educator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Totally non supportive</td>
<td>Negative, restrictive, controlling; dominating interactions; social bids or runs for comfort; go unnoticed or are rejected; disregarded, avoided or ignored</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Mainly non supportive</td>
<td>Detached, delayed or brief interactions; minimal social or emotional involvement or direct contact/affection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Neither supportive or non supportive</td>
<td>Functional interactions are routine, technical, mostly organizational or in response to physical need; superficial contact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Mainly supportive</td>
<td>Social bids and runs are responded to quality and sensitivity; some intense, reciprocal interactions, but with indirect/inner emotions; educator initiates contact; all signals are present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Extensively supportive</td>
<td>Securely attached, special togetherness and reciprocal warmth; initiates and shares positive reciprocal, sustained interactions; all signals present</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Relationships:
Reflective questions

RESPONSIVENESS
- Am I physically and emotionally available to all children?
- Do I respect and include the information from children’s families, culture, etc.?
- What drives and informs how I respond to children – verbal, non-verbal cues, temperament, mood or situation?

POSITIVE INTERACTIONS
- What do my verbal and non-verbal responses communicate to children – as a group and individually?
- Are my interactions with children positive, caring and respectful?
- Am I including children in building a learning environment where relationships are respectful and children learn how to peacefully resolve conflict?

QUALITY OF VERBAL EXCHANGES
- Am I clear about the importance of verbal exchange and two-way, turn taking conversation in learning?
- Do I listen to, respect and respond to children’s ideas, questions, theories, wondering?
- Am I communicating respectfully and reciprocally with parents?
- How am I valuing and respecting children’s home languages?

APPROPRIATENESS
- Are my expectations of children realistic, respectful and equitable?
- Do I respect who children are (personality, dispositions) and what they bring to this setting (culture, language, ideas, experiences)?
- How is this evident in my interactions?
## Relationships Scale: Observation sheet

### Signals with Indicators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Responsiveness</th>
<th>Indicator Observations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Positive Interactions

- Engaged in interactive play with educator.
- Communication towards the child is a higher respectful tone (saying, not yelling, controlling,命令).
- Matching gestures and eye contact (smiles, socialisation) are directed towards child.
- Mirth and affection are shared with child.
- Active interest is taken in the child's activity.
- Involved with the educator.
- Given encouragement through support, acknowledgment of effort and progress (other than products or achievements).
- Helped to resolve conflicts peacefully.
- Receipt of expressions of positive feelings.
- Positive feelings are directed towards child (laughter, smiles, together).
- Questions and comments of interest to the child are made.
- Child's social skills are extended/revolutionised.
- Guided by suggestions of what to do rather than what not to do.

### Quality Verbal Exchanges

- Educator engaged in respectful, reciprocal communicative exchanges with parents.
- Perspective-taking: shared two way turn taking communicational interaction.
- Conversations/interactions are initiated that reflect the child's developing understandings and interests.
- Given time to make expressions understood.
- Givers time to respond.
- Initiates interactions are built upon.
- Engaged in discussions of an activity in which they're both engaged, chatting about what's going on, what's being observed, what's being experienced.
- Wonders, exclamations, questions and remarks are responded to.
- Shared in social language games initiated by educator.
- Non-verbal language is used to add meaning to verbal gesture.
- Child's home language (if other than English) respectfully recognised and reflected in exchanges.
- Is greeted when arrives, assistants, leaves.

### Appropriateness

- Is spoken with in an appropriate language (if other than English) where possible.
- Close contact is culturally familiar ways.
- Has access to models of caring behaviour amongst educators.
- Engaged in reciprocal interaction.
- Others (other than adult) are acknowledged.
- Is treated fairly (is not discriminated against or overlooked).
- Has access to models and guidance in the use of non-discriminatory language and behaviour.
- Is told what is going to happen, what is happening (prepared for transitions).
- There are realistic expectations of what a child can do.
- Receives direct forms of support and guidance (other than discipline) when overwhelmed - distraction, suggestion, choice, reminder, redirection.
- Emotions are recognised, labelled and respectfully supported - trust and safety support hateful/overwhelming emotion.
- Is called by name, correctly pronounced.
- Healthy and aggressive are constructively discouraged.
### Relationships Scale: Rating Sheet

Using the results from the indicators, observations make a judgement of the global quality of each period and assign low (L), medium (M) or high (H) for each signal.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating Observation 1: Time</th>
<th>11:10 Mon</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brief description of Observation Context:</td>
<td>Painting space pictures on black card</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsiveness</td>
<td>L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive interactions</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality verbal exchange</td>
<td>L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appropriateness</td>
<td>L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factors affecting observation:</td>
<td>Adulterated art activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process or method well in line with a theme scale.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating Observation 2: Time</th>
<th>09:20 Tues</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brief description of Observation Context:</td>
<td>Playing facemasks and moon sandading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsiveness</td>
<td>L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive interactions</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality verbal exchange</td>
<td>L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appropriateness</td>
<td>L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factors affecting observation:</td>
<td>Social interaction - subtly directed, encouraged to explore glitter alone.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating Observation 3: Time</th>
<th>15:15 Wed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brief description of Observation Context:</td>
<td>Playing - guitar with</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsiveness</td>
<td>L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive interactions</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality verbal exchange</td>
<td>L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appropriateness</td>
<td>L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factors affecting observation:</td>
<td>- sit break.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| "Will no one see me?"
| "very dark, no furniture - be quiet."
| "Mr. Black"
| "the game"
| "Mr. Cat"

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating Observation 4: Time</th>
<th>10:33 Thurs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brief description of Observation Context:</td>
<td>Painting - group glitter /호랑이 /spons co</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsiveness</td>
<td>L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive interactions</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality verbal exchange</td>
<td>L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appropriateness</td>
<td>L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factors affecting observation:</td>
<td>Be back - all the students</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| "Look at me!"
| "There is so something"
| "I want to help you!"

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating Observation 5: Time</th>
<th>14:24 Thurs Circle Time: News, Weddings, Christmas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brief description of Observation Context:</td>
<td>Group, friends, family, wedding to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsiveness</td>
<td>L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive interactions</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality verbal exchange</td>
<td>L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appropriateness</td>
<td>L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factors affecting observation:</td>
<td>Friends, interactions, more taken to listen &amp; talking - more, family, wedding etc.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating Observation 6: Time</th>
<th>14:24 Thurs Taking cookies, Juicy Orange Spots</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brief description of Observation Context:</td>
<td>Controlling - no opportunities costs of working</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsiveness</td>
<td>L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive interactions</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality verbal exchange</td>
<td>L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appropriateness</td>
<td>L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factors affecting observation:</td>
<td>Juicy Orange hands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Picking, mixing, pouring, mixing the cake.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long time, mixing, turning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Individuals' Mean Score:** 3
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Rating Descriptions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Trial approved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Poor application</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Some support for new innovation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Try few innovations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Try new innovations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Rating Descriptions**

- **0**: No opportunity
- **1**: Limited opportunity
- **2**: Potential opportunity
- **3**: Strong opportunity
- **4**: Immediate opportunity
- **5**: High opportunity
Active Learning Environment Scale: Observation Sheet (Domain 1)

DOMAIN 1: SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVIST PEDAGOGY

Arises from a theory about how people learn; it asserts that people are active creators of knowledge, constructing understandings of their worlds through their experiences, social interactions and reflection with others. Learners build new or deeper understandings on the foundations of previous learning. It requires the educator to respond to initiatives taken by the child, it is different from a traditional idea of learning where knowledge is seen to be transmitted from teachers to learners. In constructivist approaches, the educator is a guide and co-constructor who encourages children to question and formulate ideas rather than instructs. Educators use a set of socially valid goals as well as following the development of children.

SIGNS WITH INDICATORS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator Observations</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Creates an environment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provides choice and different activities/experiences for children</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offers real-life, relevant experiences for co-constructing understandings with children</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offers opportunities to children to construct understandings in multiple ways (information and manipulation, interaction and manipulation, mental manipulation)</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provides opportunities for shared activity, creates a collaborative social environment</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provides choice, accepts and supports children's decisions</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provides opportunities for use of authentic materials</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitates and supports children's learning</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reviews self-regulation and self-awareness</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supports the child's independent, creative thinking</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourages and accepts children's emotions; initiative and active participation</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourages and accepts children's initiative and active participation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aligns with children's ideas in natural, everyday play</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenges socially diverse behaviours and attitudes respectably</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourages children's creative expressions and multiple representations (metaphorical, physical, role-play, etc.)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co-constructs meaning</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peers question, probe and think, thoughtfully (and operable) and wait for answers (rather than providing answers)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeks and values children's contributions, points of view and alternative perspectives and representations</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supports children to formulate their ideas, opinions and conclusions</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses a range of developmentally appropriate strategies to facilitate understanding of meaning, e.g., question, prompt, feedback, affirmation, redefinition, joint problem-solving, modeling, reflection and deconstructing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provides feedback and encourages thoughtful reflection on experience</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assists child to make connections between past and present experience and understanding</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>ItemStacks children's use of materials in creative and experimental ways</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeks elaboration of children's sequences</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourages exploration and investigation with cause and effect</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helps children set purposes and organize their ideas during their exploration</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Requests assistance and extends child's initial exploration and ideas</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourages children to engage in dialogue and share their understanding with all (the educator and other children)</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourages children to talk about what is happening and other things in their environment and identifies what is going on, talk about what the child is exploring without distracting or dominating</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborates with children to find information</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflects and plans</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listens to and observes children to gather information to restructure construction of understanding and plan for their learning</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Seeks information from family</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follows up on children's ideas, questions, comments</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses meaningful goals and children's interest and development to plan for the acquisition of new skills</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observes for understanding by asking in an authentic experience</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changes plans in response to children's changing interests</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practices different goals</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highlights children's awareness of how they arrived at decisions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourages children to make choices about actions and consequences</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourages children to talk about what they are discovering and why change is happening</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changes direction as a result of reflection</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Active Learning Environment Scale: Observation sheet (Domain 2)**

**DOMAIN 2: PLAY**

Play is the natural way that children learn. It provides a context for communication and interactions. During play, children spontaneously rehearse feelings, regulate emotions, try out ideas and test hypotheses.

**SIGNALS WITH INDICATORS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sensory and physical play</th>
<th>Indicator Observations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Encourages children to attend to sensory stimuli (scent, tasting objects, sounds)</td>
<td>2 3 4 5 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plays sensory games with children</td>
<td>4 5 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourages children to explore different textures, sounds, sights</td>
<td>3 4 5 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourages children to try new or practice developing physical skills</td>
<td>3 4 5 6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Experiential play**

| Sets of play spaces and resources in a variety of sizes and places (indoors/outdoors, porch, backyards) | 3 4 5 6 |
| Encourages experiential play (open ended resources) | 4 5 6 |
| Provides different interactions for play | 3 4 5 6 |
| Environment is physically safe | 3 4 5 6 |
| Provides opportunities to explore and investigate (eg, marking, grabbing, dragging, pulling, pushing, hitting, rolling, sound and object permanence, patterns, light, sound, physics, and deductive reasoning) | 3 4 5 6 |
| Provides an unhampered time for play | 3 4 5 6 |
| Facilitates meaningful dialogue where children practice, encounter, reflect, and learn problems, concepts, and skills | 3 4 5 6 |
| Environment respects children’s creativity, temperaments, and interests | 3 4 5 6 |
| Actively encourages children to manipulate objects, sets to discover properties and purposes | 3 4 5 6 |

**Social play**

| Encourages children in turn-taking (eg, tag, hide and seek, role-playing games with rules, electronic games, card/word games) | 4 5 6 |
| Encourages social play (eg, object games and games for two and for small groups) | 4 5 6 |
| Shocks and shares humour | 4 5 6 |
| Models and encourages imitation | 4 5 6 |
| Engages in organized non-verbal exchanges (games, rituals, vocalizations, gestures) | 4 5 6 |

**Pretend/symbolic play**

| Values children’s transitional objects | 4 5 6 |
| Provides props that heighten play (eg, puppets, dolls/addresses, home items, costumes, scarves, tag people, vehicles, animals) | 4 5 6 |
| Provides props and encouragement for symbolic play (eg, play through play, toys, dramatization) | 4 5 6 |
| Contributes to and participates in children’s play (gives ideas suggested by the children; offers suggestions to extend play) | 4 5 6 |
| Recognizes and engages with the child’s reality | 4 5 6 |
| Accepts and supports the child’s interest in exploring and developing scripts (provides time, resources, elaboration) | 4 5 6 |
### Active Learning Environment Scale: Observation sheet (Domain 2)

**DOMAIN 2: PLAY**

Play is the natural way that children learn. It provides a context for communication and interactions. During play children spontaneously rehearse feelings, regulate emotions, try out ideas and test hypotheses.

#### SIGNALS WITH INDICATORS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sensory and physical play</th>
<th>Indicator Observations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exposes children to different textures, sounds, sights</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plays sensory games with children</td>
<td>3 4 5 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourages children to engage in tactile or &quot;hairy&quot; play: sand, water, mud</td>
<td>3 4 5 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourages children to try new/interesting developing physical skills</td>
<td>3 4 5 6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Experiential play**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator Observations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Set up play spaces and resources in a variety of ways and places (inside/ outside/ active/ secure)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provides different locations for play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provides different times for play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitates meaningful role-play where children practice, encounter, solve/estimate problems, concepts and skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment supports children's rhythms, interests and understandings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actively encourages children to manipulate objects, details by discovering properties and purposes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Social play**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator Observations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Engages with children in turn-taking, big pot-eater, give and take, role-playing, games with rules, electronic games, collaborative games</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set play environments to encourage social play (e.g. objects and spaces for two and for small groups)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shows and shares humour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourages children to share play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engages in social/joint emotional exchanges (e.g. smiles, verbalisations, gestures)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Pretend/intuitive play**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator Observations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Values children's transitional objects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provides props that have personal play (e.g. puppets, dolls, figures, home setting, clothes, animals, toys, people, wooden animals)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provides props and encouragement for symbolic play (e.g. blocks, body movements, dressing)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourages and participates in children's play (assumes rules suggested by the children; offers suggestions to extend play; follows the children's cues about the direction of the play)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Accepts and supports the children's interest in exploring roles and developing skills (provides time, resources, elaboration)** | 3 4 5 6 |
### Active Learning Environment Scale: Rating sheet

Using the results from the indicator observations make a judgment of the global quality of each signal and assign low (L), medium (M) or high (H) for each signal.

| Rating Observation: Time | 11:15 | 9:50 | 10:25 |

#### Pedagogy
- creates an environment: L
- co-construct meaning: M
- reflects and plans: L

#### Play
- sensory and physical: L
- exploratory: M
- social: L
- pretend/symbolic: L

#### Learning Dispositions
- curiosity: M
- communicatory: L
- purposeful/expressive: L
- openness/risk-taking: L
- activity: L
- cooperation/collaboration: L

#### Brief description of Observation Context:

**Finding areas of interest**

- Identities a place to play
- Cant block
- Not open anymore
- Possible physical activity possibly available to children

**Finding areas of interest**

- Not engaging
- Following children
- Little interaction
- Parking

**Finding areas of interest**

- Child playing on bench
- Accountable

---

**Brief description of Observation Context:**

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**Brief description of Observation Context:**

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**Brief description of Observation Context:**

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### Active Learning Environment Scale: Rating sheet

Using the results from the indicator observations make a judgement of the global quality of each signal and assign low (1), medium (2) or high (3) for each signal.

#### Rating Observation 4: Time 1

**Brief description of Observation Context:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pedagogy</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Factors affecting observation:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>creates an environment</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>h</td>
<td>Reflects and plans</td>
<td>identifies a place to play with blocks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To construct meaning</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>h</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Play</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sensory and physical</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>h</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>exploratory</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>social</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>preferred symbol</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning dispositions</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>curiosity</td>
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<tr>
<td>perseverance</td>
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<tr>
<td>openness to risk taking</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>activity</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>cooperation/ collaboration</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>reflection</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

#### Rating Observation 5: Time 2

**Brief description of Observation Context:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pedagogy</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Factors affecting observation:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>creates an environment</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>h</td>
<td>Reflects and plans</td>
<td>not engaging or following children lead</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To construct meaning</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>h</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Play</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sensory and physical</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>h</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>exploratory</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>social</td>
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<tr>
<td>preferred symbol</td>
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<tr>
<td>Learning dispositions</td>
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<tr>
<td>curiosity</td>
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<tr>
<td>perseverance</td>
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<tr>
<td>openness to risk taking</td>
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<tr>
<td>activity</td>
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<tr>
<td>cooperation/ collaboration</td>
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<tr>
<td>reflection</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

#### Rating Observation 6: Time 3

**Brief description of Observation Context:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pedagogy</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Factors affecting observation:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>creates an environment</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>h</td>
<td>Reflects and plans</td>
<td>5 children playing in the box area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To construct meaning</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>h</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Play</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sensory and physical</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>h</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>exploratory</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>social</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>preferred symbol</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning dispositions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>curiosity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>perseverance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>openness to risk taking</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>activity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cooperation/ collaboration</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reflection</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Wellbeing Scale: Observation Sheet

### Domains and Signals with Indicators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator Observations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Happiness and satisfaction</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comfort, self-esteem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trusts biological needs are satisfied without anxiety - feeds, settles, toilets, cares for self calmly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expresses wants, needs, ideas, feelings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tries out things, risking the possibility of being unsuccessful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recovers from unsuccessful attempts relatively quickly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Looks for realistic challenges for self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asks for help when needed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initiates and engages in interactions, social and pretend play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sense of self</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognizes and increasingly regulates own needs, wishes, feelings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidently expresses wishes, preferences, opinions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shares the joy and success of self and others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accepts verbal and non-verbal attention from others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Vitality</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is alert and active</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is spontaneous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has lively posture and movements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Enjoyment/sense of humour</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrates pleasure in authentic experiences and ways</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enjoys fun, jokes, humor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engages in experiences with enthusiasm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ability to rest and relax</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Signals need for rest, relax</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regulates rhythms of activity and rest (remains when tired)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Regulates periods of calmness</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social functioning</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social initiative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reaches out to others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is receptive and responds to the stimuli/suggestions of others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attracts other children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Assures</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has a sense of own space</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is not unduly pressured by claims of others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objects when personal rights threatened</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wants to be consulted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aids for help/comfort</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Coping/resilience</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is flexible, accepts help/support when needed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recovers from distress/inconvenience/irritation/frustration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can be comforted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calms/quietens (using own strategies)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can be distracted if inappropriate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remains accountable when distressed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooperates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accepts limits/boundaries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Positive attitude towards warmth and closeness</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enjoys being in close proximity to others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reaches out for physical contact</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Wellbeing Scale: Rating sheet

Using the results from the indicator observations make a judgement of the global quality of each signal and assign low (1), medium (2) or high (3) for each signal.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating Observation 1: Time</th>
<th>Brief description of Observation Context</th>
<th>Happiness and satisfaction</th>
<th>Social functioning</th>
<th>Dispositions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11 10 Mon. July</td>
<td>Sharing space, Pic on Blackboard</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Factors affecting observation: Compelled, some upsets, totally social interaction compromised.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating Observation 2: Time</th>
<th>Brief description of Observation Context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9:30 Time</td>
<td>Pounding paddles, Moon stones</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating Observation 3: Time</th>
<th>Brief description of Observation Context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9:55 Wed</td>
<td>Playing with toys</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating Observation 4: Time</th>
<th>Brief description of Observation Context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10:30 Wed</td>
<td>Good playing sparkle</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating Observation 5: Time</th>
<th>Brief description of Observation Context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9:20 Thu</td>
<td>Circle Two</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating Observation 6: Time</th>
<th>Brief description of Observation Context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9:05</td>
<td>Making lockers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

INDIVIDUAL 3 MEAN SCORE: 3.5
### Wellbeing Scale: Observation Sheet (continued)

#### Domains and Signals with Indicators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disposition</th>
<th>Indicator Observations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Openness and eagerness to explore</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initiates open-ended conversations and language</td>
<td>4 4 4 4 3 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is aware of those around</td>
<td>4 4 4 4 3 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tries new and untried activities willingly</td>
<td>4 4 4 4 3 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Takes time to wonder and experience</td>
<td>3 3 4 4 4 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In curios questions, actively seeks out things to investigate and explore</td>
<td>4 4 4 4 3 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Considers alternatives</td>
<td>4 3 4 4 4 4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Pleasure in sensory experiences

| Shows pleasure in being immersed in sensory experiences - taste, sound, smell, sight, movement and touch | 3 4 4 3 3 3 |
| Eats meals | 4 4 3 3 3 3 |
| Eats familiar things | 3 3 4 3 3 3 |
| Enjoys movement | 4 4 4 4 4 3 |
| Listens to music and nature’s sounds | 4 4 4 4 4 4 |
| Visually tracks and observes attentively | 4 3 4 3 3 3 |
| Uses materials expressively and well (e.g., drawing, clay, sand, paint, collage) | 3 4 4 4 4 3 |

#### Perseverance/trustworthiness

<p>| Tries again when faced with a problem | 4 4 4 4 4 3 |
| Problems with optimism | 4 4 4 4 4 3 |
| Not easily distracted when concentrating | 4 4 4 4 4 3 |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Item 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item 7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Rating Explanations**

- Item 1: [Rating Explanations]
- Item 2: [Rating Explanations]
- Item 3: [Rating Explanations]
- Item 4: [Rating Explanations]
- Item 5: [Rating Explanations]
- Item 6: [Rating Explanations]
- Item 7: [Rating Explanations]
# Involvement Scale: Rating Sheet

Using the results from the Involvement Observations make a judgement of the global quality of each signal and assign low (l), medium (m) or high (h) for each signal.

## Rating Observation 1: Time 9:15 Tuesday July Circle Time Ed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Brief description of Observation Context:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Concentration: l h</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Energy: m h</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creativity &amp; Originality: m h</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facial expression &amp; posture: m h</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persistence: h</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Precision: m h</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reaction time: m h</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbalizations &amp; language: m h</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction: h</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Factors affecting observation:
- Adult led-feeling
- Walking in circle
- I was feeling a little sick
- I saw a little space ship flying up with 3 aliens - I jumped up to look

Notes:
- I love the listening ears
- Flexible
- Busy, talking, getting off hands

## Rating Observation 2: Time 1:00 Tuesday July Piyiya Noonstien Ed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Brief description of Observation Context:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Concentration:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Energy:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creativity &amp; Originality:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facial expression &amp; posture:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persistence:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Precision:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reaction time:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbalizations &amp; language:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Factors affecting observation:
- I’m feeling a little sick
- Flexible
- Busy, talking, getting off hands

Notes:
- I love the listening ears
- Flexible

## Rating Observation 3: Time 10:05 Wednesday Colouring Activity - Male Room

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Brief description of Observation Context:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Concentration:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Energy:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creativity &amp; Originality:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facial expression &amp; posture:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persistence:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Precision:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reaction time:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbalizations &amp; language:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Factors affecting observation:
- Teacher showed how to hold the crayon
- Focussing & colouring
- Singing so he colours supernova - Happy
- Anxious, putting palms in pocket

Notes:
- I love the listening ears
- Flexible
- Busy, talking, getting off hands
### Involvement Scale: Rating sheet (continued)

Using the results from the Indicator Observations make a judgement of the global quality of each signal and assign low (L), medium (M) or high (H) for each signal.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating Observation</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Description of Observation Context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rating Observation</td>
<td>11:30</td>
<td>July running outside</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concentration</td>
<td>H</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Energy</td>
<td>H</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complexity &amp; creativity</td>
<td>M</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facial expression &amp; posture</td>
<td>M</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persistence</td>
<td>M</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Precision</td>
<td>H</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reaction time</td>
<td>M</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal utterances/language</td>
<td>M</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction</td>
<td>H</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Rating Observation: Time 9:20

**Circle Time**

| Concentration      | M        |                                     |
| Energy             | H        |                                     |
| Complexity & creativity | M   |                                     |
| Facial expression & posture | M |                                     |
| Persistence        | M        |                                     |
| Precision          | H        |                                     |
| Reaction time      | M        |                                     |
| Verbal utterances/language | M |                                     |
| Satisfaction       | H        |                                     |

### Rating Observation: Time 10:15

**Mixing Dough Cookies**

| Concentration      | M        |                                     |
| Energy             | H        |                                     |
| Complexity & creativity | M   |                                     |
| Facial expression & posture | M |                                     |
| Persistence        | M        |                                     |
| Precision          | H        |                                     |
| Reaction time      | M        |                                     |
| Verbal utterances/language | M |                                     |
| Satisfaction       | H        |                                     |

**Factors affecting observation:**

- Outside aimlessly running around. Trying to impress the girls. Uninterested child. Teacher.
- Circle time. Introduced to story about his book not awarded. No inclusion, listening...
- So wants to engage but frustrated and does it by educator.

**Individual's Mean Score:** 1.7
Appendix X: Degree and Masters Equivalent
### Relationships Scale: Observation Sheet

**Signals with Indicators**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Responsiveness</th>
<th>Indicators</th>
<th>Observations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Interactions</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality Verbal Exchanges</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appropriateness</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:**
- 1: Rarely
- 2: Occasionally
- 3: Most of the time
- 4: Always

*Please provide feedback on the specific observations made during the interaction.*