

**From language to literacy:
Supporting the development of early childhood
educator's knowledge and skills in phonological
awareness**

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*Ours is not the task of fixing the entire world all at once,
but of stretching out to mend the part of the world that is
within reach.*

Clarissa Pinkola Estes

Declaration

I have read and understood the Departmental policy on plagiarism.

I declare that this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted in any form for another degree or diploma at any university or other institution of tertiary education.

Information derived from the published or unpublished work of others has been acknowledged in the text and a list of references is given.

Signature: *Annette J. Keavns*

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Date: 14th February 2024

Table of Contents

Title Page	i
Declaration	iii
Table of Contents	iv
Appendices	xii
List of Tables	xiii
Table of Acronyms	xiv
Glossary of Key Terms	xvii
Abstract	xx
Acknowledgements	xxi

Chapter 1 - Introduction

1.1 Introduction	1
1.2 Setting the context	4
1.3 Rationale for the research study	5
1.4 Research aim, purpose and questions	8
1.5 Significance of the study	9
1.6 Structure of the study	10
1.7 Conclusion	12

Chapter 2 - Policy

2.1 Introduction	13
2.2 International ECEC context – impact on Ireland	14
2.3 Historical development of the ECEC sector in Ireland through the 1990's	16

2.3.1	Demand for ECEC provision outside the home _____	17
2.3.2	Growing demands in the late 1990's – driving regulation for the sector _____	18
2.4	The Beginning of a Quality Agenda – moving into a new millennium _____	20
2.4.1	Quality agenda - interrupted by austerity _____	21
2.4.2	Quality Agenda Gathers Momentum _____	21
2.4.3	Investing in People – Towards a Well-Educated Workforce _____	22
2.4.4	Early Years Education-focused Inspections _____	23
2.5	Professionalising the Sector _____	24
2.6	Policies related to literacy and professional development and learning _____	27
2.6.1	Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life: The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People, 2011-2020 (DES, 2011) _____	28
2.6.2	Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy Consultation: Discussion Paper (2022) _____	29
2.7	Conclusion _____	30

Chapter 3 - Literature Review

3.1	Introduction _____	32
3.2	Theoretical Framework _____	34
3.2.1	Andragogy _____	35
3.2.2	Vygotsky's Learning Theories _____	39
3.2.2.1	<i>Constructivism or social constructivism?</i> _____	39
3.2.2.2	<i>Sociocultural theory</i> _____	40
3.2.3	Situated learning (SL) in communities of practice (CoP) _____	42
3.2.3.1	<i>Situated learning theory (SLT)</i> _____	42
3.2.3.2	<i>Community of practice theory (CoP)</i> _____	44
3.2.4	The theoretical framework for this research _____	47

3.3 Exploring Professional Development and Professional Learning	48
3.3.1 Professional development.	49
3.3.2 Professional learning	50
3.3.3 Professional development and learning	51
3.4 Models of professional development and learning	52
3.4.1 Desimone’s (2009) model of PD	52
3.4.2 Darling-Hammond et al. (2017)	53
3.4.3 Scarparolo and Hammond (2018)	55
3.5 The starting point	58
3.5.1 Identifying current knowledge level	58
3.5.2 Content input through workshops	58
3.5.3 On-site observation and modelling	59
3.5.4 Reflection with coaching and feedback	60
3.5.4.1 <i>Coaching</i>	62
3.5.4.2 <i>Feedback</i>	64
3.5.5 Important phases in a model of professional development and learning for this research	65
Summary of professional development and learning pillar	67
3.6 Exploring emergent literacy development	67
3.6.1 Understanding what is meant by EL	68
3.7 The EL Continuum	70
3.7.1 Step 1: Basic foundational skills	72
3.7.2 Steps 2 and 3: Phonological Sensitivity	72
3.7.3 Step 4, 5 and 6: The final steps on the continuum: phonics/fluency/ comprehension	75
3.8 Models of EL	75
3.8.1 Whitehurst and Lonigan (1998)	76

3.8.2	National Early Literacy Panel (NELP) 2008	77
3.8.3	Rohde’s comprehensive EL model (CELM) (2015)	80
3.8.4	Impact of EL models on practice	81
3.9	Knowledge requirement	82
3.9.1	What should be taught?	82
3.9.2	Step 1 - Rhyming and alliteration	84
3.9.2.1	<i>Recognising Rhyme</i>	85
3.9.2.2	<i>Generating Rhyme</i>	85
3.9.2.3	<i>Alliteration</i>	86
3.9.3	Step 2 - Segmenting sentences into words	87
3.9.4	Step 3 – Segmenting words into syllables	87
3.9.5	Step 4 - Segmenting - syllables into subsyllables - onset and rime	88
3.9.6	Step 5 - Segmenting - from sub-syllables into phonemes	89
3.10	The ‘Do’s’ and ‘Don’ts’ of PA teaching	89
3.11	Conclusion	90

Chapter 4 - Methodology

4.1	Introduction	92
4.2	Research questions	93
4.3	Research design	94
4.4	Positionality	95
4.5	My philosophical positioning	97
4.5.1	My ontological position	98
4.5.2	My epistemological position	99
4.5.3	My axiological assumptions	99
4.5.4	Paradigms	100

4.6 Methodology - action research	102
4.6.1 Brief historical background	102
4.6.2 Collaborative action research (CAR)	104
4.7 Sample context and selection	106
4.8 The research cycles	108
4.8.1 Cycle 1 (Figure 4.2)	108
4.8.2 Cycles 2, 3 and 4 (Figure 4.3)	109
4.8.3 Cycle 5 (Figure 4.4)	111
4.9 Data collection	112
4.9.1 Online questionnaire	112
4.9.2 Workshops	112
4.9.3 Focus groups (including de-brief discussions)	113
4.9.4 Observations, field notes	114
4.9.5 Coaching with modelling and feedback	115
4.9.6 Reflective journals	116
4.9.7 Abbreviations and initialisms for collection data	117
4.10 Data analysis	118
4.10.1 Quantitative data	118
4.10.2 Quantitative data analysis	118
4.10.2.1 Phase 1	119
4.10.2.2 Phase 2	120
4.10.2.3 Phase 3	120
4.10.2.4 Phase 4	121
4.10.2.5 Phase 5	121
4.10.2.6 Phase 6	121
4.11 Trustworthiness	122

4.11.1	Credibility	122
4.11.2	Dependability	123
4.12	Triangulation	124
4.13	Ethical Considerations	124
4.13.1	Consent and assent	125
4.13.2	Confidentiality	126
4.13.3	Power relations	127
4.13.4	Data Management and Storage	128
4.13.5	Limitations	129
4.14	Conclusion	129

Chapter 5 - Findings and Discussion

5.1	Introduction	131
5.2	Theme 1: Knowledge - Knowing more, doing better	133
5.2.1	Knowledge and practice conflict	133
5.2.1.1	<i>Current knowledge and practice</i>	134
5.2.1.2	<i>New Knowledge and practice – the conflict</i>	139
5.2.2	Knowledge leading to confidence	143
5.2.3	Knowledge and confidence influencing skills	146
5.2.4	Knowledge, confidence and skills influencing competency	148
5.2.5	Knowledge, confidence, skills and competency leading to changed practices	
	151	
5.2.6	Summary of theme 1: knowledge-practice conflict	154
5.3	Theme 2: Capacity building methodologies	155
5.3.1	Resources and Materials	156
5.3.2	Observation - look and see	157

5.3.3	Modelling - show me how _____	159
5.3.4	Feedback – asking and telling _____	163
5.3.5	Summary of theme 2: capacity building methodologies _____	165
5.4	Theme 3 – reflection within a community of practice _____	166
5.4.1	Reflection hesitancy _____	167
5.4.2	Reflection - giving and receiving feedback _____	168
5.4.3	Reflection in a Community of Practice _____	171
5.4.4	Reflection leading to self-belief and supporting others _____	173
5.4.5	Advocating to parents and other stakeholders _____	175
5.4.6	Summary theme 3: reflection within a community of practice _____	177
5.5	Conclusion _____	177

Chapter 6 - Conclusions

6.1	Introduction _____	179
6.2	Revisiting the research questions – key insights _____	180
6.2.1	Research question 1 _____	180
6.2.2	Research question 2 _____	182
6.2.2.1	<i>Workshops</i> _____	182
6.2.2.2	<i>Observations – opportunities for coaching using modelling and feedback</i> _____	183
6.2.2.3	<i>Reflection</i> _____	185
6.2.3	Research question 3 _____	186
6.3	Contributions to knowledge and scholarship _____	189
6.3.1	A staged model of professional development and learning _____	189
6.3.2	Knowledge Stairs - levels of knowledge _____	192
6.3.3	A coaching model _____	194
6.3.4	A PA programme for the Irish ECCE context _____	197

6.3.5 Contribution to policy _____	198
6.4 Recommendations for policy, practice and research _____	198
6.4.1 Recommendations for policy _____	199
6.4.2 Recommendations for practice _____	200
6.4.3 Recommendations for future research _____	200
6.5 Conclusion _____	201
References	203

Appendices

Appendix A: National Qualifications Framework _____	247
Appendix B: AIM _____	248
Appendix C: Key milestones that impacted the evolution of the ECEC sector in Ireland over the past 100 years _____	252
Appendix D: Information sheet for owners of the early years' setting _____	252
Appendix E: Presentation PowerPoints _____	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Appendix F: Semi-structured focus group questions _____	264
Appendix G: Pre/post intervention questionnaire _____	265
Appendix H: A selection of the resources to support implementation strategies provided at workshops _____	269
Appendix I: Parent/carer information sheet and consent form _____	270
Appendix J: Educators' information sheet and consent form _____	274
Appendix K: Child information sheet and assent form _____	280
Appendix L: Reflective framework _____	281
Appendix M: Phonological awareness _____	283

List of Tables

Table 2.1	Government departments and their roles and responsibilities for the ECEC sector	18
Table 2.2	Staff qualification levels from Pobal 2020-2021 report	26
Table 2.3	Title, role and qualification level as set out under the Employment Regulation Order	27
Table 2.4	Actions identified to improve the skills of ECEC educators. Adapted from Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life	29
Table 2.5	Key factors that will underpin the new Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy	30
Table 3.1	Darling-Hammond <i>et al.</i> (2017) seven features of effective professional development and learning	54
Table 3.2a	The first six of the conventional literacy skills identified by National Early Literacy Panel (2008)	76
Table 3.2b	The final five of the conventional literacy skills identified by National Early Literacy Panel (2008)	77
Table 4.1	Qualification levels and years of experience of participating staff	105
Table 4.2	Abbreviations and initialisms identifying where data were collected	115
Table 5.1	Research questions	130
Table 5.2	Themes and sub-themes	130

List of Figures

Figure 2.1	Pillars of the Workforce Development Plan	25
Figure 3.1	Knowles' six assumptions of andragogy	38
Figure 3.1	Elements of Vygotsky's theories impacting on this study	41
Figure 3.2	Situated learning in a community of practice	46
Figure 3.4	Researcher's theoretical framework for a professional development and learning programme on PA	48
Figure 3.5	Desimone core conceptual framework	53
Figure 3.6	Scarparolo and Hammond model	56
Figure 3.7	A professional development and learning framework for educators used in this research.	65
Figure 3.8	The literacy continuum	69
Figure 3.9	Whitehurst and Lonigan EL Model	74
Figure 3.10	Rohde Comprehensive Emergent Literacy Model (CELM)	79
Figure 3.11	The phonological awareness continuum	81
Figure 4.1	Elliott's model of action research applied to this study	103
Figure 4.2	Cycle 1 of the intervention	106
Figure 4.3	Cycles 2, 3, and 4 of the intervention	107
Figure 4.4	Cycle 5 of the intervention	109
Figure 4.5	Braun and Clarke's 6-step analysis framework	117
Figure 5.1	Q 6: Pre-IQ How to support literacy skills	132
Figure 5.2	Q 7: Pre-IQ Phonological awareness is..	133
Figure 5.3	Q 8: Pre-IQ Phonics is..	134
Figure 5.4	Q 10: Pre-IQ Confidence in ability to teach PA	136
Figure 5.5	Q 6: Post-IQ How to support literacy skills	142
Figure 5.6	Q 9: Pre- and Post IQ How knowledgeable do you feel in the area of EL development?	143
Figure 5.7	Q 4: Post-IQ How much time is spent on different EL activities	148
Figure 5.8	Q 5: Frequency of wordplay activities pre- and post-intervention	149
Figure 6.1	A staged model of professional development and learning developed by the researcher	189
Figure 6.2	Knowledge stairs developed by the researcher	191
Figure 6.3	Dynamic coaching model developed by the researcher	194

Table of Acronyms

AIM	Access and Inclusion Model
AR	Action Research
BAECTL	Bachelor of Arts in Early Childhood Teaching and Learning
CAR	Collaborative Action Research
CECDE	Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education
CoP	Community of Practice
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
DCECIY	Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth
DCYA	Department of Children and Youth Affairs
DE	Department of Education
DES	Department of Education and Skills
DES	Department of Education and Science
DoH	Department of Health
ECCE	Early Childhood Care and Education programme (a state-funded preschool programme)
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
ECI	Early Childhood Ireland
ECS	Early Childhood Specialist
EEC	European Economic Community
EL	Early Literacy
ELC	Early Learning and Care
EOCP	Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme
EU	European Community
ILA	International Literacy Association
IMF	International Monetary Fund
ITE	Initial Teacher Education
IPPA	Irish Preschool Playgroup Association
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NCNA	National Childrens Nursery Association
NDP	National Development Plan

NELP	National Early Literacy Panel
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
OMCYA	Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs
PA	Phonological Awareness
PACG	Professional Award Criteria and Guidelines
PD	Professional Development
PL	Professional Learning
PS	Phonological Sensitivity
QQI	Quality and Qualifications Ireland
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
WDP	Workforce Development Plan

Glossary of Key Terms

Adult Learning	A compilation of theories and methods to describe how adults’ learn best.
Andragogy	This is a theory about how adults learn. It is a process model that is concerned with ensuring the resources and procedures used will support the acquisition of information and skills for adult learners.
Alphabetic principle	The knowledge that letters symbolise sounds and is demonstrated by the capability to “identify letters in print, as well as their corresponding sounds” (Cunningham <i>et al.</i> , 2015, p.63).
Coaching	Coaching is the “process of equipping people with the tools, knowledge, and opportunities they need to develop themselves and become more effective” (Rogers <i>et al.</i> , 2020, p.177). It promotes collaborative learning in a supportive environment (Sawyer and Stuke, 2019).
Community of practice (CoP)	This is a group of people who “share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who share their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (Wenger <i>et al.</i> , 2002, p.4).
Community settings	Preschool settings that are funded by the state and managed by a board of volunteers not for profit.
Educator	To differentiate between ECEC and primary, throughout this thesis the term ‘educator’ refers to the educators in ECEC settings, while the term ‘teacher’ is used when referring to primary school.
Emergent literacy	This refers to the skills, knowledge and attitudes that precede learning to read and write, and the environments that support this learning (Lonigan and Whitehurst 1998).
Expressive vocabulary	Refers to the ability to produce and use words correctly and have an understanding of the meaning. Typically, receptive language precedes expressive (Breadmore <i>et al.</i> , 2019).
Feedback	This is information provided by the researcher regarding aspects of the educators’ observed practice and/or understanding of the various strategies and concepts. It is a tool that provides “timely, descriptive information” (Jug <i>et al.</i> , 2019, p.245) concerning the observations of the learner while in practice. Direct observation is crucial as it provides specific relevant information for feedback analysis.
Grapheme	The written symbol that represents a sound. These graphemes can be either single letters, (e.g. a, b, c) or combinations of letters (e.g. sh, th) (Neaum, 2017).

Intervention	An intervention refers to an action taken as part of a research study to effect a change in practice (Koshy, 2005). In this study, the interventions taken were part of a professional development and learning programme, aimed at influencing the knowledge and practices of the educators.
Modelling	This is when the teacher (in this case the researcher) takes opportunities to show how to perform a particular skill while describing each step along the way with a rationale (Elek and Page, 2019). This strategy can help promote learning and growth, enabling educators to see how to make changes within their own practice.

Phonological sensitivity	This is an umbrella term that comprises both phonological awareness (PA) and phonemic awareness skills on the literacy continuum.
Phoneme:	“The smallest unit of speech sound in a word that changes meaning” (Breadmore <i>et al.</i> , 2019).
Phonology:	It is the study of speech sounds of a language or languages, and the laws governing them.
Print knowledge	This encompasses alphabet knowledge, i.e. naming graphemes, and print concept knowledge, i.e. awareness of the features and functions of print (Lonergan <i>et al.</i> , 2000).
Phonemic Awareness	Phonemic awareness is the understanding that speech consists of small units of sound called phonemes. Children need to be able to intentionally manipulate (both segment and blend) the individual sounds within a spoken syllable or word (Scarborough, 2002). Phonemic awareness entails much more complex skills than PA (Yopp and Yopp, 2022).
Phonics	Phonics refers to knowledge of letter sounds and the ability to apply that knowledge in decoding to unfamiliar printed words. Phonics is “a way of teaching reading and spelling that stresses symbol–sound relationships” (Yopp and Yopp, 2022, p.131).
Phonological Awareness	PA refers to an awareness of the sounds in spoken words, as well as the ability to manipulate those sounds (Yopp and Yopp, 2022) and includes rhymes, syllables, onset-rimes and individual phonemes. PA is the focus of this research study.
Private settings	Preschool settings that are owned and managed by persons other than the state for profit.
Professional Development	Professional development is an intentional and planned sequence of training or learning experiences to advance teacher capacity and build pedagogical skills (Sawyer and Stukey, 2019).
Professional Learning	Specific changes in professional knowledge, teaching skills, attitudes, beliefs, teaching decisions, or actions (Sawyer and Stukey, 2019).
Receptive vocabulary	Refers to the ability to understand meaning of a word. A large receptive vocabulary supports understanding of the meaning but does not necessarily mean that we are able to use those words in our own speech. (Breadmore <i>et al.</i> , 2019).
Self-efficacy	Refers to one’s own belief in one’s own ability to address a specific issue in the context of one’s own instruction. Increased self-efficacy and confidence can influence the “effort people will expend and how long they will persist in the face of obstacles and aversive experiences” (Bandura, 1977, p.194).
Teacher	The term used in this study when referring to educators in primary school.

Abstract

Being literate facilitates greater functionality in today's literate society. Unfortunately, not all children are afforded opportunities to build foundational reading skills in their earliest years. Children's later reading skills are dependent on the acquisition of a series of phonological skills which form part of the emergent literacy (EL) continuum. Thus, educators need to be sufficiently informed to ensure the acquisition of phonological awareness (PA) skills. This study aims to establish to what extent if at all, a professional development and learning programme on PA in a situated-learning context impacts the knowledge and skills of participating educators, and in so doing influences their professional learning and practice.

This Collaborative Action Research study was set in a small, private sessional pre-school in a rural town in Ireland. It involved the provision of a professional development and learning programme, tailored to the needs of the educators, which included workshops focussed on related content, followed by on-site observations, coaching, modelling and feedback. Opportunities to reflect, both through discussion and journaling, were also significant components of the process. Data gathered included pre- and post-intervention questionnaires, observations that included field-notes and audio-recordings, debriefing discussions, researcher and practitioner reflective journals, and a final focus group.

This study unearthed a lacuna in knowledge and skills, specifically related to EL and PA, amongst these educators. However, it clearly illustrates that by engaging in a customised programme of professional development and learning, educator's knowledge, skills, and practice in this area can change. Moreover, findings reveal a strong correlation between depth of knowledge, heightened confidence, and more proficient pedagogical skills.

Arrival at this conclusion required various professional development and learning methods, of which coaching was deemed the most effective. This included in-situ modelling and individual feedback, coupled with the gradual emergence of a community of practice, which fostered deeper reflection and embedded learning.

At policy level, this study points to the need for adjustments to national curriculum, to include PA skills' development and reflect the extended duration children spend in early childhood settings today. Concomitantly, the inclusion of PA development skills within initial teacher education (ITE) programmes and continuing professional development for early years' educators is recommended.

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Beginning my adult education journey at 40 meant it coincided with the education journey of my children, Aoife, Brendán and Dónal, without whose support none of this would have been possible. Now this particular learning journey has coincided with your growing families, and I look forward to having the time to be able to do more of the 'granny' things. I hope, for both you and your children, I too am leading by example. Finally, without the unstinting love, support and encouragement of my husband Pat none of this journey would have been possible. He never questioned 'why', only 'when' and 'for how long'! I am eternally grateful to you and this, I promise, is definitely the last 'course'. After all, I'll have the floppy hat!

Chapter 1 – Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Learning to read and write is a crucial foundational skill that children need to learn to enable them to function effectively in our literate society. In fact being literate is “fundamental to our engagement and enjoyment in life” (Neaum, 2017, p.1), because in today’s world, literacy is involved in most everyday activities. Consequently, poor literacy significantly impacts on every aspect of our lives. Ensuring children acquire these skills is one of the “greatest contributions that we can make to achieving social justice and equity in our country” (Department of Education, 2011, p.5). Children with poor literacy skills struggle with most curriculum areas as they progress through school which, ultimately, can adversely impact their future employment options (Breadmore *et al.*, 2019). Extensive research has documented that the preschool experience plays a significant role in children’s development of language and early literacy skills and continued later life benefits (Shanahan and Lonigan, 2009; Department of Education, 2011; Piasta *et al.*, 2020). The Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy Consultation Discussion Paper states “these skills are crucial to a person’s ability to develop fully as an individual, to live a satisfying and rewarding life and to participate fully in our society” (Department of Education¹ (DE) and Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Inclusion and Youth (DCEDIY)², 2022, p.2). For children to learn to read, and read well, they need to first develop strong pre-literacy skills. These skills include elements such as alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness (PA), print knowledge, oral language and vocabulary (see Glossary of Key Terms), all of which are elements found to be highly predictive of later reading achievement (Cunningham *et al.*, 2015).

¹ The name of the Department of Education (DE), established in 1924, has changed over the years. In 1997 it changed to the Department of Education and Science (DES); in 2010 it was changed to the Department of Education and Skills (DES) and in 2020 it became the Department of Education (DE). This thesis will refer to the correct term for the time period under discussion.

² In June 2011 the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (OMCYA) evolved into the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA). In October 2020, the DCYA evolved into the current Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY). This thesis will refer to the correct term for the time period under discussion.

The development of literacy skills begins with language. Supporting children’s developing language in the first five years in rich and engaging environments where language is promoted, is the best way to ensure their success as readers (Dickinson and Tabors, 2001). Indeed Crim *et al.* contend that the “foundation of all learning is rooted in the development of language and literacy abilities” (2008, p,17). The development of PA is very closely linked to overall language and speech development but more importantly it is also closely linked to literacy development. PA has been identified as a key skill that contributes to early literacy success and can be defined as the ability to think about, reflect on, and manipulate the sound structures of language (Goswami, 2001; Justice and Pullen, 2003; Phillips *et al.*, 2008; Cunningham and O’Donnell, 2015; Weadman *et al.*, 2023). Phonemic awareness is a term that has been used interchangeably in both research and practice but according to the International Literacy Association (ILA) there are important distinctions between them (ILA, 2019). As a multi-level skill, PA is comprised of a broad continuum of skills ranging from the most basic word and syllable level (rhyme, syllables and alliteration) to the most discrete level of individual sounds, or phonemes (onset-rime and phonemes) whereas phonemic awareness skills are more complex, requiring the “detection and manipulation of the smallest linguistic units: phonemes” (ibid, p.2). This study accepts the determination of the ILA regarding the skills of both PA and phonemic awareness. For the purpose of this study, we will be focussing on the development of the PA skills, rather than the more complex phonemic awareness skills.

To become successful readers, children need to understand that the words they hear are made up of sounds and that those individual sounds can be linked to the written word, i.e. letters or graphemes. As PA is regarded as an important skill that helps make the transition from oral communication to becoming a reader (Weadman, 2023), it is an essential skill that should be incorporated into ECEC programmes. Having the opportunity to participate in high-quality early childhood education and care³ (ECEC) has been proven to impact positively and long-term on children’s learning and development (Ginner Hau *et al.*, 2022). The research literature indicates children benefit from receiving high quality emergent literacy (EL) instruction from educators who have a deep understanding of PA (Cunningham *et al.*, 2009), therefore preschools

³ ECEC is a general term used to refer to early childhood education and care provision.

have the potential to contribute greatly to the literacy development of children. Unfortunately, many educators lack this critical knowledge and the pedagogical skills that are needed to teach PA (Moats and Foorman, 2003; Cunningham *et al.*, 2004; Schuele and Boudreau, 2008; Moats, 2009; Cunningham and O'Donnell, 2015). A way of providing the required knowledge and pedagogical skills is through a professional development and learning programme. The literature indicates that research-informed professional development and learning can significantly impact educator's knowledge and pedagogical skills (Desimone, 2009; Landry *et al.*, 2011; Elek *et al.*, 2022).

Potentially influencing PA practice in an ECEC setting through the development of a programme which delivers specific content and supports pedagogical skill development, is the aim of this study. To ensure the educators were involved in helping to steer the study in the direction of relevant interventions and make sure the research was being carried out *with* as opposed to *on* them, Collaborative Action Research (CAR) was selected (Elliott, 2001; Riel, 2017). This research was carried out in a small, semi-rural privately owned, community-based, sessional pre-school setting. This pre-school delivers the Early Childhood Care and Education⁴ (ECCE) state-funded preschool programme in two different rooms, catering for children from two years and eight months in year one (morning group), to children aged from four years in year two (afternoon group).

This chapter is structured to introduce the reader to the topic, highlight the importance of PA in the early stages of literacy development and provide information on the context of the study. Section 1.2 sets the context for ECEC, with a brief discussion on the international and national influences. A rationale for the research is provided in section 1.3, followed in section 1.4 by the research aims, purpose and questions. Section 1.5 briefly outlines the significance of the study. The structure of the study follows in section 1.6, before the chapter is finally concluded in section 1.7.

⁴ This ECCE programme provides 3 hours of free preschool each weekday over 38 weeks of the year, running for the school year. It is available for all children from the age of 2 years and 8 months up to 5 years and 6 months.

1.2 Setting the context

What follows next is a brief introduction to policy literature pertaining to PA and professional development and learning in ECEC in recent years. This section provides a brief backdrop of both international and national influences. Relevant policies are explored in greater depth in chapter 2.

The early 2000's brought investment through the EU structural funds into the ECEC sector in Ireland (Wolfe *et al.*, 2013), kick-starting national investment in the sector. At this time the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2006) had already identified that improved training and qualification levels were main contributors to the raising of quality in ECEC settings. In the years 2010/11, the European Commission Directorate-General for Education and Culture carried out research on competence requirements in early childhood education and care (CoRe) (European Commission Directorate-General for Education Youth Sport and Culture, 2013), which also found that “*the quality of early childhood services... depends on well educated, experienced and ‘competent’ staff.*” (Urban *et al.*, 2012, p.508). Further evidence was accumulated internationally identifying that better quality preschool experiences leads to stronger overall outcomes later in life (Walsh, 2005; OECD, 2018; Schweinhart, 2019) as well as leading to stronger reading abilities and later reading success (National Early Literacy Panel (NELP), 2008; Shanahan and Lonigan, 2009; Cunningham *et al.*, 2015; Gillon *et al.*, 2019; Kennedy *et al.*, 2023).

On the national front, preschool education is guided by two national frameworks. In 2006, *Siolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education* was developed by the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE, 2006). In 2009, a second framework, *Aistear, The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* for children birth – six years was developed by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA, 2009a) in consultation with the sector. This promoted learning through play in a child-led environment where a nurturing adult supports their learning (NCCA, 2016).

While traditionally, preschool provision in Ireland was mostly provided by private settings and funded by parents, in 2010, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) began to fund the delivery of a universal free ECCE programme. In 2016 this

increased to an optional two years of state-funded provision for children aged from two years and eight months until they transfer to the primary school system (Hayes, 2022). With a focus on early childhood education, in 2019, First 5, a ten-year whole of Government strategy to improve the lives of babies, young children and their families was introduced. Part of this strategy was to introduce Core Funding with the intention of professionalising the sector. An Employment Regulation Order for the Early Years sector was introduced in 2022, which set out for the first time, set minimum wage scales across a range of roles in the sector.

From a literacy perspective, The ‘*Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures*’ policy framework (2014-2020), published by the DCYA highlighted the need for all children to develop good literacy and numeracy skills and indeed stated “improving literacy skills and numeracy standards is an urgent national priority” (DCYA, 2014, p.68). *The National Strategy: Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life* (2011-2020) has expired and a new policy framework (2023-2028) is currently being revised. A literature review, *Towards a New Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy* is also currently under development. There appears to be little recognition that ECEC educators have a key role in developing EL skills with preschool children. Notwithstanding both national and international awareness of the relationship between EL and in particular PA skills (see chapter 3) and future reading abilities (Lonigan *et al.*, 2000; Schuele and Boudreau, 2008, Gillon *et al.*, 2019), PA remains virtually unspoken of within the ECEC sector in Ireland. The policies and reports named above influence the teaching and learning that takes place in ECEC settings and directly impact the areas of specific concern in this research study, namely PA and professional development and learning. These policies, in addition to others of relevance, are considered in more detail in chapter 2.

1.3 Rationale for the research study

I have extensive and varied experience working in different roles within ECEC. I spent fifteen years working as an educator with preschool children, whilst managing my own private setting. Following this, I became an Early Childhood Specialist (ECS) and tutor with a National Voluntary Organisation. In my current role I work as Lecturer and Placement Coordinator in Early Childhood in Maynooth University. While

visiting settings, I frequently observe practices whereby the educators were “doing phonics” with the children using off-the-shelf programmes, teaching to the “kit” with a problematic understanding of PA. Discreet discussions with educators on these occasions exposed a gap in knowledge of the EL continuum, specifically in the area of PA and the skills required by the children to actually prepare them for learning about phonics. Throughout this journey, my experience aligns with the international picture, which states that many educators lack this critical EL knowledge (Cunningham *et al.*, 2009; Moats, 2009; Cunningham and O'Donnell, 2015). Unfortunately, this results in a lack of mastery in the refined skills required to enable successful teaching of PA skills, placing the children in their settings at a disadvantage regarding the development of PA skills (Yopp and Yopp, 2009, 2022).

Throughout my time as a tutor of Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI)⁵ Levels 5 and 6, I worked with hundreds of educators who were looking to upskill in ECEC (see [Appendix A](#) for the QQI framework). Notwithstanding all the good, relevant knowledge that was gained throughout these programmes, the literacy content covered was basic and relied heavily on the existing knowledge of the tutor. At that time, I was unaware of PA and all it entailed. This state of knowledge remained until some years later when I encountered it on a master's programme on Special Education where it was being discussed in relation to language delay. I was astonished I had not encountered it previously as it is not difficult content to understand and I grew to believe that it should be covered in all QQI ECEC programmes, from Level 5 to Level 8. International research also identifies an inability to provide quality EL instructions because of poor preparation in “effective research-based instruction” within ITE programmes (Justice *et al.*, 2008).

It is now well established that professional development and learning can positively influence an educator's knowledge and skills (Justice *et al.*, 2008; Zaslow *et al.*, 2016; Schachter *et al.*, 2019). Likewise, it is understood that children benefit from having educators who hold a deep understanding of PA (Cunningham *et al.*, 2015).

Fortunately, because of the increased awareness worldwide of the importance of

⁵ QQI – Quality and Qualifications Ireland is the state agency responsible for promoting the quality, integrity and reputation of Ireland's further and higher education system. It has a 10 level framework for the development, recognition and award of qualifications in Ireland.

developing PA skills at preschool level, there is an abundance of research available to guide the design, selection and sequencing of the instructional stimuli, strategies and scaffolds (Schuele and Boudreau, 2008). However, the research varies in relation to the elements and features recommended within professional development and learning programmes with no complete agreement on what is most effective (Desimone, 2009; Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2017; Scarparolo and Hammond, 2018). Founded on a comprehensive literature review, this programme was developed in collaboration with the educators, in a manner conducive to their learning.

Based on knowledge of the sector at the time of undertaking this research, there were no PA programmes available that meet the needs of the early childhood sector in Ireland. Because the age range of children beginning ECCE here is slightly younger than the international norm, off-the-shelf programmes are focussed on older children⁶. These programmes appear to complicate PA through the integration of letters and instruction in letter-sound correspondence. In addition, from my extensive experience working in the sector, educators in Ireland appear to lack both EL and PA continuum knowledge, thereby rendering the available programmes to be no more than exercises in teaching to the kit. Consequently, there is a need for a professional development and learning programme that supports the development of the educator's PA knowledge and pedagogical skills, which also includes opportunities to practice and apply the learning in their own settings (Desimone, 2009; Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2017; Rogers *et al.*, 2020). Integral to the programme, there will be opportunities for modelling as well as the provision of feedback following observations, thus supporting their upskilling in a meaningful way.

This study seeks to construct and deliver a professional development and learning programme which will enhance the educators' PA knowledge and pedagogical skills in a particular setting. Secondly, it aims to influence their practices so that children will engage effectively in appropriate activities that lead to higher levels of EL

⁶ The starting age of children in kindergarten in USA is 5 years on a certain date in most states as opposed to 2 years and 8 months in the first year of ECCE in Ireland. This age difference is significant in regard to learning about phonological awareness.

competency (Yopp and Yopp, 2022). On-site delivery of the programme in the educators' own setting provides opportunities for discussions on what is working and what is found challenging (Lave and Wenger, 1991). It takes cognisance of adult education principles of learning (Knowles, 1986). On-site coaching that includes modelling and feedback also creates opportunities for both the researcher and the educators to socially construct and share new learning (Vygotsky, 1978).

1.4 Research Aim, Purpose and Questions

The purpose of this study is to develop a PA programme that will influence a change in practice regarding EL for the educators in a particular setting. My experiences over many years both as an ECS and as a Placement Supervisor in Maynooth University led to the question at the heart of this research. Seeking to impact positively on educator's knowledge and practices, I began to explore the literature regarding both PA and professional development which led me to the overall aim for this study: *To establish to what extent if at all, a professional development and learning programme on PA in a situated-learning context impacts the knowledge and skills of participating educators, and in so doing, influences their professional learning and practice..*

Recognising the two strands of this research and reading the literature regarding both PA and professional development and learning, three overarching questions arose for me.

Question 1: From a review of the literature and an assessment of the participants' current knowledge level, what are the key elements of a professional development and learning programme to support their PA knowledge and skills?

Question 2: How do the various elements of the professional development and learning programme developed (e.g., workshops, observations, coaching, modelling, feedback and reflective journaling), individually and collectively influence the educator's PA knowledge and skills?

Question 3: How do the collaborative features of this intervention contribute to achieving a change in educator's PA knowledge, skills and practice?

1.5 Significance of the study

This study is significant because the impact a professional development and learning programme can have on educator's knowledge and skills is potentially far-reaching (Crim *et al.*, 2008; Cunningham and O'Donnell, 2015; Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2017; Weadman *et al.*, 2023). An increase in knowledge and skills impacts on practice, which ultimately impacts on the children's learning. Because PA has been described as "a powerful predictor of reading achievement" (Justice and Pullen, 2003, p.88), this study seeks to design a useful and usable professional development and learning model to help address educator's knowledge to improve literacy learning for the children in their settings. However, to do this they need to be further informed and possess good PA knowledge and pedagogical skills (Justice *et al.*, 2008; Grifenhagen and Dickinson, 2021). International research has indicated that not all educators are proficient in this area, and this aligned with my own experience over the years. Therefore, well designed professional development and learning will contribute to the upskilling of ECEC educators. This upskilling, however, needs to take cognisance of the needs of these adult learners to improve their PA outcomes. Because of the age range of the children attending the setting, ECEC educators should be encouraging the development of PA skills as the literature has established these skills as a critical predictor of children's later reading success (Gillon *et al.*, 2019; Bdeir *et al.*, 2022).

There is a substantial body of international research that examines the development of PA skills in school-going children. However, there is a more limited body of ECEC international research to which this study can contribute. The professional development and learning framework developed for this study is new and as such has not been utilised in other studies encountered, where educator's PA knowledge and skills have been investigated and supported (NELP, 2008; Desimone, 2009; Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2017; Scarparolo and Hammond, 2018). In particular, within the Irish context, there are no other documented studies available whereby a professional development and learning programme was designed and delivered to support the upskilling of early childhood educator's PA knowledge and skills. As a result of the growing body of research related to the importance of EL and PA skill development, and the impending publication of the new Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy, this research is timely, to inform the Irish context.

1.6 Structure of the study

This thesis is divided into six chapters. This chapter provided a brief introduction to the focus of this study, that is the development of a professional development and learning programme for early childhood educators on phonological awareness. Next, it briefly outlined the broader context for the study, both internationally and nationally. This was followed by a personal rationale for the study, after which the research aim, purpose and questions were stated. The significance of the study was then explained, followed by a section on the structure of the study which brings the chapter to a conclusion.

Chapter two delineates the policy landscape for the study, with a key focus on ECEC and professional development and learning policy in Ireland. Beginning with a brief overview of the international policy context that impacted Ireland from the end of the last century to the present day, it moves on to a historical overview of the Irish sector, analysing the reports and tracing the plethora of reports and policies that have influenced and shaped ECEC in Ireland as it is today.

Chapter three synthesises the literature pertinent to this research study. First, the theoretical framework that underpins this study is presented. This framework discusses the rationale for drawing on Knowles (1989) theory of andragogy, Vygotsky's (1978) learning theories of social constructivism and socioculturalism, and Lave and Wenger's (1991) situated learning in communities of practice theory. Following this, the literature relevant to the two main pillars of this research study is presented. Beginning with the professional development and learning pillar, both professional development and professional learning are individually explored followed by a rationale for the use of the term professional development and learning in this study. Following this, models of professional development and learning are discussed. Within the second pillar, EL models are explored, and the literacy continuum explained. Moving from the broad view of the EL continuum to the PA continuum, elements relevant to the development of a PA programme for educators are highlighted.

Chapter four presents the methodology for this research study and opens with a discussion on the research design. Next, I consider my positionality which impacts the theoretical framework (section 3.2.4) that influences the philosophical approach within which I have located my research. Following this, the choice of methodology, CAR (Elliott, 1991), is discussed and is followed by the description of the participant sample and their setting. The intervention cycles are then described, followed by details of the approach taken to analyse the data. The trustworthiness of the data is also discussed. This chapter concludes with an outline of the ethical considerations and protocols which underpin the research design, finishing with a brief discussion on the limitations.

Chapter five begins with a presentation of the data and a discussion across the three identified themes and is followed by an overview of the findings. The three themes are:

1. Knowledge - knowing more, doing better
2. Capacity building methodologies
3. Reflection within a community of practice

Each of these themes has subthemes which are explored and discussed in relation both to the data collected, the literature and the theoretical framework that underpins this research.

The final chapter of this thesis draws conclusions from the analysis of the data and answers the research questions in light of the data gathered and the literature reviewed, providing key insights. The significance of this research is followed by a section on my contribution to knowledge from a theoretical, policy and professional practice perspective, and precedes my concluding section, recommendations for policy, practice and for future research.

1.7 Conclusion

Research shows that preschool children's PA skills are a powerful predictor of future success in learning to read (Gillon *et al.*, 2019). Through research, our expanding knowledge of the development of emerging language and literacy skills continues to gather pace. Increasingly we are being exposed to greater knowledge of not just how best to support the children's developing skills but also, how best to support the educators in this endeavour (Cunningham, Etter *et al.*, 2015). Situated learning in a community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991), where learners support and learn from each other (Vygotsky, 1978) and their existing knowledge and experience is taken into account (Knowles, 1977), is proven to be an effective means of supporting the learning for educators.

This chapter introduced the reader to the research undertaken in this study. The research contained within this study was introduced which focuses on PA and a professional development and learning programme. Next, it set the broader context from both an international and national perspective and was followed by a section on the rationale for the study. Following this, the research aim, purpose, and questions were introduced, prior to a section on the significance of the study. The structure of the study which details the focus of each chapter, brought this chapter to a conclusion.

Next, chapter 2, is an analysis of the policies that impact on professional development and learning, phonological awareness and ECEC in general, in Ireland.

Chapter 2 – Policy

2.1 Introduction

It has been recognised internationally that ECEC has a significant impact on children, their families and their prospects for further education and employment (OECD, 2021). This has led to investment in ECEC within developed and developing countries being considered as an investment in the future success of economies and societies (ibid). Whilst the need for ECEC is now widely recognised, quality ECEC is much debated and the criteria that define effective education in the early years is much contested (Urban *et al.*, 2012). Policies impact ECEC provision and can positively or negatively influence practice within settings. The focus of this short chapter is to present the historical development of policy relevant to ECEC in Ireland, from an international and national perspective. It argues that fragmented, disparate and distorted policy development, have directly and indirectly shaped the knowledge, skills and practices (or lack of) of ECEC educators today. Tracing the influence of international practice and policy on the Irish ECEC system, it charts the myriad of factors which altered the trajectory of the sector over the last number of decades. It illustrates how various twists and turns have not served the system well. It points to some of the reasons why the absence of systemic, coherent structures as well as formalised initial and in-service education for educators has led to an absence of understanding and awareness of the critical elements of EL generally and more specifically, PA.

The chapter begins by providing a brief overview of the international context (section 2.2), highlighting key policy discourses and issues that impacted ECEC provision in Ireland from the end of the last century through to the present day. Next, section 2.3 proffers a broad overview of the historical development of the ECEC sector in Ireland, providing key associated statistics. Establishing a timeline beginning in the 1990's, it includes many of the strategic reports and policies that have brought us to the present day. Section 2.4 sets out how quality in the sector has progressed by stipulating minimum qualifications and aspiring towards a graduate-led workforce, while section 2.4 addresses the move towards professionalising the sector.

Section 2.6 explores the current policy context relating to literacy and professional development and learning for educators. While not all policies and commissioned reports are detailed within the text of the chapter, through the utilisation of tables and appendices, relevant milestones and events are captured. In addition, to assist readers, Appendix C (Hayes and Walsh, 2022) provides a more detailed timeline of key events and significant developments that impacted the evolution of the ECEC sector in Ireland over the past 100 years.

The chapter concludes by drawing the key threads together with discussion on the implications for this research study. What follows next is a section on the international policy background that impacted the evolution of the ECEC sector in Ireland from the early 1990's.

2.2 International ECEC context – impact on Ireland

The European Economic Community (EEC), now known as the European Union (EU), first indicated interest in ECEC in the early 1970's. It sought greater gender equity which would enable women to reconcile family rearing with job aspirations (Cohen and Korintus, 2017). Subsequently, Ireland's accession to the EEC in 1973, in addition to links with many international organisations and agencies, led to "more diverse discourses, expectations and obligations" in relation to our own youngest children (Walsh, 2022, p.15). Throughout the 1990's, international research began to promote the importance of ECEC for children's cognitive, social and emotional development. This influenced the thinking of those advocating for ECEC in Ireland (ibid). Consequently, in 1992, Ireland became a signatory to United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (United Nations, 1989).

In the late 1990's, policy reforms and significant public expenditure in ECEC services became evident, bringing with it a shift in the language of policy makers from the provision of supports to working mothers to the necessity for investment in children (Wolfe *et al*, 2013). While the drive to change policy nationally was gathering pace, a critical report from the UNCRC recommended "the State adopt a comprehensive National Strategy for Children to incorporate the principles and provisions of the

Convention (Children’s Rights Alliance, 1998)” (cited in Hayes, 2022, p.41). The ensuing National Childcare Strategy (Government of Ireland, 2000) became the reference document for successive policy development and was linked to the National Development Plan (NDP) 2000-2006. Subsequently, EU Structural Funds brought significant public investment to the sector (Wolfe *et al*, 2013) in the guise of the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP) (2000-2006), which allocated €564.7 million during this period (Government of Ireland, 2007). This was followed by the National Childcare Investment Programme (NCIP) (2006 – 2011), a nationally funded programme. The Childcare Directorate in the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (OMCYA) was responsible for the distribution of funding through which an additional childcare investment of €317 million was made (Hayes, 2022). While the funding was both badly needed and much appreciated, it was obvious the central focus of this outlay was not children but was intended to help parents, particularly women, to balance their work and family commitments. Indeed Fallon (2005) critiques the EOCP for maintaining a primary focus on increased workforce and training participation for parents, instead of on the children whose interests she maintained are held as “peripheral to the rationale of the programme” (cited in Horgan *et al.*, 2014, p.2).

From 2010 – 2011, research by the European Commission Directorate-General for Education and Culture was carried out on competence requirements in early childhood education and care (Urban *et al.*, 2012). Fourteen member states and one candidate country participated. This led to the publication of the *Competence Requirements in Early Childhood Education and Care (CoRe) Final Report* in 2011, which confidently began with “There is a broad consensus among researchers, practitioners, and policymakers that the quality of early childhood services – and ultimately the outcomes for children and families – depends on well educated, experienced and ‘competent’ staff” (Urban *et al.*, 2012, p.508). The policy recommendations in this report challenged all governments to provide quality ECEC for their youngest citizens, through the development of ‘competent’ educators and systems (Urban, *et al.*, 2012).

In 2010, Ireland set about addressing this challenge and the DES published a Workforce Development Plan (WDP) which included consideration of many facets of

quality ECEC, including occupational profiles and national award standards in addition to the provision of “flexible, affordable and nationally accredited learning opportunities, and quality assurance of courses” (DCEDIY, 2021, p.4). National frameworks and various other funding schemes were also introduced and are discussed later in this chapter.

The European Commission (EC 2015) noted in 2015 that the cost of ECEC was higher in Ireland than in any EU country which prompted the introduction of the National Childcare Scheme⁷ by DCYA in 2019 to replace the various funding schemes already in place. While funding and quality remained an issue, in 2019 a new WDP was established drawing on the EU Quality Framework for ECEC (EC 2019) and aimed to establish a career framework to build a diverse workforce.

Now, in 2023, it is apparent that the international influences are visible throughout the current ECEC space, from curriculum to quality, workforce development to funding. The next section outlines the chequered policy and legislative history of ECEC in Ireland, taking it from the 1990’s to the present day.

2.3 Historical development of the ECEC sector in Ireland through the 1990’s

As is evident from the section above, the international perspectives on ECEC impacted Irish policy. In tandem with this, nationally, there was a growing realisation that women need ECEC provision to enable them to enter the labour force. Additionally, there was an emerging recognition of the value of quality childcare for young children as a right (Hayes, 2022). This section looks back at how ECEC progressed towards the end of the last century and discusses the historical and social factors affecting ECEC provision in Ireland. Subsequently, a brief examination of the sectors’ progression in this millennium and a discussion on the State’s involvement ensues, which is

⁷ The National Childcare Scheme is a subsidy to help parents meet the cost of quality ECEC and School Age Childcare (SAC). It replaced all previous targeted childcare support programmes with a single, streamlined, user friendly Scheme. Subsidies are available for families with children aged between 24 weeks and 15 years who are attending any participating Tusla registered childcare service, including any Tusla registered childminder and SAC service.

characterised by disconnected policies and divided responsibilities across government departments. A discussion on the need for regulation within the sector then follows.

2.3.1 Demand for ECEC provision outside the home

Traditionally, the care and education of young children was divided: the family was responsible for the care element while education was the responsibility of schools (Hayes, 2022). However, a number of factors increased the need for care provision for children outside their own home, including the abolition of constitutional ‘marriage bar’ (Government of Ireland, 1937) in 1973 (public sector) and 1977 (private sector) which, for many years, had perpetuated the notion that a (married) woman’s place was in the home (Walsh, 2022). This brought an increase in women seeking employment outside their home even prior to the 1990’s “unprecedented economic growth” (Hayes, 2022, p.39), requiring a larger workforce which needed to include more women. Employment opportunities combined with housing requirements drove families further away from their local areas and their family support networks increasing demand for care provision for children outside their own homes.

Calls were coming for the state to involve itself in the general ECEC sector as hitherto, involvement was limited to community ‘non-for-profit’ services in disadvantaged areas. Hence, most ECEC provision was private, home-based, for-profit services with costs “among the highest in the EU” (Wolfe *et al*, 2013, p.194). Government response led to a succession of disconnected policy actions and “to the division of responsibility for ECEC across a number of government departments” (Hayes, 2022, p.38), perpetuating the distinction between childcare and education and using childcare as a solution to combat gender inequality and workforce demands. Additionally, educating young children was perceived as the panacea for tackling educational disadvantage. As a result, many government departments had some element of responsibility for childcare. These departments and their role and responsibilities can be seen in table 2.1 below. In addition to these, young children were also impacted indirectly e.g. Department of Finance through funding for education and Department of Environment through town planning and play spaces for young children.

Government Department	Roles and Responsibilities
Dept. of Agriculture	Through administration of European funding, the LEADER II scheme provides funding to develop some rural community childcare facilities
Dept. of Education	Responsibility for children in Junior and Senior infant classes as well as some projects in designated disadvantaged areas
Dept. of Enterprise and Employment	Responsibility for some training and employment schemes e.g. the Community Employment (CE) scheme
Dept. of Environment	Responsibility for ensuring early education is considered in town planning and residential developments; ECEC settings needed planning permission to operate
Dept. of Justice, Equality and Law Reform	Responsibility for provision and distribution of European funding to develop childcare initiatives that supported equality of access to jobs and training for the unemployed
Dept. of Finance	Responsibility for budget allocations to other departments
Dept. of Health	Responsibility for preschool provision for children at risk
Dept. of Social Welfare	Responsibility for funding projects in disadvantaged areas and supporting some children who experience disadvantage to attend playgroups and creches

Table 2.1: Government Departments and their roles and responsibilities for the ECEC sector. Developed from: Hayes, N., (1995, pp. 20-23).

While this list demonstrates the government’s commitment to providing for the care and education of young children, the obvious lack of cohesion could only impact negatively on both the emerging sector and the quality of provision. Lack of a single department with responsibility for ECEC also contributed to the lack of regulation and quality within the sector.

2.3.2 Growing demands in the late 1990’s – driving regulation for the sector

Most ECEC settings in the state were, and still are, privately owned and managed. Consequently, the state’s role in the actual delivery of services has been limited. Indeed, as recently as 2017, OECD data showed that 99% of eligible children attending preschool (aged three to five years), attended private ECEC services in Ireland (Oireachtas Library and Research Service, 2020). As more community,

voluntary and private ECEC settings emerged to meet the growing need for parents, the Department of Health (DoH) took legislative control and introduced regulations under the Childcare Act 1991 (Government of Ireland, 1991). In 1996 the sector became regulated for the first time and the Childcare (Pre-school Services) Regulations (Department of Health and Children, 1997) came into effect, marking “the first formalization of policy in ECEC in Ireland through the legislative control over services for children aged birth to 6” (Hayes, 2022, p.39). A Preschool Inspectorate was established as the Child Care Act (1991) imposed a statutory obligation on Health Boards to inspect preschool settings (O’Kane, 2005). However, due to the lack of available, trained ECEC professionals, the inspection team consisted of re-deployed community nursing personnel as the Pre-school Inspector along with an Environmental Health Officer. Their lack of pedagogical training was apparent from the outset with their inspection lens focused on the children’s ‘health’ rather than the learning and development indicators, with little understanding or recognition of the level of ECEC being provided (ibid). Nonetheless, finally the state was taking responsibility for all children rather than just those children ‘at risk’ (Hayes 2022). However, the emphasis on care rather than education was still very apparent and it was evident that the state saw ECEC staff as carers and not educators, which was reflected both in the lack of qualification requirements and the lack of funding available to the sector.

Despite the legislative changes, until the late 1990’s, national funding outside of the primary school system was targeted towards provision for educational disadvantage and children with additional needs. Thus, funding to develop ECEC for *all* children, not just children *at risk*, was one fundamental issue in the system. Another issue was rooted in the fact that, in Ireland, the defined age span of ‘early childhood’ is birth to six years and while children are legally required to begin school by the age of 6 years, in the 2001-02 school year, records indicated that 47% of junior infants were actually beginning aged four years (DES, 2022). For this reason, funding for ECEC up until 2000 was shared between the DoH and the DES (Hayes *et al*, 1997). It was acknowledged at this point in time, that Ireland was lagging “behind almost every other European country” (Douglas and Horgan 2000, p.4). However, following the publication of *Ready to Learn, White Paper on Early Education* (Government of

Ireland, 1999), a report recognising the importance of integrating education and care across all ECEC settings, an impetus for enhanced quality of provision in ECEC settings was beginning to emerge. This document clearly identified that high quality early education is critical to help children reach their full potential. It recognised that staff in ECEC settings were educating as well as caring for our youngest children.

2.4 The Beginning of a Quality Agenda – moving into a New Millennium

ECEC settings were becoming increasingly complex spaces in the early 2000's, with inspection and regulatory influences impacting daily practices. From these sometimes-contradictory discourses, where “distinct traditions of ‘care’ and ‘education’ existed” (Dunphy and Mhic Mhathúna, 2022, p.149), critical questions about quality arose, in response to which, in 2002 the DES established the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE). Finally, the quest for quality had arrived at the table. Addressing the ‘split’ system of dispersed players across both the ECEC and primary systems, was part of the rationale for this centre, in addition to producing a National Framework for Quality (NFQ) for ECEC. In 2002, an interdepartmental group in consultation with the sector published a report “*Quality Childcare and Lifelong Learning: A Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development in Early Childhood Care and Education*” (The National Co-ordinating Childcare Committee, 2002). Two lead departments were identified - the DoH for regulation and inspection and the DES for training, qualifications and quality practice (Hayes, 2022). Recognising the lack of integration across multiple departments, an Office of the Minister for Children (OMC⁸) with a Junior Ministry was appointed in 2005. To further encourage a cohesive approach and streamline thinking, the Early Years Education Policy Unit (EYEPU), co-located between the OMC and the DES, was established. These developments augured well for the sector until the global financial downturn stymied growth from 2008 onwards. This meant that any upskilling through professional development and learning that was being provided for ECEC educators, was going to be withheld until further funding was available.

⁸ In 2008 the OMC evolved into the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (OMCYA). The OMCYA further evolved into the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) in 2011

2.4.1 Quality agenda - interrupted by austerity

The economic ‘crash’ in 2008 brought the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the ‘Troika’ into Irish affairs and halted all ‘non-essential’ government spending. This had ramifications for ECEC development and manifested itself in opposing ways.

Prior to the financial downturn, in 2006, *Síolta: The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (CECDE, 2006)* was published. This was a very significant development and signalled a move towards greater standardisation in quality. Unfortunately, only two years after the publication of this valuable resource, in 2008, the CECDE closed its doors due to a lack of funding (Dunphy and Mhic Mhathúna, 2022). Shortly afterwards, in 2009, *Aistear*, The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009a) was introduced. However, the roll-out of training for both *Síolta* and *Aistear* was hampered by a scarcity of funding which subsequently led to “a fractured application of the frameworks in practice” (Hayes, 2022, p.46) – another negative fall-out from the austerity measures.

Ironically, the “Troika” supported the government’s plan to maintain essential services and shield the poor (IMF, 2018) which led to the introduction in 2009, of the ‘free preschool year’ for all, through the Early Childhood Care and Education Programme (ECCE)⁹, one of the most significant developments, ever, for ECEC in Ireland. Unfortunately, as funding was still an issue it contributed to a lack of professional development and learning opportunities for the sector.

2.4.2 Quality Agenda Gathers Momentum

In the latter half of the 2010’s, the country began to show signs of economic recovery. The emphasis on quality of education and care was developing momentum and this signified the need for a professional support service for educators in the sector. Therefore, to support this role and help improve quality in settings, in 2014, *Better Start*¹⁰, a quality development and mentoring service with a “regional reach through a

⁹ This ECCE programme provides 3 hours of free preschool each weekday over 38 weeks of the year, running for the school year. It is available for all children from the age of 2 years and 8 months up to 5 years and 6 months.

¹⁰ Better Start is a a quality development and mentoring service. A large team of ECEC Specialists utilise both *Aistear* and *Síolta* frameworks to work directly with settings to promote and enhance high quality care and education for all children in the settings.

network of mentors” (Hayes, 2022, p.45) was established by DCYA to promote quality and inclusion in ECEC settings for children birth to six years.

Another initiative was the publication of the *AistearSiolta* Practice Guide. Eight years after the peak of austerity, in 2016, the NCCA, DCYA and DES together developed the online *AistearSiolta* practice guide (NCCA, 2016) in an effort to drive quality within ECEC by focussing the combined potential of both frameworks. A further development was the increase in the ECCE Programme from 1-year to 2 years in September 2016 (DCEDIY, 2019). Settings operating the ECCE scheme were required to “provide evidence” of working within both frameworks (Hayes, 2022, p.46). A key underpinning principle for both frameworks was the *Role of the Adult*. This necessitated on-going support and training for ECEC workforce. International studies were already emphasising the need for a qualified workforce to work with young children. While there were programmes available to gain a general QQI level 5 qualification in childcare, there were no programmes specifically aiming to improve the EL knowledge of educators.

2.4.3 Investing in People – Towards a Well-Educated Workforce

Research indicates the quality of ECEC depends greatly “on well-educated and competent staff” (Peeters *et al*, 2018, p.46). A National Learner Fund of €3m was established to assist with up-skilling the ECEC workforce to achieve new minimum mandatory (from December 2016) qualifications at QQI¹¹ Level 5 for all educators working directly with children and at QQI Level 6 for room leaders, marking a move towards professionalisation. However, most available ECEC degree programmes (Level 7+) were full-time, with minimal availability of part-time programmes allowing educators in the sector to upskill.

In response to a demand from the sector, in 2012 Froebel College¹², (already in the process of merging with Maynooth University), in partnership with Irish Preschool

¹² In 2014, Froebel College, a primary teacher College of Education, merged into Maynooth University.

Playgroup Association (IPPA)¹³ and supported by Start Strong¹⁴, designed and developed a part-time Bachelor of Arts degree in Early Childhood Teaching and Learning (BAECTL). This was the first degree in Ireland to be delivered with the alliance of academia, advocacy and a practice/professional organisation that enabled educators who were working in the sector by day to gain a 3rd level qualification in childcare at night. The programme was delivered by both Froebel and IPPA staff, all of whom had worked in the sector and were cognisant of the educators' needs. A module on literacy and numeracy was introduced from the very outset of the degree.

In tune with Ginner Hau *et al.* (2022) who highlight the positive and long-term impacts of quality ECEC on children's learning and development, particularly children with a disability or from disadvantaged background, an Interdepartmental Group launched *Supporting Access to the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme for Children with a Disability* (Interdepartmental Working Group, 2015). Within this, the *Access and Inclusion Model (AIM)* was introduced "to ensure access" (Better Start National Early Years Quality Development, 2021, p.2) for all children to ECCE programmes. Both the background to AIM and the model are explained in Appendix B. To reinforce this initiative, *Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines for Early Childhood Care and Education* was published (DCYA, 2016). Thankfully, under Better Start and AIM, some elements of early literacy training are available to AIM workers in settings.

2.4.4 Early Years Education-focused Inspections

The *Action Plan for Education* (2016 - 2019) (DES, 2016a), with a vision to provide the best education and training system in Europe, outlined five high level goals, one of which identified the provision of high-quality professional development and learning opportunities and improvement in the "quality of the learning experience for our youngest learners" (p.31). The DES took responsibility for this and introduced Early

¹³ In 2012, IPPA, a non-governmental organisation providing support for ECEC providers and the largest ECEC membership organisation in Ireland with a focus on practice, merged with another early years organisation, National Children's Nursery Association (NCNA), to become Early Childhood Ireland (ECI).

¹⁴ Start Strong, an advocacy organisation that worked and campaigned to advance children's early care and education in Ireland which had a focus on children's rights, closed down in August 2016.

Years Education-focused Inspections (EYEI) in 2016. These inspections were intended to be supportive, looking at the quality of provision for children’s learning but only comment broadly on fostering emergent language, literacy and numeracy skills. Drawing from an evolving ECEC graduate pool, they provided advice and support and were considered to have “power to influence aspects such as ‘relational pedagogy’” (Urban *et al*, 2017, p.39). The next phase of development led towards enhanced professionalisation of the sector with a particular focus on standardising requirements for minimum qualifications for the workforce. With international literature advocating upskilling the educators in literacy to support children in the settings, and the DES now responsible for the education-focussed inspections, it was anticipated that some continuing professional development (CPD) might become available for educators in the sector. Unfortunately, this was not the case.

2.5 Professionalising the Sector

Throughout the final years of the decade, several developments signify the drive towards professionalising the workforce. To begin with, in 2019, the DES published *Professional Award Criteria and Guidelines (PACG) for Initial Professional Education (Level 7 and 8) Degree Programme for Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School-Age Childcare 2022-2028*. These guidelines include both academic and professional indicators (DES, 2019) and propose that ECEC professional graduates require the development of:

- Academic attributes
- Professional practice attributes
- Professional personal attributes

(Moloney and French, 2022)

all of which should be attained through a range of professional experiences. This was a prime opportunity to set in place PA development within all nationally accredited ECEC programmes. Unfortunately, within the PACG there is no explicit obligation to ensure PA is adequately covered within programmes. However, the government continued to demonstrate its commitment to the youngest children and further commitments regarding quality and qualifications of educators were in train.

In 2019, *First 5, A Whole-of-Government Strategy to Improve the Lives of Babies, Young Children and their Families* was introduced with a commitment to provide high quality ECEC. To address this quality objective, a WDP was developed and drawing on the EU Quality Framework for ECEC, it outlined plans to establish a career framework (DCYA, 2019). Also in 2019, an Expert Working Group set up by DCEDIY to develop a new funding model for Early Learning and Care and School Age Childcare was established. Their report was published at the close of 2021 (Government of Ireland, 2021) and one of the recommendations was to provide additional funding to support staff progression and development within the sector and to help meet the overhead costs to support employment of graduate lead-educators in ECEC settings (*ibid*). Year 1 (September 2022-August 2023) of the Programme brought a purse of €259m to the sector while year 2 (September 2023-August 2024) brought an additional €28m. With an ongoing aim of strengthening professionalism, *Nurturing Skills: The Workforce Plan for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare 2022-2028* was introduced, setting out a plan for career development and professional recognition within the sector (Government of Ireland, 2022). It was launched in 2021 and is the most progressive plan for ECEC to date. It has been organised under five interlinked pillars (Figure 2.1).



Figure 2.1: Pillars of the Workforce Development Plan

Steps 2 and 3 of this framework are particularly of interest to this study as they address raising the qualification levels of the workforce and developing a CPD framework. This could mean that finally, specific literacy qualifications could be introduced and CPD could become available to all educators.

Building on *First 5* objectives, it set a target of having a graduate-led workforce by 2028. Most recent figures available from Pobal are the 2020-21 Sector Report, which indicates 33.2% of staff who work directly with children have a QQI Level 7 qualification, or higher. Table 2.2 shows the year-by-year staff qualification changes, as outlined in the Pobal 2020-2021 report (DCEDIY, 2022). Looking at the qualification level for the most recent figures, 95% of educators have QQI level 5 or above. If PA skill development was included in all QQI programmes, from level 5 to level 8, it would make a significant contribution to supporting the PA skills of children in ECEC settings.

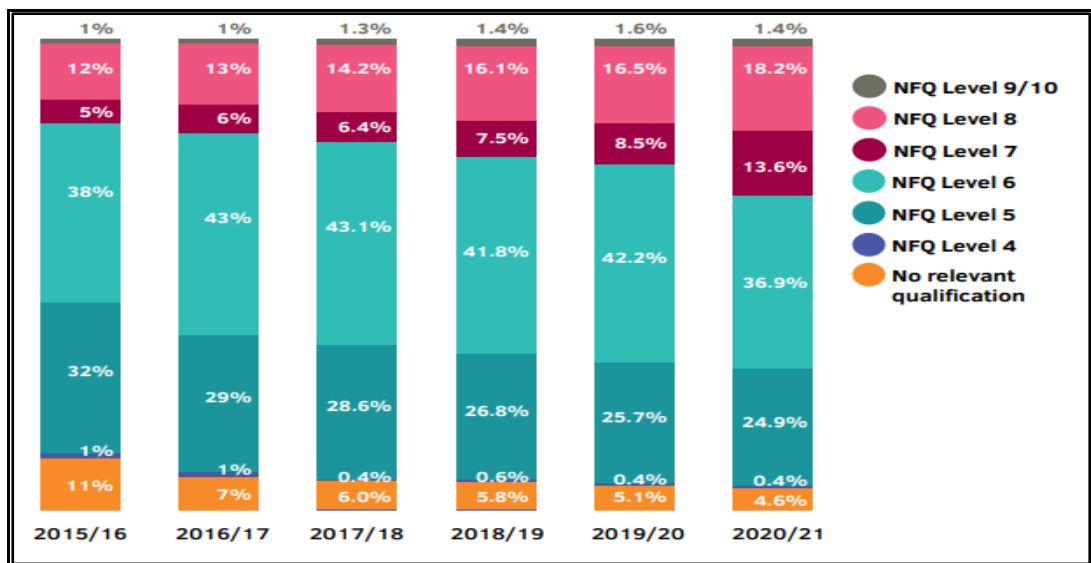


Table 2.2. Staff qualification levels for those working directly with children (Pobal 2020-2021 report, DCEDIY, 2022).

In an attempt to further sustain the sector, an historic Employment Regulation Order (ERO) was set for the ECEC sector in 2022, establishing new minimum rates of pay for roles in the sector. These roles are named in table 2.3. While broadly welcomed by the sector, it is argued that the rates of pay it sets out are inadequate, with an hourly

rate of pay for a graduate of €15.50/hour. It is important to note that no qualification above QQI Level 7 is mentioned in the ERO and only two of the roles named must work directly with the children.

Title	Role	Qualification Level
Early Years Educator	Working wholly or mainly with children involved in their education and care	Level 5
Lead Educator/room leader	Working wholly or mainly with the children and leading the practice in the room	Level 6/Graduate
Deputy/assistant manager	May work directly with the children in addition to managerial duties and responsibilities	Level 6/Graduate
Centre manager	May work directly with the children in addition to managerial duties and responsibilities	Level 6/Graduate

Table 2.3: Title, role and qualification level as set out under the Employment Regulation Order (Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, 2022)

This chapter offers only a brief discussion of the key milestones and significant developments that impacted the evolution of the ECEC sector in Ireland over the past 100 years. However, [Appendix C](#), adapted from Hayes & Walsh (Eds.) (2022), offers a more detailed listing.

2.6 Policies related to literacy and professional development and learning

Some of the current policies and legislation that impact ECEC practice in general also impact literacy practices and this research. One such policy, *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures* emphasises the development of good literacy skills among all children as fundamental to their life chances and deems improving literacy and numeracy as “an urgent national priority” (p.68). Also, *First 5* (DCEDIY, 2019) refers to family literacy and improvement of literacy skills. Other policies specific to literacy are *The National Strategy: Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life* (DES, 2011) and the *Interim Review 2011-2016* (DES, 2016b); *Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy*

Consultation: Discussion Paper (DES, 2022). Each of these will be discussed briefly in this section.

2.6.1 Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life: The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People, 2011-2020 (DES, 2011)

Published in 2011, this strategy aimed to improve literacy and numeracy standards among children and young people in the education system. It highlights key skills identified as the building blocks of reading, including PA skills, and acknowledges that early childhood is a time of significant opportunity for learning and “the knowledge, skills, attitudes and dispositions developed in these early years impact significantly upon their [children] later learning experiences” (DES, 2011, p.10). While it identifies Junior and Senior Infants as the setting for the development of these skills, it also explicitly states the importance of educators acquiring a greater understanding of the process by which reading skills are subsequently developed, through ITE and professional development and learning. Table 2.4 describes the actions sought to improve practice.

Both the DE and DCYA, alongside ITE providers, are tasked with the responsibility of providing professional development and learning for educators to ensure they have relevant content and pedagogical knowledge of EL. However, relevant content and pedagogical knowledge of EL was not defined anywhere to guide any of Departments or ITE providers which resulted in schools alone taking responsibility for PA skill development.

An interim review of the strategy from 2011 – 2016 (DES, 2016) was carried out and has set new targets. Developing materials and resources as part of the *AistearSiolta* Practice Guide to support the educators was suggested. Embedding EL and numeracy practices across the ECEC sector and in junior classes in primary was highlighted, as was increasing a focus on oral language and EL skills across all ITE in early childhood at Levels 7 and 8 (ibid, 2016). However, in the absence of the provision of upskilling for the ECEC sector, this remained mostly undone.

Objective: Encourage and support the upskilling of ECEC educators		
Detail	Who is responsible for the action?	Indicative date
Ensure that all ECCE training programmes include units on both content¹ and pedagogical knowledge in literacy (including oral language and a focus on additional language learning) (bold type mine)	DES DCYA QQI Universities Providers of ECCE programmes	2012-2013
Continue to provide incentives for CPD of ECEC educators through higher capitation for higher qualifications	DCYA	Continue and adjust incrementally
Ensure sufficient training provision to enable formal qualifications in literacy and numeracy development be a requirement in for all ECEC leaders in ECCE settings	DES DCYA Providers of ECEC programmes	2015
Increase the minimum qualification requirements for ECEC educators in ECCE programmes	DCYA DES	

Table 2.4: Actions identified to improve the skills of ECEC educators.
Adapted by researcher from *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life* (DES, 2011, p.29)

2.6.2 Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy Consultation: Discussion Paper (2022)

There is currently a review of the *Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy (LNDLS)* underway. In this Discussion Paper (DE and DCEDIY, 2022) (December 2022), some key anticipated underpinning factors of the new strategy were outlined (Table 2.5). From the initial reading of this discussion paper, an equal obligation is being placed on both primary teachers and ECEC educators to ensure children are afforded the opportunities they require to develop early literacy skills, indicating a change in thinking.

There is an acknowledgement within it that the development of literacy and numeracy skills falls beyond the remit of just the primary sector and needs the commitment of educators in addition to all other “education stakeholders and partners” (p.2).

However, if this is to be enforced, funding needs to be allocated to develop professional development and learning programmes to upskill educators in EL and PA. Additionally, all ITE providers should be charged with ensuring the development of EL and PA skills is included in their programmes. The next table, table 2.5, identifies the key factors that will underpin this new strategy if the consultation discussion paper is taken on-board.

Key Factors	Influence
Enabling parents and communities to support children’s literacy and numeracy development	When parents and families take an active interest in children’s education, better learning outcomes are achieved
Supporting teachers’ and early year’s educator’s professional practice and leadership	Professional development and learning support for educators are essential if improved learning experiences and outcomes for the children are to be achieved
Improving the curriculum and the learning experience	<i>Aistear</i> places an emphasis on playful pedagogies utilising active, hands-on experiences that children can connect with. These strategies should be used to support developing LNDLS skills
Supporting diverse learners to achieve their potential	Educators need to provide extra support for children with diverse needs and from poor SES backgrounds to develop LNDLS skills
Improving assessment and evaluation to support better learning in literacy, numeracy and digital literacy.	Recognising assessment and evaluation as key to delivery of high-quality learning experiences. Gathering information and documenting children’s learning and development provides rich pictures of young children as powerful learners

Table 2.5: Key Factors that will underpin the new *Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy* (adapted by the researcher from the LNDLS Consultation Discussion Paper) (DE and DCEDIY, 2022).

2.7 Conclusion

Because of the fragmented nature of policy development regarding ECEC over the years, it is small wonder that the sector is coming from behind. Recent years have seen

a significant shift in ECEC policy in Ireland, progressing from a reluctant minimal input by the state with negligible funding for the care and education of our youngest citizens, to funding both the children and their educators. There has been a plethora of reports, strategies and policies over the past number of years that contributed to the lack of cohesion in the sector. Ensuring these align with each other is imperative to effectively provide for ECEC. However, regardless of the huge shifts in funding in recent years, it still remains what Hayes calls “a split system” (2022, p.51), caught between the *care* and *education* of the child. Educators look to both the state and educational institutions to help ensure they are providing the best possible care and education for the children in their setting.

Many educators, like those in this research, seek out and fund their own educational qualifications and CPD. Policies past and present suggest a focus is required on EL and PA in ECEC settings. Effective state funded professional development and learning that helps develop the knowledge, skills and practices that promote children’s PA in the ECEC setting is required, particularly for those working with children in the two ECCE years prior to attending primary school. However, while our ECEC curriculum framework, *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009b), identifies the importance of supporting language development and providing print-rich environments along with use of books in ECEC settings, it fails to either mention the development of PA skills or identify practices to support their development. Additionally, the DES education-focussed inspections look broadly at EL with no focus on PA skill development. Unfortunately, the development of the PACG was a missed opportunity to ensure PA skills are specifically included in all degree programmes. Many educators are unaware of the gap in their practice regarding the critical elements of EL in general, and PA in particular, resulting in an absence of PA learning opportunities in ECEC settings.

The next chapter reviews the literature that underpins effective professional development and learning for educators. In addition to this, understanding and guidance is sought from the literature regarding EL and the effective teaching of PA skills.

Chapter 3 - Literature Review

3.1 Introduction

This literature review aims to be “an un-biased, informative, evidence-based and in-depth analysis of a subject that includes conflicting findings and explores established and current thinking” (Winchester and Salji, 2016, p.308). It seeks to meet this requirement with regard to this research study which aims to equip educators with the necessary knowledge and skills in EL through an effective programme of professional development and learning. For a number of decades, research has been carried out on the professional development and learning efforts to increase the pedagogical knowledge of educators on the nature and relevance of PA awareness for children’s EL development. However, regardless of this, many educators are still lacking a sophisticated understanding of PA and of how to effectively promote the development of PA skills in young children (Lonigan *et al.*, 2011). Consequently, numerous opportunities are missed for supporting the development of these skills with many children in early years’ settings.

Of all EL skills, PA skills have been most closely connected with future reading abilities (Lonigan *et al.*, 2000; Schuele and Boudreau, 2008; Gillon *et al.*, 2019) and also have consistently predicted future reading outcomes (Wagner and Torgesen, 1987). PA “...is not an intuitive or naturally developing ability, as language skills may be for some children, but rather may require deliberate teaching and practice opportunities” (Phillips *et al.*, 2008, p.4). Therefore, children need to be exposed to, and taught PA skills and concepts before they begin formal schooling to ensure they have a solid foundation to help develop the more complex literacy skills.

Research also indicates that children who struggle to read are at greater risk of inequalities in educational attainment, vocational opportunities, socio-economic prospects, and health and wellbeing (Carson and Bayetto, 2018; Gualteros, 2018). Consequently, it is imperative children’s developing PA skills are supported throughout the preschool years through “the provision of high-quality learning

opportunities” (Cunningham and Donnell, 2015, p.63), indicating a need for educators to have specific knowledge and skills to effectively support the children’s developing literacy skills. The OECD reports that children who participate in high quality ECEC programmes are better prepared for school and tend to have a higher academic performance (OECD, 2006). Results from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) show that children who attended ECEC tend to score higher in reading at age 15 (OECD, 2017).

The purpose of this research is two-fold. Firstly, based on previously identified needs, I set out to develop a model of professional development and learning informed by research that would ensure the educators develop both knowledge and skills in PA. Secondly, I wish to ascertain if an increase in knowledge and skills enhanced the educator’s confidence and competence in the teaching of PA skills. For that reason, this research seeks to establish to what extent if at all, a professional development and learning programme on PA in a situated-learning context impacts the knowledge and skills of participating educators and in so doing, influences their professional learning and practice. This literature review will explore these two main pillars of research, professional development and learning and PA skill requirements.

Reflecting this, the review will first begin, in section 3.2, by introducing the theoretical framework and the theories that underpin this research. Next, section 3.3 explores how both PD and PL are defined in the literature and notwithstanding the many discussions throughout the research literature on these terms, I proffer the definition and rationale for using the term professional development and learning for this research study. Following this, section 3.4 explores different models of professional development and learning¹⁵ prior to discussing the professional development and learning of educators and introducing, in section 3.5, a professional development and learning framework for this research study. Moving to the second main pillar, sections 3.6 and 3.7 discuss EL development and the EL continuum and PA knowledge and skills, respectively. Section 3.8 follows with a discussion on the

¹⁵ These models are referred to by their authors as either PD or PL models, or indeed both. While discussing the components of their models, I will adopt the terminology used by the authors. Thereafter, I will use the term professional development and learning throughout the study.

models of EL and considers their impact on practice. Finally, section 3.9 focuses on what knowledge and skills are required and how these might be taught, before finally drawing conclusions from the literature on the implications for this research study.

3.2 Theoretical Framework

Grant and Osanloo (2014) contend that all research is theoretical, and a theoretical framework serves as a guide to support a study and provides the structure to define how to approach the dissertation as a whole, without which, the structure and vision for a study is unclear. This framework guides the research by connecting with a formal theory or theories that offer a coherent explanation of certain phenomena and relationships and helps to justify the importance and significance of the work being carried out. It also serves as a guide to help determine what elements might be excluded from or included within the study and what needs to be measured and examined while it can also act as a guide to the data collection and data analysis plan. In fact, “a research plan that contains a theoretical framework allows the dissertation study to be strong and structured with an organized flow from one chapter to the next” (ibid, p.13). Mertens (2005) asserts that every decision made in the research process, including the development of research questions, focus of the literature review and the design approach are impacted by the theoretical framework.

There are many theories and theorists in education with different principles informing us about how people learn best, some of which include behaviourism (e.g. Pavlov and Skinner); cognitivism (e.g. Piaget and Gagne) and constructivism (e.g. Dewey, Bruner, Vygotsky). This study examines the impact of professional development and learning and how professional learning is transferred and enacted. It is grounded in the theories of (1) andragogy, (2) Vygotsky’s social constructivist and sociocultural theories of learning and (3) situated learning in community of practice (CoP) theory.

The reason for situating this study within a framework that takes cognisance of these theories are:

Andragogy is specifically concerned with adult learning (Knowles, 1984) and the educators in this research project are all adults.

Social constructivist and sociocultural theory focuses on the influences that mentors and peers have on an individual's learning and how we come to know and understand and construct new knowledge (Moll, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978). Within this research, the educators will be supporting both each other and the children to learn.

Situated learning theory in communities of practice focuses on groups of people with common interests who learn how to better develop their understandings and practices through regular interaction, the sharing of knowledge and mutual support (Lave and Wenger, 1991). As this research is taking place in an early years' setting where the educators want to increase their knowledge, skills, and attitudes regarding the teaching of early literacy, this theory contributes greatly to the research.

An exploration of each of these theories in turn will demonstrate how they complement and overlap with each other and will clarify why they are important to the study, both individually and collectively, in the development, implementation and analysis of a professional development and learning programme for the educators involved in the research.

3.2.1 Andragogy

Adult teaching and learning concepts can be traced back as far as Socrates, Aristotle and Plato whose main students were adults seeking insights and understandings that would enhance their social roles and identities (Forrest III and Peterson, 2006). The term andragogy had first been coined as far back as 1833 by a German teacher named Kapp who used it to describe Plato's educational philosophy. However, the term then vanished from education for almost a century until it surfaced again in Europe in 1921 and was used widely in France, Holland, and Yugoslavia in the 1960's. Davenport (1987) credits Knowles (1970) with the introduction of the term to the US in the late 1960's with the publication of his article "Andragogy Not Pedagogy". Brookfield (1984), however, argued that others, in particular Lindeman (1926), had in fact referred to the term over fifty years earlier.

In 1968, following much research into how adults learn, Malcolm Knowles published an article entitled "Andragogy Not Pedagogy" where he adopts the term andragogy to explain his theory of how adults learn, distinguishing it from how children learn.

Knowles contends that pedagogy, translated from Greek, means 'child-leading' or as he himself states "the art and science of teaching children". Andragogy, when translated means 'man-leading' and therefore should follow as "the art and science of teaching adults". However, in defining andragogy, Knowles makes what Davenport describes as "a curious semantical leap" (1987, p.17) when instead of translating andragogy to mean "the art and science of teaching adults", he instead describes it as "the art and science of helping adults learn" (Knowles, 1980, p.43). Andragogy, Knowles argues, is a process model that is concerned with ensuring the resources and procedures used will support the acquisition of information and skills. Pedagogy, on the other hand, is a content model and is premised on a belief that the purpose of education is the "transmittal of knowledge and skills that had stood the test of time" and utilises strategies that include "fact-laden lectures, assigned readings, drill quizzes, rote memorizing and examinations" (Knowles, 1970, p.40). Knowles claims the difference is that in conventional education the students adapt themselves to the curriculum offered, but in adult education the students assist in the development of the curriculum.

Controversy arose around Knowles' theory of andragogy and its theoretical status, with questions arising about how its general usability differed from progressive, inquiry-based education applied to adults. It began with Houle (1972) who rejected andragogy as an organising principle of adult education followed shortly after by London (1973) who agreed with Houle, insisting that some of the andragogical principles could be applied also to children and their learning. A plethora of articles to prominent journals of the day followed with eminent educationalists coming down on both sides. McKenzie (1977, cited in Davenport and Davenport, 1985, p.154), however, put forward the contention that the disagreements regarding differences in adult educational approaches were down to the differing philosophical approaches held by the educators "which explains why intelligent and reflective adult educators can be found on both sides of this issue". Elias (1979) also entered the debate contending that the andragogical-pedagogical debate was not in fact about educational theory, rather a misguided attempt to enhance the status of the adult education field. Following this debate and the many questions raised around the validity of andragogy as an education theory, in particular by Jarvis (1984) who pointed out that Knowles'

assumptions lacked empirical foundation and was not “grounded in sufficient empirical research to justify its dominant position” (p.32), Knowles revised his position on andragogy from being an actual theory to considering it as a situational model of human learning (Feuer and Geber, 1988). He acknowledged that it was possibly less of an adult learning theory and perhaps more a “set of assumptions about learning or a conceptual framework that serves as a basis for an emergent theory” (Knowles, 1989, p.112). However Kidd (1978) argued that a theory can be a guiding set of assumptions similar to those Knowles introduced which is why today Knowles’s assumptions are regularly referred to as Knowles’s Theory of Andragogy and has led to him being known as the father of adult education.

Originally Knowles (1977) defined just four assumptions regarding the teaching and learning transaction with adults which he considered underpinned and supported his theory of andragogy which were:

1. *Adults have a self-concept of a self-directing personality* – as a person matures, self-concept moves from dependency on others to support learning towards being self-directed in their own learning process.
2. *Adults bring a wealth of experience to the learning process* – with maturity comes an ever-increasing reservoir of experience which serves as a resource on which to connect with the learning. Adults have more life experiences to draw from than younger learners which influences their motivation, needs, interests, and goals resulting in a much greater need for individualisation within teaching and learning strategies.
3. *Adults come to the learning process ready to learn* – with maturity comes the desire to learn more about the real-life situations the adult finds themselves in. Adults learn best when the information being offered helps to solve an immediate, real-life problem.
4. *Adults are oriented towards the immediate application of learned knowledge* – as adults engage in the learning process their orientation towards learning becomes more problem oriented and less subject oriented. The content should

meet the adults' needs. Adults want to learn specific knowledge, skills and/or abilities that solve a problem and can be applied immediately, rather than in the future.

Later, Knowles (1984, 1989) in collaboration with others (Knowles *et al.*, 2005) added two further assumptions:

5. *Adults need to know the reason for learning something* - Adults need to understand why they should learn what you are teaching. Once 'what' they need to know is ascertained, then the content can be designed to meet their need.
6. *Adults are driven by an intrinsic motivation to learn* - With maturity comes an intrinsic motivation to learn. As adults experience needs and interests, what they need to know should be the starting point for organising learning activities.

Figure 3.1 below identifies all six of Knowles' assumptions of andragogy.

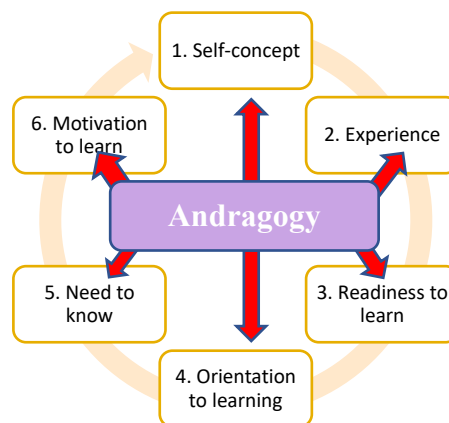


Figure 3.1 : Knowles' six assumptions of andragogy

I am in agreement with Kidd (1978) that a set of assumptions can indeed be taken as a theory and can guide the development of my research project. All the assumptions Knowles outlines impact on the development and presentation of my professional

development and learning programme; from the overall programme design, tool development for observation, data gathering and reflection, as well as guiding me through the process of analysing the data collected. Remaining cognisant of Knowles assumptions will support in the design and development of materials suitable for the educators with whom I am working with to ensure the best possible learning conditions for them.

3.2.2 Vygotsky's Learning Theories

This section discusses both social constructivism and sociocultural theory. Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934) was a Russian psychologist and teacher who is considered to be the first to explore how our social interactions influence our cognitive growth. He believed that learning occurred and was constructed through interactions with those in our communities (adults, teachers, peers etc.), hence his belief also that culture was a primary determinant of knowledge acquisition. Because he believed that teachers have the ability to control many factors in an educational setting such as tasks, behaviours and responses, he encouraged more interactive pursuits such as discussions, constructive feedback and collaboration with others, to promote cognitive growth. These beliefs will be further explored next, through discussions on constructivism and social constructivism, followed by a section considering the sociocultural impact on learning.

3.2.2.1 Constructivism or social constructivism?

Constructivist theory is based on the premise that learners are active participants in their own learning thereby constructing new knowledge, in association with others, based on these experiences rather than just passively taking in information (Devi, 2019). Constructivism, a theory which emanates from Piaget, Vygotsky, Dewey and Bruner among others, proposes that human's knowledge, intelligence and morality is constructed by themselves, through a series of stages and often in collaboration with others (Young People, Children, and Education (YPCE), 2013; Bada, and Olusegun, 2015). Constructivists believe that active construction of knowledge and social interaction are the two main tenets of most constructivist theories. However, a lack of agreement regarding the level of impact of each of these concepts has led to two main

types of constructivism: psychological (cognitive) constructivism, where the emphasis is on personal experiences in constructing knowledge, and social constructivism where the emphasis is on social interactions and culture.

Because of Vygotsky's belief in knowledge acquisition as being a social process he is regarded as a social constructivist. He emphasises his belief that knowledge is cumulative with existing cognitive frameworks being altered as new experiences and understandings are incorporated. He believes in the social nature of learning, contending that a more capable other should help in the development of new skills through 'scaffolding'. Vygotsky also asserts that learning is a social process that could not occur independent of culture and context and determines that social interaction is a key factor in the development of cognition. He believed that "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)" (Vygotsky, 1978, p.57). His conviction that language is key to this development was ground-breaking for his time and he argued that logic, reasoning, and reflective thinking were all made possible because of language. This is demonstrated in the classroom through collaborative work and group discussions.

3.2.2.2 Sociocultural theory

As the founder of sociocultural theory, Vygotsky (1978) believed that culture was a primary determinant of knowledge acquisition, and he argued that the beliefs and attitudes observed and modelled by a culture greatly impact on learning. Sociocultural theory is related to but distinct from social constructivism (ibid, 1978). While both theories attach importance to the contextual nature of learning and the construction of knowledge, sociocultural theory places emphasis on the mediating role of cultural tools and artefacts to help produce and shape new knowledge (Cole and Wertsch, 1996). In fact, according to Rogoff *et al.* (2018) participation in everyday practices and lived experiences impacts greatly on development.

There are three main essential concepts that define sociocultural theory (Allman, 2020):

1. the importance of social interaction in learning

2. the importance of language in the learning process and
3. learning occurs within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD).

The ZPD is “the distance between the actual development level (of the learner) as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers” (ibid, p.86). The most important elements of this theory are the concept of ‘potential’ development of the learner and the role that social interaction, language and collaboration play in the learning process (Figure 3.2), which would appear to encapsulate both his sociocultural and social constructivist theories.

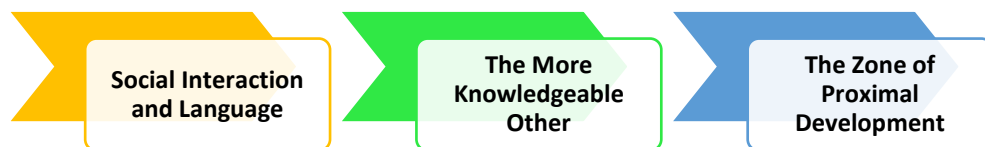


Figure 3.2: Elements of Vygotsky’s theories impacting on this study

The term ‘scaffolding’ has, in the literature, become synonymous with ZPD although Vygotsky himself never used this term. However, based on his work describing ZPD, Wood *et al.* (1976) created the term and define it as a process “that enables a child or novice to solve a task or achieve a goal that would be beyond his unassisted efforts” (p.90). Hence an educator or more knowledgeable other (MKO) can provide the scaffolding and modelling that supports the learners’ evolving understanding or the development of more complex skills (Vygotsky, 1978).

Vygotsky’s theories of learning inform this study. Social constructivism emphasises peer to peer interaction and independent exploration while sociocultural theory emphasises novice-expert interaction and culture in shaping learning and development (Rogoff, 2003). Both theories inform the collaborative features of professional

learning underpinning the study, specifically the roles of guidance, collaboration and discussion. In this research study, the educators were supported to learn in their own authentic real-life context and were encouraged to become proficient through interaction, dialogue, and engagement with each other in addition to collaborating with the researcher, an experienced educator.

Both theories also provide a theoretical base for the collaborative components of professional learning opportunities and professional development in the literature reviewed for the study.

What follows next is an overview of Situated Learning in CoPs.

3.2.3 Situated learning (SL) in communities of practice (CoP)

Situated learning theory (SLT) explains the process of how learning develops when there is an opportunity to participate in a CoP (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

3.2.3.1 Situated learning theory (SLT)

In a situated learning context (i.e. in the workplace), knowledge is acquired through the use of participative teaching methods and is negotiated through the interactions of the learners with both others and the environment. Lave (1997) contends that knowledge is acquired through two processes: the “way in” process whereby a learner observes what he calls a master and then makes a first attempt to solve a problem. The second step in this process is “practice” which entails the refining and perfecting of the use of the newly acquired knowledge (p.21). In the adult classroom, to situate learning means to create the conditions in which participants experience the intricacies and uncertainties of learning in the real world. Participants create their own knowledge through activities, the environment and relationships with other participants (Lave and Wenger, 1991). According to Clancey (1995, p.1), “every idea and human action is a generalization, adapted to the ongoing environment, because what people see and what they do arise together.” Knowledge is dynamically constructed as we understand what is happening to us within a social matrix, as a member of a community. In the situated learning approach, the learner is placed at the centre of the instructional process. This

process integrates four main elements: content, context, participation and community (Stein, 1998), which are described next.

Content: - when the content is situated within the learner's own daily transactions of life, the meaning of content can be negotiated and framed to fit with their own experiences, providing opportunities to make the information applicable to their own needs and supporting the retention of the new information (Wenger, 2010). This aligns with 'practice' in CoP theory.

Context: - situated learning theory suggests that learning takes place through relationships and the connection of prior knowledge with real context learning. Aligning with 'the domain' in CoP theory, learning occurs when it takes place within the context where it will be applied. Learning in context is important as it helps to draw out and use experiences as a means of engaging with the social and material environment in which the learner is situated (Boud, 1994) and supports the students to re-experience events from multiple perspectives.

Participation: - as a result of interactions with others and an interchange of ideas, shared problem solving and active engagement, learning occurs. This participation progresses from 'peripheral', whereby the new members of the community learn through observing and dialoguing with more experienced members to becoming one of the experienced 'old timers' (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p.29).

Community: At the heart of Lave and Wenger's theories (both SLT and CoP) is the learner within the community, whereby they contend learning happens as a result of active participation within a community where the social interaction facilitates dialogue with others. This enables the linking of practices with analysis and reflection and the creation of new knowledge through the sharing of diverse experiences. Stein (1998) reminds us that while "context provides the setting for examining experience; community provides the shaping of learning" (p.3). One of the most important elements in situated learning theory is that of a community of practice (CoP).

3.2.3.2 Community of practice theory (CoP)

The theory of CoP, also developed by Lave and Wenger (1991), posits that learning is individual and should be considered as knowledge that develops through opportunities to participate in the practices of a community. CoPs are groups of people who have a common interest and are engaged in a shared enterprise, through which a repertoire of knowledge, skills, and practices are further developed (Wenger, 1998). Essentially it is a group of individuals making a collaborative effort to improve their own practice (Saint-Onge and Wallace, 2012).

These communities are to be found everywhere and have been in existence since time immemorial. They are not formed but rather they evolve (Liedtka, 1999; Squire and Johnson, 2000) to learn in what is called a ‘situated’ learning environment (Wenger, 2008). People have always gathered in groups, large and small, to discuss events and share in an informal manner the problems they encounter and explore possible solutions. The key concept for these groups is community knowledge whereby the knowledge of the group is greater than the knowledge of the individual (Wenger, 2009) and is shared and exchanged amongst its members (Dei and van der Walt, 2020). Within this CoP, the learner develops a sense of belonging and commitment, leading to the development of a group identity (Handley *et al.*, 2006).

It has been noted that learning within professional development and learning communities entails reflection and analysis that leads to the active deconstruction of knowledge followed by a reconstruction through action in a particular context, as well as co-construction (of knowledge) through collaborative learning with peers (Stoll *et al.*, 2006). For CoPs, participation is the key, and the involvement in a social practice “that entails learning as an integral constituent” (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p.35). Conversations with others provide an opportunity to examine and think critically about issues that arise in the setting and supports the construction of knowledge from both direct experiences and reflection on experiences (Schön, 2017). Jensen and Iannone (2018) identify CoP’s as being important for educators to promote a culture of collaboration, co-creation and critical reflection which in turn creates opportunities for sustainable transformation within a setting, which is why the theory of situated learning in a CoP is one of the theories that underpins this research. One of the

benefits of working within a single setting is that the group of educators can come together as a CoP in both planned ‘formal’ and unplanned ‘informal’ ways. Much of the literature that focussed on professional development and learning identifies CoPs as being a good sources of professional learning (Wenger, 2010). Research carried out by Peleman *et al.* (2018) at a European level found that CoP’s promote reflective practice, which can impact greatly on quality in ECEC.

There are three basic concepts in the CoP theoretical model which are: a joint enterprise or domain; mutual engagement (i.e., the community) and a shared repertoire or shared practice, each of which will be briefly explored next.

The domain: A community of practice has a shared identity which is defined by a shared domain of interest. Membership of the community requires a commitment to the domain and a shared competence. Outside of the domain, this competence or ‘expertise’ may not be readily acknowledged. Nonetheless, the collective competence is valued within the group and learning from each other is supported (Wenger, 2009).

The community: The domain not only brings the community together, but defines its common pursuits (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002). Within the group, members engage in joint activities and conversations and share information. They build relationships together and these relationships enable them to learn from each other. They care about their standing with each other.

The practice: Members of CoP are practitioners, and together they develop a shared practice which is supported by a repertoire of tools and resources, experiences, and ways of addressing recurring issues. Developing this shared CoP takes time and sustained interaction. However, the development of this community may or may not be planned and organised. Nevertheless, through its formation a shared repertoire of practice is acquired (Wenger, 2010). Figure 3.3 below depicts how situated learning occurs within a CoP.



Figure 3.3: Situated Learning in a Community of Practice

The theory of CoP continues to evolve and in 2011 Wenger *et al.* further define CoP as a “learning partnership among people who find it useful to learn from and with each other about a particular domain. They use each other’s experience of practice as a learning resource” (2011, p.9) and together they make sense of the challenges they face. People participate in a CoP because of their common interest and desire to share information and help each other master skills and practices. Curtis *et al.* (2013) acknowledge that while educators are well able to reflect on their own to enhance their learning, reflecting with others, in particular others with whom they work, presents a much greater and richer learning experience. The opportunities to engage with their work colleagues and share their multiple perspectives, ultimately leads to deeper learning and changed practices particularly in their work situation.

The theories of situated learning theory and community of practice theory apply to this study as they relate to learning as a collaborative professional learning experience, situated in the educator's own environment. In this research study, the educators utilised their own staff group as a CoP to jointly reflect on and interrogate their own practices and learn from each other within their workplace.

3.2.4 The theoretical framework for this research

This research draws primarily on the theories of andragogy, Vygotsky's learning theories of social constructivism and socioculturalism, and situated learning in CoP theory. Knowles' andragogical assumptions contend that adults are always guided by their past experiences. This experience helps them to link both new and prior learning together, enables them to test new ideas to solve immediate problems and implies that they are self-directed learners (Knowles, 1984). Vygotsky asserts that social interaction is central to the learning process and believes that everything is learned twice, first through interactions with others after which that learning is internalised, reflected on and made sense of (Vygotsky, 1978). Situated learning offers links with real-life situations and through engagement with colleagues in a CoP, the educators check out what they already know through discussions, linking new learning while working collaboratively in their own context. This is, according to Lave and Wenger (1991), the most appropriate way for adults to learn. In the provision of the workshops, observations, coaching that includes modelling and feedback and in the reflective discussions that subsequently ensued, adult education principles were adhered to. All these elements are discussed in chapter 4, Andragogy theory, Vygotsky's learning theories, in conjunction with Lave and Wenger's situated learning in CoPs theories all contributed to shaping this programme of learning for the educators (Figure 3.4).



Figure 3.4: Theoretical framework for a professional development and learning programme on PA

These theories also helped to frame the observations, analysis and conclusions of this research in addition to supporting the educators to co-construct new understandings that are fundamental to a change in their practice. Having established the theoretical framework that underpins this study, the next section reviews the academic literature that informs the study, beginning with literature on professional development and learning.

3.3 Exploring Professional Development and Professional Learning

Professional development (PD) can be defined in different ways. Lieberman and Miller (2014) observe that while some use the terms PD and professional learning (PL) interchangeably, others are clear in identifying differences. The definitions of both in the world of education continues to be a topic for discussion as there is no agreed definition for either within the literature. Indeed, both are often also referred to as in-service training and/or staff development and vary in depth and breadth.

Desimone (2009) uses the term PD and outlines her definition as a range of activities that can increase knowledge and skills that improve teaching practices. These can range from formal, structured in-service seminars to informal discussions with colleagues. Darling-Hammond *et al* (2017), who use the terms PD and PL interchangeably, concur with this definition, contending it (PD/PL) is a product of both external and job-embedded activities that help to increase knowledge and lead to a change in instructional practices. Kang *et al.* (2013) conclude that traditional PD activities such as workshops and courses that are not directly related to the implementation of practice are frequently considered to be ineffective. The *TALIS Report, An International Perspective on Teaching and Learning* (OECD, 2014) considers PD to be “activities that aim to advance teachers’ skills and knowledge, with the ultimate aim of improving their teaching practice” (p.85). These combined perspectives view PD as a range of activities that can be either external or job-embedded, that lead to an increase in knowledge and skills and a change in practice. However Fullan *et al.* (2015) argue that PD that is well funded and has high aspirations can still fail as a result of other factors impact implementation such as culture, leadership or an inability to grasp the underpinning beliefs. Gallagher (2016) observes the need to recognise that neither teachers nor learners are the metaphorical empty vessel into which PD pours new knowledge and she concludes that there is no “silver bullet” (p.5) approach to PD.

3.3.1 Professional development.

Many over the decades (Guskey, 1991; Elmore and Burney, 1999; Guskey, 2002a; Guskey and Yoon, 2008; Carlisle and Berebitsky, 2011; Scarparolo and Hammond, 2018) assert that PD is mainly intended to change the beliefs, attitudes, knowledge and practices of educators, while others believe it can refer to both experiences and activities that possibly may lead to professional learning and/or development (Boylan *et al.*, 2017; Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2017). This perspective is somewhat counter to how traditional PD would have been perceived, which was the provision of ‘set’ workshops/seminars, determined by the workplace as important, and organised at a time and venue that suited them. Both Boylan *et al.* (2017) and Darling-Hammond *et al* (2017) argue that the actual learning taken and used in practice from many of these programmes is questionable. Despite some studies identifying PD as effective in

leading to changes in practice, others suggest these efforts have been ineffective and have not resulted in improved classroom practices. (Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2017; Guskey, 2002a, 2021; Scarparolo and Hammond, 2018). Consequently, Kennedy (2015) contends that professional learning that is appropriate to the needs of the educators, delivered in a specific place at a specific time, will potentially be considered more useful. However, central to these endeavours is “the understanding that PD is about teachers’ learning, learning how to learn, and transforming their knowledge into practice for the benefit of their students’ growth” (Avalos, 2011, p.10).

3.3.2 Professional learning

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) identify PD and PL on their website as a “continuum of learning and support activities designed to prepare individuals for work with and on behalf of young children and their families.... these opportunities lead to improvements in the knowledge, skills, practices, and dispositions of early childhood professionals” (2023). Learning more about a topic, e.g. building an awareness of PA, is not sufficient to change the educator’s practice, although it is a crucial first step. However, to sustain knowledge and implement change in a setting requires more. According to Fullan *et al.* (2014), professional learning (PL) leads to changes in the knowledge, actions, and beliefs of educators, resulting in changed practices, with an ultimate aim of improving learning opportunities for the children. Significantly, a considerable amount of literature informs us that learning opportunities should be intensive, sustained over time and include guidance and feedback through coaching on the application of specific practices and enhanced through the development of CoPs (Wenger, 2000; Whitehurst, 2002; Hill, 2007; Winton and McCollum, 2008).

Sawyer and Stuckey (2019) contend a difference in definitions between PD and PL. PD, they believe, is an intentional and planned sequence of training or learning experiences to advance teacher capacity and build pedagogical skills. PL, they believe, leads to specific changes in professional knowledge, teaching skills, attitudes, beliefs, teaching decisions or actions. They discuss features such as a conceptual input, shared teaching demonstrations, coaching, video self-analysis, collegial discussions, an inquiry stance, a shared curriculum, and self-reflection contending that these elements support

transformational instruction practices in PL (ibid). Focused learning, both for and about practice, is how Nolan and Molla (2017) define PL.

Based on the literature already referenced, I deduce that PD is concerned mostly with the content input and the provision of information required to effect PL and enable educators develop skills and attitudes that will impact their work with the children. I believe this combination influences their practice, how they work with the children. For that reason, the combined concept of professional development and learning will be discussed next.

3.3.3 Professional development and learning

Increasingly, effective professional development and learning is identified as being more successful when the approaches are focused on practices, are content specific and aligned with instructional goals and learning standards (Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2017). It should also retain a real connection with the curriculum materials that the educators are familiar with and use in practice. It must be continuous and should help educators learn and refine their skills to support the development of competencies “such as deep mastery of challenging content, critical thinking, complex problem-solving, effective communication and collaboration, and self-direction.” (ibid, p.v). The intention of this research is to provide a programme of experiences that will support professional development *and* learning, influencing changes in practice, leading to increased confidence and competence in the development of PA skills. Therefore, the term professional development and learning will be used to refer to the programme throughout this study. Having considered the many definitions expounded in the literature, for this research the definition taken for professional development and learning will be an amalgam of Sawyer and Stucky’s (2019) and Darling-Hammond, Hyler and Gardner (2017) definitions of PD and PL. Therefore, professional development and learning is defined by the researcher to be *a sequence of varied educational experiences, both externally and job-embedded, leading to changes in professional knowledge, pedagogical skills, attitudes, and beliefs.*

Following on from this definition, it is useful to explore professional development and learning models and their recommendations to identify where this research will be located. However, while discussing the different framework models in the next section, I will apply the terminology used by the authors of those models.

3.4 Models of professional development and learning

What follows next in this chapter is an overview of three models of professional development and learning. The three models discussed in this section were selected as an exploration of how their combined strengths and weakness supported the development of a professional development and learning model for this research. The first model explored is Desimone's (2009, p.185) "path model" which she contends will support a change in both knowledge and practice. The second model, Darling-Hammond *et al's* (2017, p.4) seven characteristics of effective PD highlights what they determine are "typical components of high-quality" PD, while the third model selected for discussion is Scarparolo and Hammond (2018) model which is a model of PD developed specifically with the intention of upskilling ECEC educators. As previously mentioned, (footnote 1), I will refer to each model using the terminology (PD or PL) identified by the authors.

3.4.1 Desimone's (2009) model of PD

Desimone (2009, p.185) uses the term PD in her work and proposes a basic model of which she names a "proposed core conceptual framework for studying the effects of professional development". This model represents what she considers to be critical features of PD (Figure 3.5), distilled from an extensive review of the literature. In this path model, Desimone shows the relationships between the identified critical features: educator knowledge and beliefs, classroom practice and student outcomes. However, unlike Guskey's (2002) seminal work on PD effectiveness, she contends that changes in the educator's knowledge and beliefs precedes changes in practice. Other studies (Carpenter *et al.*, 1989; Franke *et al.*, 2001; Saxe *et al.*, 2001) concur with Desimone's thesis of the importance of the four areas: PD, content knowledge, instruction and student achievement.

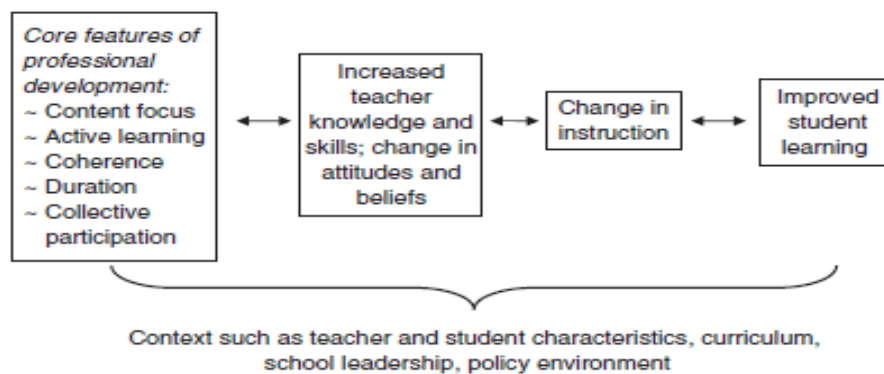


Figure 3.5: Desimone (2009, p.185) proposed core conceptual framework for studying the effects of professional development on teachers and students.

Desimone’s “path model” proposes “nonrecursive, interactive pathways” (2009, p.185), which would indicate that the order is not fixed, allowing for differential emphases on the basic components, as the need arises. This model allows not just for change in knowledge, beliefs and practices of those participating in the PD but also allows for that change to influence change in the instructor’s practice. Desimone *et al.* (2005) contend that professional development and learning that focusses only on instructional practices is less effective than that which is also focused on building content knowledge.

3.4.2 Darling-Hammond et al. (2017)

Within the Darling-Hammond *et al* (2017) model, the terms PD and PL are used interchangeably. They define effective PD as “structured professional learning that results in changes in teacher practices and improvements in student learning outcomes” (p.v), contending it is deemed effective when it has a positive and enduring impact on leadership and practice. They carried out a systematic review of “methodologically rigorous studies” (ibid, p.v) where a positive link between teacher professional development and learning, teaching practices and student outcomes were demonstrated. This review spanned three decades of research and 35 studies were identified, from which seven widely shared features of effective professional development and learning were deduced (table 3.1). A brief explanation of these elements is provided next.

<i>Effective professional development and learning is:</i>	
1	Content focused
2	Incorporates active learning utilizing adult learning theory
3	Supports collaboration, typically in job-embedded contexts
4	Uses models and modelling of effective practice
5	Provides coaching and expert support
6	Offers opportunities for feedback and reflection
7	Is of sustained duration

Table 3.1: Seven Features of Effective Professional Development and Learning (Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2017).

1. ***Content Focused:*** Ensures the targeting of the specific knowledge required to meet the needs of both the educators and the children they work with. Their prior knowledge and experiences should be the starting point for new learning.
2. ***Active Learning:*** Activities that engage the educators in new practices enables them to understand and make sense of how they might transfer and use this learning into the classroom.
3. ***Collaboration:*** Utilising whole staff teams can provide a “broader base of understanding and support” (ibid, p.10), generating collective support for each other and practice change.
4. ***Modelling:*** This can include demonstration lessons which can help promote learning and growth, enabling educators to see how to make changes within their own practice.
5. ***Coaching and Expert Support:*** Experts can help guide and facilitate learning in the context of practice, using modelling, discussions and collaborative analysis while sharing their own expertise on content and practices.
6. ***Feedback and Reflection:*** Feedback and reflection are key tools in this toolkit providing time for the educators to reflect, receive feedback and make changes to their practices.

7. ***Sustained Duration***: Effective professional development and learning requires time and quality implementation, with opportunities for learning within and between workshops.

Research indicates if most or all these elements are incorporated in professional development and learning, student learning improvements result (Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2017). The collaborative and job-embedded nature of this model can enable widespread improvement. However, they caution that implementation is key as even the best-designed professional development and learning can fail. Barriers such as inadequate resources, lack of shared vision on what constitutes high-quality professional development and learning and lack of time to implement any new approaches, can block success.

3.4.3 Scarparolo and Hammond (2018)

Scarparolo and Hammond (2018) developed a model of PD designed to specifically support early years' educators' early reading instruction called the ITPOC (Information, tailoring/ targeting the PD, observations and coaching) MODEL. They contend that effective PD must promote sustainable changes in educators' knowledge, beliefs and instructional practices. They propose an alternative approach to the "chronically ineffective" (Stein *et al.*, 1999) traditional, didactic single session of instruction that would target educators' strengths and weaknesses. As part of the PD, they used a PA programme based on the Theory of Instruction (Engelmann and Carnine, 1991).

There are three main components to this model:

1. A determination of educators existing knowledge of EL skills and how to teach them.
2. A one-day workshop that addresses the specific needs identified and includes input on the PA programme.
3. A class-based coaching input to support the implementation of new strategies

Underpinning this model is evidence-based research on PD that considers the factors that impact educator’s receptivity to new learning, what promotes sustainable changes in their instruction and the inclusion of modelling as part of the coaching process. Included also was immediate feedback during observations, which has a high effect on PD (Hattie, 2013). This was purposefully included in this model to ensure a continuous loop between the implementation, observation and feedback which would promote changes in practice over the course of a year (Scarparolo and Hammond, 2018). All of these factors combined to create a full professional development model (Figure 3.6). A brief outline of the steps within this model follows.

Step 1: Initial information/baseline data gathering on the existing knowledge, beliefs and attitudes of the educators to ensure their specific needs are met. Others (Ramey and Ramey, 2008; Brady *et al.*, 2009; Collet, 2015) also highlighted this data as key to effective planning of content, format of programme and delivery.

Step 2: Existing knowledge and learning needs are used to develop a suitable intervention, tailoring the information to their areas of need.

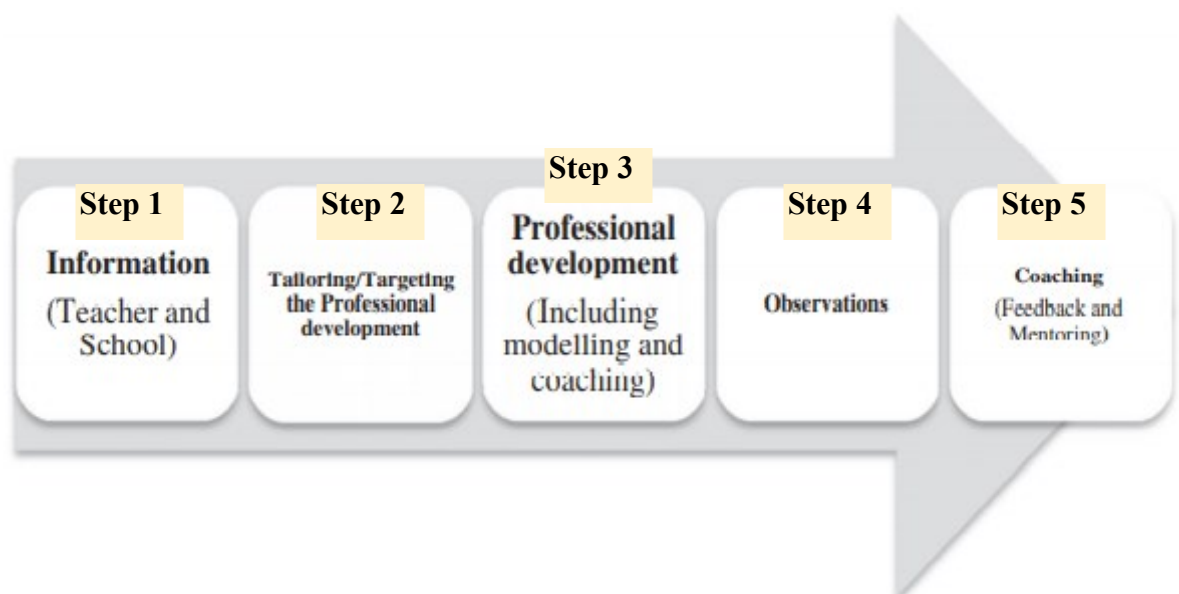


Figure 3.6: Scarparolo and Hammond (2018) Model

Step 3: Delivery of specifically developed training which includes modelling and coaching of skills and strategies within the workshop process.

Step 4: Promotes observation and feedback to support educators make changes to their teaching.

Step 5: Advocates coaching and mentoring “where and when they are teaching” by a “specialist who has distinct expertise in the field...and strong interpersonal skills” (Scarparolo and Hammond, 2018, p.496).

Benefits identified by the participants in the Scarparolo and Hammond (2018) study were the use of modelling, coaching and classroom observation visits, as well as the immediate feedback. Having a coach in the role of demonstrator in the classroom was further identified as an advantage of this model. However, models of professional development and learning such as this are expensive and time consuming to implement but can be effective in changing the educators’ knowledge and practices (ibid).

The literature on the three preceding models indicates that for effective professional development and learning for educators, specific elements must be present, including identifying current knowledge (Desimone, 2009; Scarparolo and Hammond, 2017); content input through workshops (Desimone, 2009; Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2017; Scarparolo and Hammond, 2018); onsite observation and modelling (Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2017; Scarparolo and Hammond, 2018); reflection (Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2017); and coaching with feedback (Guskey, 2002a; Desimone, 2009; Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2017; Scarparolo and Hammond, 2018). Although educators may participate in professional development and learning, it frequently targets teaching strategies rather than building educators’ content knowledge. Effective professional development and learning for educators can promote improved quality provision leading to improved outcomes for children (Justice *et al.*, 2008; Zaslow *et al.*, 2016; Schachter *et al.*, 2019).

ECEC educators play a significant role in supporting children’s development of oral language skills. Unfortunately, international evidence suggests that educators are

insufficiently educated themselves to support these developing skills (Cunningham, *et al.*, 2009; Sandvik, van Daal and Adèr, 2014). We know oral language proficiency is vital to the developing literacy skills of young children (Leppänen *et al.*, 2006). If we are to improve the outcomes for young children, we first must ensure the educators are competent and confident in their knowledge of all EL and in how to teach these skills to young children. Recent years has seen a growth in the literature specifically relating to the professional development and learning of ECEC educators and has seen a shift from a focus on the design elements, to the theory of action that integrates and drives these elements to create effective programmes (Kennedy, 2016). Increasingly, research is also beginning to focus on the professional development and learning of educators for PA teaching, the specific area of interest for this research.

I will now explore the literature in relation to these elements. Following on, I will outline the specific framework developed for this research and explore the sequence of these important elements for effective professional development and learning.

3.5 The starting point

3.5.1 Identifying current knowledge level

Key to an effective professional development and learning programme is beginning where the educators are at, acknowledging and utilising current funds of knowledge and skills (Grifenhagen *et al.*, 2017) while introducing and tailoring new content to expand understanding and meet every day needs.

3.5.2 Content input through workshops

Landry *et al.* (2011) and Lonigan *et al.* (2011) advocate for “targeted, well-designed” professional development and learning (Lane *et al.*, 2014, p.69), where workshops are facilitated rather than taught in a didactic manner. Discussions within workshops lead to a greater understanding of EL and PA in addition to supporting the development of a panoply of strategies, producing a tool-kit for the educator to “select the right tool for the right task at the right time” (Committee on Early Childhood Pedagogy, 2001, p.33). Opportunities to use and apply content immediately in an authentic context, leads to a greater understanding of literacy development.

3.5.3 On-site observation and modelling

On-site observation of educators in their everyday practice provides opportunities to witness practices as they engage with children. Educators should be supported to immediately try out new techniques with the children and there is strong evidence (Desimone, 2009; Labone and Long, 2016) that in-situ professional development and learning, and the opportunity to learn new skills in context can further facilitate and contribute to both learning and sustained pedagogical changes (Desimone, 2009; Neuman and Cunningham, 2009; Labone and Long, 2016). Ensuring ample time for active engagement provides an opportunity to “grapple with, question, and reflect” (Morgan and Bates, 2018, p.623) on any issues of practice that might arise and helps deepen knowledge and understanding.

Use of strategies discussed at the workshops should be evident during the observation phase, and their implementation supported through a process where the educators receive “real-time, ongoing feedback of their newly attempted teaching practices” (Desimone and Pak, 2017, p.6). Observing and recording opportunities taken and opportunities missed will provide topics for discussion and reflection. This can also offer an opportunity to see things from a different perspective, presenting learning opportunities for both the educators and the observer (Varghese *et al.*, 2022). Observing others while they are teaching offers opportunities to reflect on their teaching approaches, share commonalities and discuss differences, presenting mutual benefits in the development of knowledge and skills (*ibid*). If an opportunity arises for the researcher to model good practice in a natural way, then it should be taken.

Modelling of instruction provides educators with a clear vision of what best practice looks like (Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2017). Because many educators have a limited knowledge of EL teaching, they often lack the confidence to teach this content to children (Ball and Cohen, 1999; Cunningham *et al.*, 2015; Scarparolo and Hammond, 2018; Stark *et al.*, 2019; Goldfeld *et al.*, 2021). As discussed in the theoretical framework, Vygotsky understood that development occurs through social interactions whereby the knowledge, values and skills of the more knowledgeable other guides the learning and development of other members of the community (Vygotsky, 1978). Therefore, the modelling approach is an effective way to instil an understanding of

how to incorporate new knowledge into everyday practice. Lave and Wenger (1991) contended that professional development and learning should address practice issues and engage educators in concrete everyday tasks. They also advised that the structure of effective professional development and learning should support coaching, modelling and collective problem solving. Feedback and dialogue after on-site observations seeks to promote self-evaluation and reflection on the implementation of new strategies to support the sustaining of the new practice (Hinojosa, 2022). Developing an ability to connect learning from the programme with a real-life classroom, through the modelling process, helps educators to develop confidence in their knowledge of EL and their ability to help the children develop PA skills.

For this study, modelling is conceptualised as classroom-based demonstrations of activities and strategies used in-the-moment to avail of opportunities as they arise.

3.5.4 Reflection with coaching and feedback

In order to learn new practices, educators need to be given the space and time to reflect on their practice. Schön's (1987) theories on reflection affirm for us the importance of reflection in, on and for professional practice and the importance of “understanding the gap between espoused theories of practice and theories in action” (Twigg *et al.*, 2013, p.76). Reflective practice can be a solitary pastime, indeed the initial reflective space recommended in the framework in this research is for self-reflection. However, peers have a definite role to play in providing insights into our practice of which we ourselves are unaware. As educators usually work in pairs or triads in rooms in settings, seeking support within this group on issues that arise from reflective practice helps to improve ongoing practice. In particular if the reflections have prompted debates and discussions around practice, knowing that discussions can take place in a safe and supportive environment can be empowering for the educator (Helyer, 2015). Ultimately, the hope will be that through reflection educators will become conscious and creative participants in their own growth and development (Schön, 1987). In order to critically appraise what they have experienced through practice, educators need to reflect on the experience which in turn enables them to improve ongoing practice (Helyer, 2015). The combination of more scholarly thinking with the real-life experiences of the educator’s practice makes reflection on practice such a powerful

tool (ibid) and presents areas of practice for discussion during coaching and feedback sessions, both of which will be discussed in the subsequent sections. However, as the terms coaching and mentoring are often used interchangeably and have many similarities and differences, this will be discussed first.

3.5.4.1 *The Difference between Mentoring and Coaching*

A mentor can be defined as a teacher, adviser, or friend who becomes a resource to the mentee and leads to an increase in their personal and professional capacity and effectiveness (Landry et al., 2011; Twigg et al., 2013; Lane et al., 2014). It calls on the skills of questioning, listening, clarifying and reframing. Mentoring is a general practice and is a “relationship-based process between colleagues in similar professional roles” (Young Children, 2016, p.1) where a more experienced person, the mentor, provides guidance to the less experienced person, the mentee. Mentoring relationships tend to be of a long duration (CIPD, 2021).

Coaching, on the other hand, is a form of PDL that involves ongoing classroom modelling, supportive critiques of practice, and specific observations (Shanklin, 2006) and has in recent years become popular in education as a way of supporting the embedding of knowledge in practice (Showers & Rolheiser-Bennett, 1987; Justice et al., 2008; Neuman & Cunningham, 2009; Sawyer & Stuke, 2019; Rogers, Brown & Poble, 2020). It also calls on skills such as questioning, listening, clarifying and reframing, aiming to produce optimal performance thereby improving practice. A target of developing specific skills and goals will be set e.g., developing an understanding of a particular topic such as literacy development, which in turn may also positively impact the individual’s personal confidence. Coaching is a process that typically lasts for a defined period of time (CIPD, 2021).

Crucial to both is building a trusting relationship between the mentor/coach and the mentees. However the main difference according to Beasley is that “mentoring is relational and coaching is functional”, (2012, p. 8). Coaching is the term used in this research study. The next section reviews the literature pertaining to coaching.

3.5.4.1 Coaching

Coaching is a form of professional development and learning that involves ongoing classroom modelling, supportive critiques of practice, and specific observations (Shanklin, 2006). It has in recent years become popular in education as a way of supporting the embedding of knowledge in practice (Showers and Rolheiser-Bennett, 1987; Justice *et al.*, 2008; Neuman and Cunningham, 2009; Sawyer and Stuke, 2019; Rogers *et al.*, 2020). It calls on skills such as questioning, listening, clarifying and reframing, aiming to support and influence a change in practice. A target of developing specific skills and goals is set e.g., developing an understanding of a particular topic such as literacy development, which in turn may also positively impact the individual's personal confidence. Coaching is a process that typically lasts for a defined period of time (CIPD, 2021). Crucial to the coaching process is building a trusting relationship between the coach and the coached.

The principles of adult learning are fore-fronted in the coaching process through the experience of active learning and reflection on learning in practice, on practice and for practice (Schön, 2017). Coaching, like andragogy, necessitates listening and questioning skills, and use of these skills helps to build on the experiences and needs of the educators (Knowles *et al.*, 2005; Cox, 2015). The CIPD advise that coaching is about skill and knowledge development leading to an improvement in job practices. The coaching generally lasts for a short period and focuses on specific skills and goals (CIPD, 2021). Following a review and meta-analysis of 254 documents on the effects of coaching in education, Cornett and Knight (2009) identify four approaches to coaching which are most frequently mentioned in the literature.

- *Peer coaching*, where teachers paired up to support the implementation of learning and include elements such as modelling of instructional strategies, using effective instructional practices, the development of a learning community and feedback (Barkley, 2005)
- *Cognitive coaching*, where the coach asks questions to prompt teachers thinking behind their practices, initiating change in planning, reflecting and problem-solving (Ellison and Hayes, 2006)
- *Literacy coaching*, which can appear differently in each setting as it is considered to be any form of support that increases literacy through

collaborative dialogue with teachers, facilitating development of a school vision about literacy, developing capacity for the teachers to assess the students to support learning, observations that help the building of knowledge over time and provides ongoing support to the teachers (Shanklin, 2006)

- *Instructional coaching* which holds modelling as a critical element of the coaching strategy. According to Knight (2008), instructional coaching leads to improvement in teacher attitudes, transfer of skills and feelings of increased ability and confidence. However, he reminds us that some educators are resistant to the coaching strategy and may need other supports to inform and progress their practice.

The framework developed for this research (see section 3.5.4) contains elements from all four of these approaches that the researcher deems appropriate to meet the needs of this study. Key to this is the intention to support the educators to recognise that “they have the strengths; let’s discover them and fine-tune them” (Barkley, 2005, p.25). However, the expertise of the researcher is key to the coaching process. If the coach is not an expert in teaching teachers, in addition to having the required content knowledge, then it is unlikely the coaching will be effective (DeMonte, 2013).

In an extensive review of the literature on effective coaching for ECEC educators, Elek and Page define coaching as “a professional learning and development strategy which involves providing individual, ongoing support for an educator to learn and apply specific job-related skills in order to support children’s learning” (2019, p.568). It is recognised as a powerful tool to facilitate educators in their bid to learn about and introduce new knowledge and skills into their practice (Twiggy *et al.*, 2013). Sawyer and Stucky (2019) determine coaching to be a process whereby job-embedded professional development and learning is provided by a trained professional who offers support, guidance and assistance within the context of their instruction which promotes “collaborative, collegial learning in a supportive environment” (p.14). A significant distillation of the literature on professional development and learning in ECEC carried out by Rogers *et al.*, (2020, p.184) concludes that specialist content coaching “undertaken by more expert peers... or provided by external coaches, can offer a responsive approach for a diverse workforce with wide variation in skills, knowledge and qualification.” Coaching models coupled with content focus and linked

to educator's own settings and experiences, impacts positively on practice. Meaning comes through dialogue, therefore feedback following a coaching input helps to promote self-reflection and an improvement in practice (Hinojosa, 2022).

Coaching is conceptualised in this study similar to Desimone (2018, p.496) as being the “job of a specialist who has distinct expertise in the field in which they coach and strong interpersonal skills”

3.5.4.2 Feedback

Feedback is a tool used to provide “timely descriptive information regarding direct observations of the learner in the learning environment” (Jug *et al.*, 2019, p.245).

Feedback should always be delivered in the context of humility, acknowledging that everyone needs help and feedback to make changes to their practice (*ibid.*). It is important if new practices are to be sustained beyond the scope of the professional development and learning programme (Guskey, 2002b; Davis and Fantozzi, 2016). However, Dominguez (2017) emphasises the importance of good communication and listening skills to enable them to both give and receive feedback. This is to ensure that feedback is given in a way that the educator can accept and understand it, and therefore can use it (Keiler *et al.*, 2020; Sanyal, 2017). Utilising Vygotsky's (1976) ZPD as described in the theoretical framework for this research study, the feedback discussions should be seen as scaffolds to support the educator and increase their knowledge and skills. The ZPD indicates the distance between what the educator can achieve with their current practice and the level they could potentially achieve through the guidance and scaffolding of a coach (Hinojosa, 2022). Direct observation is a crucial prerequisite for feedback as it provides the observer with specific relevant information for feedback analysis. This information might address concerns and provide an insight into what went well and provide an opportunity to discuss what could be improved.

Providing educators with individualised feedback on their knowledge and skills supports them to reflect on their practice and reflection is seen as an important element of effective professional development and learning for educators (Showers, 1984; Page and Tayler, 2016). In fact, receiving feedback on observed practice from a coach is not

normally available to educators, so ensuring there is system of feedback loops in place whereby the coach and educator become engaged in a professional conversation on practice helps the educator to reach a deeper understanding and see things through a different lens, thereby potentially improving practice (Pianta, Hamre and Allen, 2012).

After feedback, further reflection, in particular self-reflection, can influence a change in practice. Reflection also within the staff team, the CoP, also influences practices within the setting.

3.5.5 Important phases in a model of professional development and learning for this research

Each of the three models discussed in this chapter, taken alone, are not adequate as a model of professional development and learning nor do they provide a complete set of tools to meet the needs of this study. However, in drawing elements from a combination of the models explored, a model of professional development and learning for this research was developed and is portrayed in Figure 3.7.

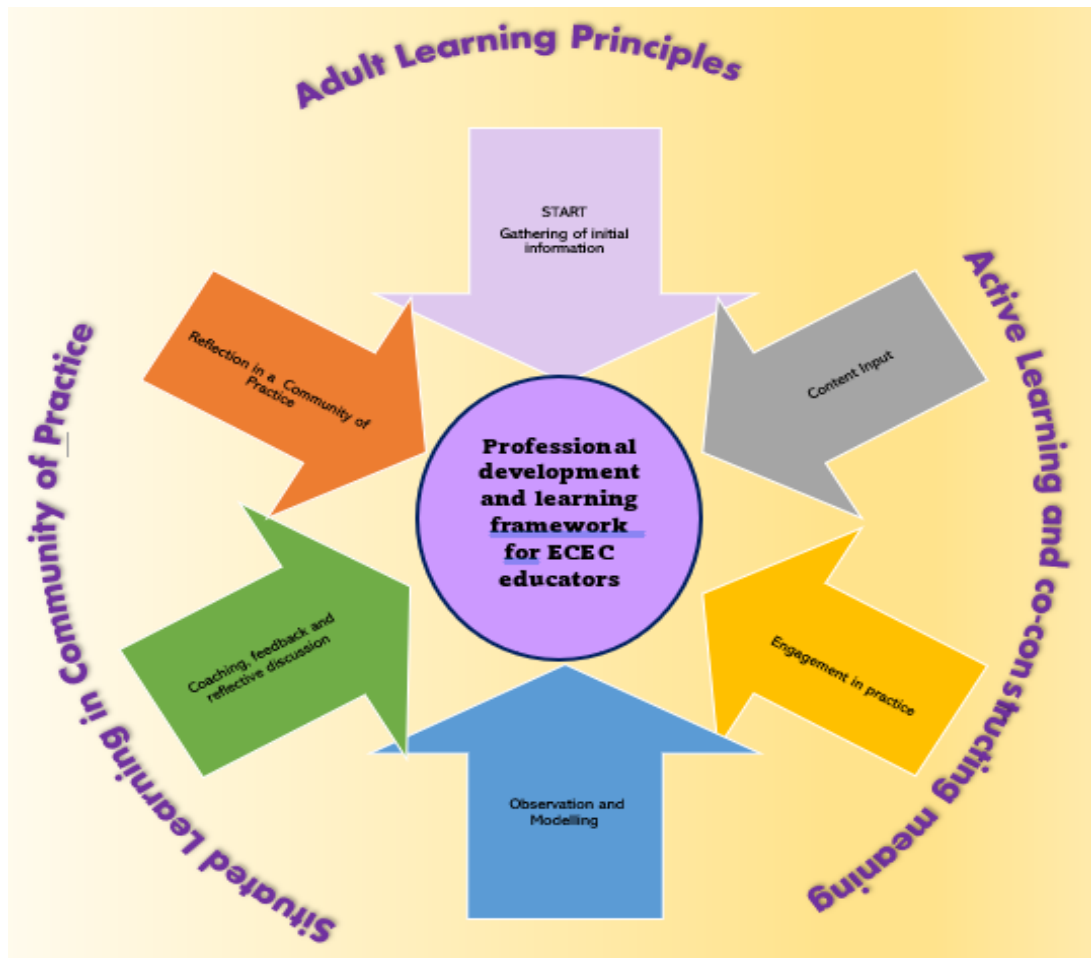


Figure 3.7: A professional development and learning framework for educators used in this research.

These elements include:

Gathering of initial information: This is important baseline data informing the starting point of the professional development and learning programme.

Content input: Using adult education principles, onsite workshops providing necessary content and opportunities to discuss strategies for implementation.

Engagement in practice: Opportunities for educators to practise implementation of strategies during the working day (over a period of time between content input and observation).

Observation and Modelling: Onsite observations by the researcher taking opportunities to model strategies as the need arises.

Coaching, feedback and reflective discussion: Meeting with the educators to give feedback on the observation and discuss the implementation of strategies. This also provides a reflective discussion where strengths and challenges can be shared in addition to providing a space to identify further learning needs for the next session.

Reflection (CoP): Using the Community of Practice (CoP) generated through participation in the programme to support individual understanding and documenting their reflections to enhance learning.

Summary of professional development and learning pillar

Professional development and learning improves the literacy knowledge and skills of educators particularly when coaching is included as an integral part of the programme and onsite modelling forms part of the coaching approach (Neuman and Cunningham, 2009). Educators need time and space to reflect on practice. Changes in practice require increased knowledge and skills and a change in attitudes and beliefs and is more likely to be effective if it provides opportunities for educators to use, practice and apply what has been learned in a real life situation e.g. in their own setting (Desimone, 2009; Walter and Briggs, 2012; Sims and Fletcher-Wood, 2021). Professional development and learning should be focussed on developing the educators ability to reflect-in and for-action which will prepare them to be confident educators (Schön, 1987).

Having explored the professional development and learning pillar of this research, in the next section I will explore the literature in relation to EL in general and PA in particular.

3.6 Exploring emergent literacy development

Extensive research has documented that the preschool experience plays a significant role in children's development of language and EL skills (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Greenwood *et al.*, 2013; Shanahan and Lonigan, 2009; Weadman *et al.*, 2023). Today's world is a literate world, hence poor literacy significantly impacts on most aspects of life. According to the World Literacy Foundation, poor literacy skills impact

significantly on economic, social and health at both an individual and societal level (Gualteros, 2018). Children with poor literacy skills struggle across the curriculum, resulting in poor educational outcomes, which ultimately, negatively impacts on employment options (Breadmore *et al.*, 2019). Consequently, the importance of literacy on an individual's career and life-long success cannot be underestimated. Children's literacy learning begins with language. Supporting this development through the provision of rich and engaging language environments during the first five years of children's lives is the best way to ensure their success as readers (Tabors *et al.*, 2001). Through the preschool system, educators have an opportunity to positively impact this provision. To enable children to read well they must develop strong pre-literacy skills, such as alphabet knowledge, PA, print knowledge, oral language and vocabulary, all of which have been found to be highly predictive of later reading achievement (Lane *et al.*, 2014). PA is defined as "a conscious ability to notice and manipulate the sound structure of spoken words, including syllables (i.e., syllable awareness), onset-rimes (i.e., rime awareness) and individual phonemes (i.e., phoneme awareness)" (Carson and Bayetto, 2018a, p.68) and provides the bridge between the spoken (sounds) and written (letters) language in the preschool and early primary school years as children learn to decipher the alphabetic code.

In this section of the Literature Review, I will consider EL and the literacy continuum. To develop an understanding of literacy acquisition, I will first discuss my understanding of what EL is followed by a breakdown of the literacy continuum, clearly identifying the specific area of concern in this research study. This will be followed by a section on models of EL and the impact of these models on the educator's practice. Moving on to consider the necessary knowledge and skills requirement, I will discuss the elements of the PA continuum and how the skills might be taught. I will then summarise the literacy pillar of this literature review and conclude the chapter.

3.6.1 Understanding what is meant by EL

The ECEC field is continually researching and expanding its understanding of the development of EL and language skills, recognising that fostering these skills is a "complex task requiring strong content knowledge, an understanding of how these

skills develop in young children, as well as the use of evidence-based, high-quality instructional practices” (Cunningham *et al.*, 2015, p.62). Sulzby and Teale (1991) attribute the phrase “Emergent Literacy” to Marie Clay (1966) who refers to a period in a child’s life between birth and when they can read and write conventionally. The term *Emergent* denotes the process of becoming and *Literacy* denotes the interrelatedness of writing and reading in young children's development. The study of EL represents, they believe, a perspective which emphasises that “legitimate, conceptual, developmental literacy learning is occurring during the first years of a child's life” (Teale and Sulzby 1986, p.28). Initial EL theory contends that children learn to read once they reach a particular stage of maturity. This Maturation Theory was proposed by Morphett and Washburne (1931) who identified the mental age of six years and six months as being the ideal time to begin reading instruction (Sampson *et al.*, 1981). However, Sulzby and Teale (1986, 1991) contend developing reading skills is less of a maturation issue and more of an issue of experience and environmental factors, and children can begin developing reading skills long before this age. Subsequent research over the following decades produced evidence that children who were exposed to pre-reading skills in earlier years had positive long-term effects (Reid, 2010).

Current EL theory purports that children are active literacy learners who change and develop over time and acquire literacy best through active engagement in meaningful, literacy activities (Justice *et al.*, 2008; Piasta *et al.*, 2021). While it was originally thought that children needed formal literacy instruction to become literate, research over the years has indicated that children are informally gathering considerable amounts of knowledge about written language from the time they are born (Justice and Kaderavek, 2002). Once children are exposed to rich literacy experiences from which they can learn early in life, they begin to build literacy knowledge and skills (Morrow and Casey, 2004; Connor *et al.*, 2006). Through interactions with books, children develop print awareness and begin to understand that the print signifies language, pages are turned from right to left and the lines are read from left to right (although some languages read right to left). As children progress through the stages of EL, the connection between the spoken and written words become more obvious for them, which increases the likelihood of literacy success.

3.6.2 Literacy and educational disadvantage

However, children from lower socioeconomic (SES¹⁶) backgrounds tend to be more disadvantaged in the development of the requisite early literacy skills and can fall behind (Lane et al., 2014). In fact, Strang & Piasta (2016) contend that children reared in poverty quite often have poor spoken language skills. Research carried out in the UK by Locke *et al* (2002) assessing children's PA awareness identified a distinct link between poor performance and low SES. In Ireland, since 2018, ECEC settings are funded by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) to deliver a universal free Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) program, which provides for an optional two years of state-funded preschool provision for children from the age of 2 years and 8 months (Delaney et al., 2022) and there is a significant body of research (Dearing, McCartney & Taylor, 2009) that suggests that high-quality EC programmes can “mitigate the negative effects of low SES by preparing children to be ready for school” (Lane et al., 2014).

3.7 The EL Continuum

The development of literacy skills is along an increasingly complex continuum (Figure 3.8), beginning with developing basic foundational skills of visual and auditory processing and oral communication skills. These skills begin at birth when babies begin a cycle of interactions with their parent/carer (Bowlby, 1988). Moving through the early years, their level of interaction with language and the written word impacts on their level of vocabulary and language growth, which in turn impacts on how they connect with the social world around them (Vygotsky, 1962).

¹⁶ Socioeconomic status (SES) measures a family's income, occupation and social status which may disclose the inequity to access of resources and privilege.



Figure 3.8: The Literacy Continuum adapted by researcher from International Literacy Association (2019) and Bray (2013).

Children need ongoing exposure to print from birth and the process of reading, writing and speaking develop simultaneously and are interdependent (Neaum, 2017). As skill levels increase, awareness to sounds and changes in sounds should also increase. Once they are adept at hearing and manipulating the sound structure of language they are better prepared to learn how to read (Cunningham *et al.*, 2015). This continuum will now be explored.

3.7.1 Step 1: Basic foundational skills

The emergence of literacy is founded on the skills of communication and language, beginning with basic foundational skills such as developing listening skills. Literacy learning begins early in life and the skills that children acquire before they enter any ‘formal’ education process will impact their reading readiness later on (Pelatti *et al.*, 2014; Piasta *et al.*, 2012). Children use language to help them build relationships, negotiate in peer play and join in team activities (Honig, 2007). During their first few years, the two literacy components most children learn and demonstrate are receptive language (i.e., listening), and expressive language (i.e., speaking); moving through the continuum from repeating sounds and words with no comprehension to understanding the words they hear, and understanding all the rules of language and grammar (*ibid.*). According to Henry and Pianta (2011), children from lower SES backgrounds have less books in their homes and experience less stimulating conversations than children from more affluent homes. Educators need to mitigate against this by ensuring exposure to both books and an extensive vocabulary.

3.7.2 Steps 2 and 3: Phonological Sensitivity

Phonological sensitivity describes the processing abilities connected with how children “developmentally navigate and work with sound units” (Mott and Rutherford, 2012) and is comprised of both Step 2: phonological awareness (PA) and Step 3: phonemic awareness on the literacy continuum and is the stage most pertinent to the age group in the research. The development of these skills generally follows a developmental pattern, beginning with basic word-unit sounds (e.g. do these two words sound the same/rhyme?) to more complex individual sounds (e.g. what sound can you hear at the end of **c-a-t?**) (*ibid.*). Frequently throughout the literature, the terms PA and phonemic awareness are used interchangeably. However, the literacy continuum distinguishes between both but amalgamates them under a phonological sensitivity (PS) umbrella (Figure 2.4) (Stanovich *et al.*, 1984; Anthony and Lonigan, 2004). As stated in chapter 1, this study accepts the determination of the ILA regarding the skills of both PA and phonemic awareness i.e. PA is comprised of a broad continuum of skills ranging from the most basic word and syllable level (rhyme, syllables and alliteration) to the most discrete level of individual sounds, or phonemes (onset-rime and phonemes) whereas phonemic awareness skills are more complex,

requiring the “detection and manipulation of the smallest linguistic units: phonemes” (ILA, 2019, p.2).

Literacy begins with language, so the most fundamental element of any literacy programme is the provision of rich language experiences with opportunities to listen to others and be listened to (Piasta *et al.*, 2012). Providing opportunities for children to engage in activities that promote the basic foundational skills, such as talking and listening and providing activities that improve vocabulary, are key. As previously discussed, early childhood educators play a significant role in supporting children’s development of these oral language skills (step 1) which will prepare the children for the development of stage 2. Phonological tasks start with the less complex skills of listening to hear rhyming in songs and books, to more complex skills of phoneme/individual sound manipulation through segmenting and blending sounds (Yopp and Yopp, 2022). This is necessary to begin to hear and isolate larger sounds such as sentences, advancing to be able to decipher the smallest unit of sound, the phoneme¹⁷. An example of this difference is understanding that a sentence that sounds like *itstimetogohome* can be broken into words/segments *it’s time to go home*, hearing the units of sound in the spoken sentence. However, phonemic awareness is concerned with more complex skills and further refinement and understanding a word e.g. CAT can be broken down into /c/ and /a/ and /t/ and put back together as the word CAT (Cunningham *et al.*, 2009; Cunningham *et al.*, 2015). Because PA skills play a key role in the development of EL skills with the age range attending ECCE settings, these are the elements focused on for this study. It is important to recognise these skills are auditory skills and do not require knowledge of symbols (Yopp and Yopp, 2022).

PA skills begin to develop from around age 3 whereby children become aware of larger sound units starting with syllables. More complex phoneme-level (single sound) knowledge tends to develop in initial primary school years (Neaum, 2017). PA is “an awareness of sounds in spoken (not written) words that is revealed by such abilities as rhyming, matching initial consonant, and counting the number of phonemes in spoken words” (Stahl and Murray 1994, p.221). Children’s PA skills lie on a continuum of

¹⁷ A phoneme is the smallest unit of sound in a word

complexity (Chard and Dickson, 1999) and when children become accomplished in PA, their ability to understand phonics is greater (Juel, 1988). The US National Early Literacy Panel (NELP, 2008) carried out a meta-analysis of numerous studies all of which recognised PA as one of the most important factors in early reading success and a plethora of international studies concurs with this viewpoint (Snow *et al.*, 1998; Anthony and Lonigan, 2004; Dickinson and Caswell, 2007; Gillon *et al.*, 2019). The NELP established PA as a ‘key contributor’ to children’s ability to learn to read (Shanahan and Lonigan, 2009). Of all the EL skills, PA has been most closely connected to future reading abilities and reading success (NELP, 2008; Breadmore *et al.*, 2019; Gillon *et al.*, 2019). These skills are important for children to learn as it focuses their attention to the sounds they are hearing in words and helps them understand that words are made up of smaller sounds i.e. syllables and phonemes. Some children find PA skills difficult to acquire on their own, so it is crucial that educators are sufficiently informed to enable them support the development of these skills during the preschool years (Cunningham *et al.*, 2015). The more complex skills of phonemic awareness, the manipulation of phonemes within words to create new ones (Chard and Dickson, 1999), is required to successfully map sounds onto print to decode words. When PA and phonemic awareness skills, along with letter name and letter sound knowledge combine, children develop a conceptual understanding to enable them learn to read and write.

PA skills can be taught (Yeh, 2003) and as critical skills, educators should not rely on incidental teaching methods but should utilise evidence-informed strategies to teach them directly (Watson *et al.*, 1994; Yopp and Yopp, 2000). Educators who implement PA tasks for at least five minutes each day can improve children’s skills and support their literacy development (Managhan, 2020; Piasta *et al.*, 2020). EL skills and concepts should be taught prior to starting school to help build a sound foundation on which to begin to develop their literacy skills. Landry *et al.* (2011) contend that if children receive proper exposure to these essential skills during their early childhood, only 5% might experience difficulties in schools, rather than the higher 20-30% that is experienced in some countries, including Ireland (Nugent *et al.*, 2016). Consequently, educators have a key role to play in both EL and PA instruction. However, educators with limited or no knowledge of EL are at a significant disadvantage when it comes to

providing PA experiences for children (Burgess *et al.*, 2001; Justice *et al.*, 2008; Grifenhagen and Dickinson, 2021). Conversely, educators who have acquired a knowledge of EL in general and PA in particular, will be better placed to support the early literacy process with the children in their setting.

3.7.3 Step 4, 5 and 6: The final steps on the continuum: phonics/fluency/comprehension

Children then progress to phonics whereby they use all they have learned about the sounds in words to connect to the written grapheme (letter). PA, phonemic awareness and phonics are “distinct, but often confused, concepts” (Piasta and Hudson, 2022, p.201) and require explicit instruction to teach the grapheme-phoneme correspondence. In simple terms, PA and phonemic awareness are anything that can be done in the dark i.e. all about sounds, while phonics, needs the light to see the letter symbols (Yopp and Yopp, 2022). The next stage in the reading continuum is again more complex, reading the text quickly, with expression and demonstrating an understanding of grammar. The final stage is to read with understanding and comprehension of the text. However, this research study will focus only on steps 2 and the development of PA skills.

In order to support the development of the programme for this research study, different models of EL will now be explored.

3.8 Models of EL

Various models and frameworks have been developed over the years to identify and support the transfer of the PA skills outlined in the previous sections. Early models developed by Stanovich *et al.* (1984) and Yopp (1988) contributed significantly to the general understanding of PA development, but maintained a main focus on the more complex skills at the upper end of the PA continuum, the phonemic awareness level. Later models from Whitehurst and Lonigan (1998), NELP (2008) and Mason and Stewart (1990) however, consider the earlier phonological awareness skills, precursor skills to conventional literacy¹⁸ and their connections to each other (Rohde, 2015). As

¹⁸ Conventional literacy is named here to distinguish between reading focused activities and those skills that precede reading but are necessary for the development of conventional literacy skills.

the full PA continuum of skills are the main focus of this study, these models will now be explored.

3.8.1 Whitehurst and Lonigan (1998)

Whitehurst and Lonigan (1998) determine EL to be all the skills, knowledge and attitudes that are “presumed to be the precursors to conventional forms of reading and writing and the environments that support these developments” (p.849). They identify the components as language, conventions of print, linguistic awareness, phoneme-grapheme correspondence, emergent reading, emergent writing and print motivation. They produced a model (Figure 3.9) of how these components develop, describing it as “a continuum, with the knowledge of context at one end, and the understanding of rules of letters and their sounds at the other” (Rohde, 2015, p.3).

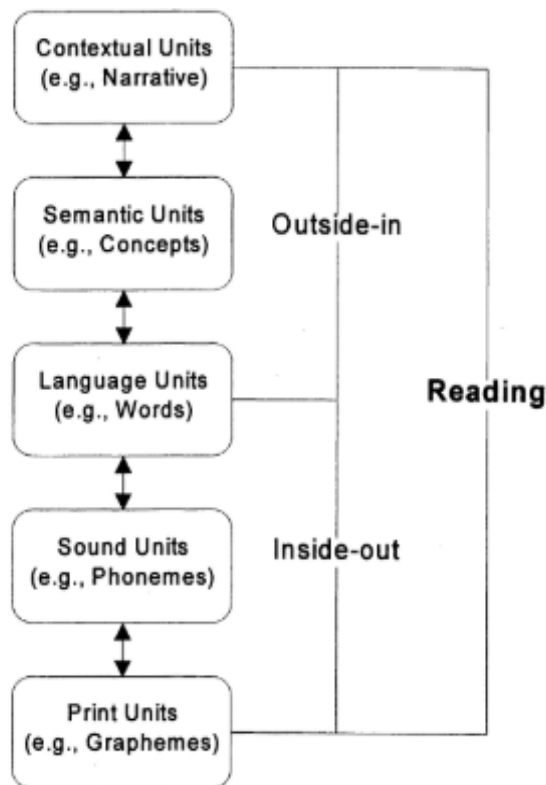


Figure 3.9: Whitehurst and Lonigan (1998) EL Model

They suggest that emergent and conventional literacy consists of two sets of interdependent skills and processes: Inside-out and Outside-in. The Inside-out process concerns the procedural knowledge of literacy skills whereby the children need to first

have phonological awareness skills and understand how to hear the sounds, and when that skill is accomplished, match the sounds with letters and blend them together to make larger units of words. Understanding punctuation and grammar will also enable them to read text but without comprehension. The term Outside-in, describes the child's conceptual knowledge, for example, the function of print in the context of the narrative.

Their processing of the overall text is where understanding and comprehension occurs and requires background knowledge to enable understanding, allowing a child to decipher the correct meaning of e.g. lead in the context "a *lead* balloon" and "*lead* me there" (Whitehurst and Lonigan, 1998, p.855). However, at the centre of this continuum are what Whitehurst and Lonigan (1998) called "language units" that demonstrate the merger of skills and conceptual knowledge. Both procedural and conceptual skills of literacy, they posit, are necessary for children to become good readers.

3.8.2 National Early Literacy Panel (NELP) 2008

If young children are to become literate, there are several skills they need to develop. In 2002 in the US, the National Institute for Literacy convened an expert panel (NELP), to "identify and synthesise the relevant research on the early precursors to school success in literacy" (McGill-Franzen, 2010, p.275). These experts were appointed to carry out an examination of the implications of instructional practices to support literacy development that are used with children from birth to five years. Their primary goal, through a meta-analysis of all research available, was to identify interventions, activities and instructional practices that support the development of children's EL skills (Shanahan, 2005).

Findings from NELP (NELP, 2008) recognised the importance of EL development in young children through the identification of foundation skills that children should have in place by the time they begin school. The initial conventional reading and writing skills that are developed in the first years of life have a "clear and consistently strong relationship with later conventional literacy skills" (ibid, p.3).

The report adopts the term *conventional literacy skills* to distinguish between the more advanced and mature indications of reading and writing skills, such as reading, writing and spelling instruction, and the earlier foundational or emergent skills. These later conventional literacy skills include decoding, oral reading fluency, reading comprehension, writing and spelling. Children attending preschool typically acquire the very early literacy skills prior to receiving any formal literacy instruction, indeed quite possibly within the context of their own homes (Whitehurst and Lonigan, 1998).

In the report, eleven skills were repeatedly identified as impacting on children’s later reading ability, to a greater or lesser degree. The first six of these skills correlated with later literacy skills and maintained their “predictive power” (NELP, 2008, p.3) when variables, such as SES or intelligence level were taken into account (Table 3.2a below).

1	Alphabet knowledge (AK):	knowledge of the names and sounds associated with printed letters
2	Phonological awareness (PA):	the ability to detect, manipulate, or analyze the auditory aspects of spoken language (including the ability to distinguish or segment words, syllables, or phonemes), independent of meaning
3	Rapid automatic naming (RAN) of letters or digits:	the ability to rapidly name a sequence of random letters or digits (alphabetic principle)
4	RAN of objects or colours:	the ability to rapidly name a sequence of repeating random sets of pictures of objects (e.g., “car,” “tree,” “house,” “man”) or colours
5	Writing or writing name:	the ability to write letters in isolation on request or to write one’s own name
6	Phonological memory:	the ability to remember spoken information for a short period of time.

Table 3.2a: The first six of the conventional literacy skills identified by National Early Literacy Panel (2008)

However, the final five EL skills (Table 3.2b) did not hold the same predictive power once variables were taken into consideration.

7	Concepts about print	knowledge of print conventions (e.g., left–right, front–back) and concepts (book cover, author, text)
8	Print knowledge:	a combination of elements of AK, concepts about print, and early decoding
9	Reading readiness:	usually a combination of AK, concepts of print, vocabulary, memory, and PA
10	Oral language:	the ability to produce or comprehend spoken language, including vocabulary and grammar
11	Visual processing:	the ability to match or discriminate visually presented symbols.

Table 3.2b: The final five of the conventional literacy skills identified by National Early Literacy Panel (2008)

The report also identifies instructional implications from the findings to help educators understand the ‘why’s’ of their recommendations. However, Teale *et al.* (2010) caution against the use of the NELP recommendations as a “blueprint for instruction” (p.314) believing them to be unclear, open to misinterpretation, potentially leading to “skill-and-drill activities” (p.312). They contend that many who will look to these recommendations for guidance may have “little experience in reading research documents” (p.312) and the panel was aware of this but neglected to rectify it. They also identify a gap in the NELP recommendations as they believe that young children need repeated instruction in “listening comprehension, oral language, and composing” (p.312) to ensure they become competent readers later on.

A further criticism of this report comes from Pearson and Hiebert (2010) who take issue with the panel’s assertion that “most young children develop few conventional literacy skills before starting school” (NELP, 2008, p.vii) as Pearson and Hiebert contend that up to 50% of children entering school have already mastered many of the skills deemed to be precursor skills to conventional literacy.

3.8.3 Rohde's comprehensive EL model (CELM) (2015)

A more recent EL model developed by Rohde (2015), known as the Comprehensive Emergent Literacy Model (CELM), is based loosely on the *Whole-to-Part Literacy Assessment* work of James Cunningham (1993). Cunningham identifies word identification, listening comprehension and silent reading comprehension as specific skills that are necessary for young children to acquire conventional literacy skills and become successful readers. However, Rohde (2015) puts forth the notion that in addition to those identified by Cunningham, there are three further components that are precursors to these skills which include:

- 1 Print awareness (includes alphabet knowledge/print concepts leading to word identification)
- 2 PA (which she identifies as the skills development of rhyming, alliteration, segmenting and blending phonemes)
- 3 Oral language (includes understanding/comprehension/fluency) leads to silent reading comprehension

EL development is “an interactive process of skills and context rather than a linear series of individual components” (Rohde, 2015, p.1) and other skills overlap these components. According to Rohde,

- Understanding the relationship between letters and sounds, observed when children use inventive spelling before they learn to spell correctly; requires both print and PA.
- Understanding the ability to use grammar and understand syntax, observed as vocabulary increases and children use more complex sentences, requires both oral language and print awareness.
- Understanding the ability to manipulate and restructure words, demonstrated when children can separate the sounds of words from the meaning (e.g. cat/hat/dog), requires both oral language and PA skills.

A further component – writing - is generated through the overlap of all elements of the model. Rohde (2015) places writing at the centre of the model (Figure 3.10) as this is where, she believes “children can often demonstrate their knowledge of literacy concepts” (p.4). She uses a Venn diagram to depict the holistic nature of EL learning,

demonstrating the manner in which all of the components overlap and interact with each other.

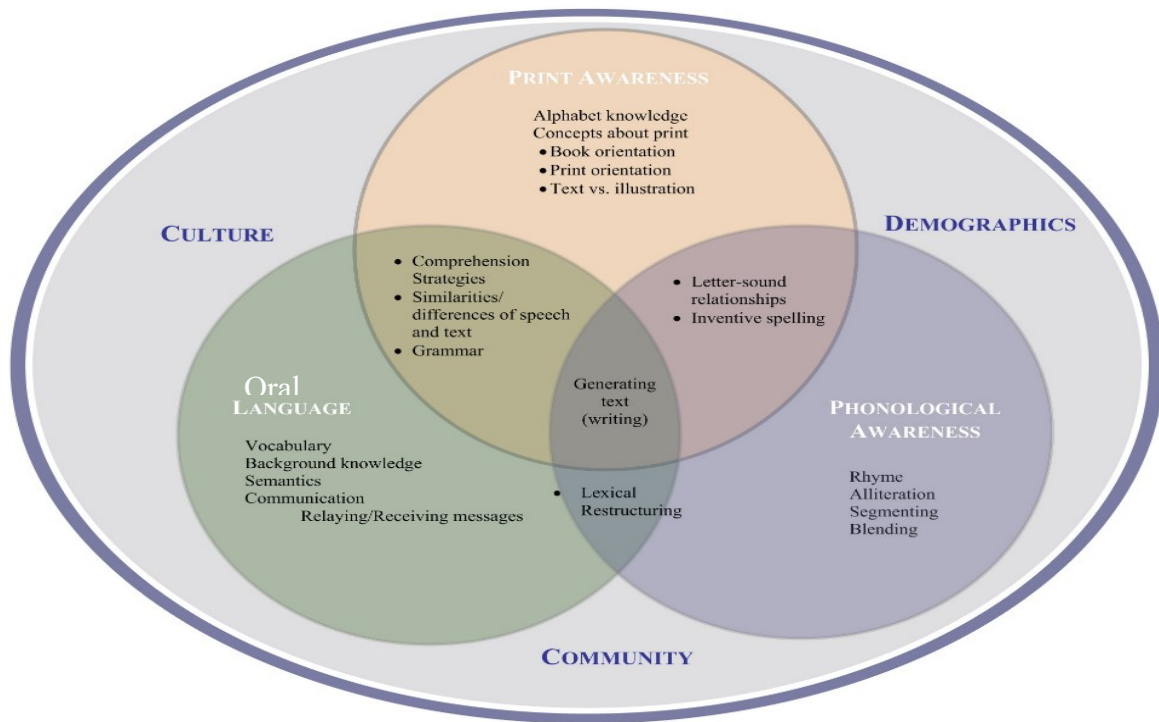


Figure 3.10: Rohde (2015) Comprehensive Emergent Literacy Model (CELM)

Rohde situates all the EL components within a context of environmental indicators, as she determines the child’s lived context impacts on their skills and understandings.

3.8.4 Impact of EL models on practice

The common feature amongst all these models, and others not cited here, is that literacy occurs along a continuum. The variation in models is related to the ‘what’ (happens) and the ‘how’ (it happens). Rohde’s CELM model recognises that children learn best through the medium of play and she prioritises PA as a principal component. In Ireland a play-based emergent curriculum is promoted within the ECEC sector to support the development of children’s EL skills and our curriculum framework, *Aistear*, advocates language play and playing with sounds and words “unrehearsed and spontaneous manipulation of these, often with rhythmic and repetitive elements... playing with language – enjoying patterns, sounds and nonsense words” (NCCA, 2009, p.54). Literacy learning should be fun for both the children and the educators,

therefore the manner in which PA skills are developed in an ECEC setting need be spontaneous and playful, with opportunities taken as they arise naturally. However, helping children to develop these skills requires the educators to have an “explicit understanding of phonology” as this will inform their instructional practices (Piasta and Hudson, 2022, p.2022).

The next section will consider what specific knowledge is required to teach PA skills to children in an ECCE setting.

3.9 Knowledge requirement

An ability to nurture EL and language skills requires “strong content knowledge, an understanding of how these skills develop in young children, as well as the use of evidence-based, high-quality instructional practices” (Cunningham *et al.*, 2015, p.62). A significant amount of research has been carried out into the efficacy of PA instruction and the evidence has concluded that PA interventions and subsequent improvements in PA skills lead to improvement in children’s reading in later years (NELP, 2008; Lonigan *et al.*, 2011; Bailet *et al.*, 2013; Pelatti *et al.*, 2014; Suortti and Lipponen, 2016; Gillon *et al.*, 2019; Grofčíková and Máčajová, 2021). This has resulted in some countries, such as the UK and US, including PA instruction in their ECEC curriculum. Yopp and Yopp (2022) assert that children in ECEC settings are entitled to be with educators who can effectively support their PA development. The positive impact of professional development and learning on EL practice for educators is widely accepted (Justice *et al.*, 2008; Zaslow *et al.*, 2016; Schachter *et al.*, 2019). Fortunately there is an abundance of research available to guide the design, selection and sequencing of the instructional stimuli, strategies and scaffolds to teach the development of PA skills (NELP, 2008; Kaminski and Powell-smith, 2017; Gillon *et al.*, 2019; Bdeir, Bahous and Nabhani, 2022; Yopp and Yopp, 2022).

3.9.1 What should be taught?

Skills involving larger units of sound are easier to master than smaller units of sound so children will find rhyming easier than identifying the initial phoneme (Adams, 1990; Bailet *et al.*, 2013). Once all PA and phonemic awareness skills are acquired, they form the basis for phonics, the first step towards reading (Yopp and Yopp, 2009).

Being able to hear and manipulate the sounds of spoken language i.e. phonological awareness, is highly related to later success in reading and spelling (Justice and Pullen, 2003).

The programme developed for this research included elements identified in the PA continuum in Figure 3.11, with the tasks becoming increasingly complex, reflecting a transition from “shallow to deep levels” of skill (Justice and Pullen, 2003, p.88).

These include:

- Rhyming and alliteration
- Sentence segmentation
- Segmentation words into syllables
- Segmenting and blending syllables
- Onset – rime segmenting and blending
- Counting Phonemes – blending and segmenting

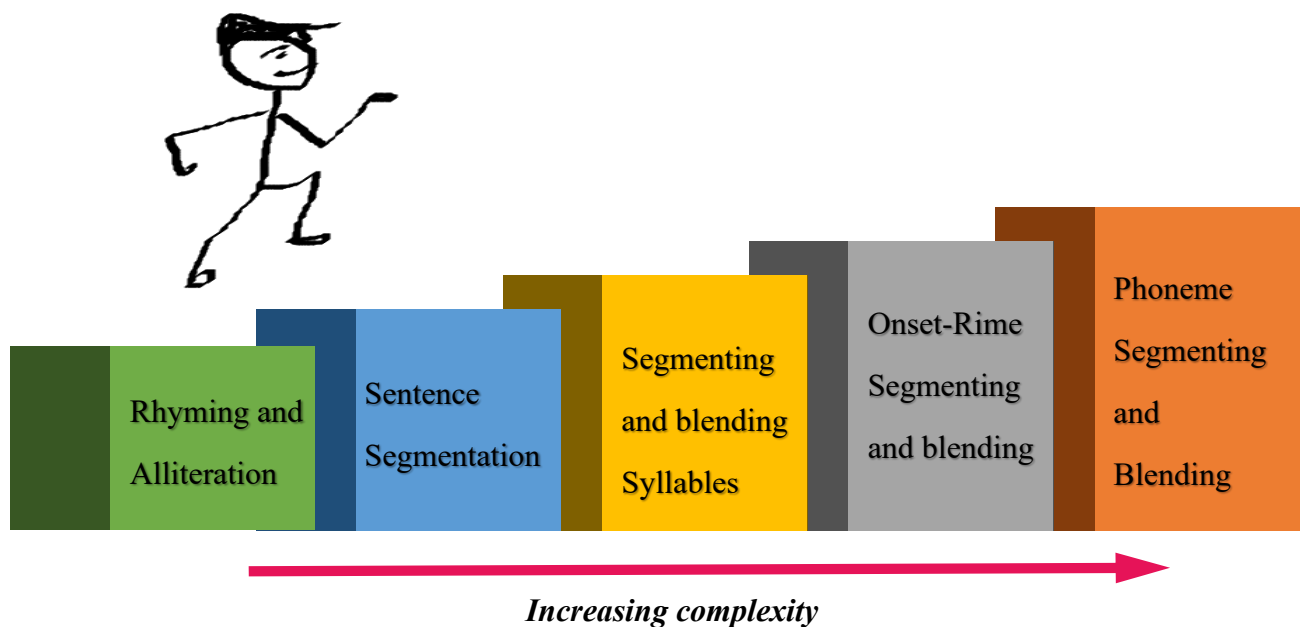


Figure 3.11: The Phonological Awareness Continuum (Adapted from the literature by Researcher.

I will now explore each of these steps from the continuum in turn.

3.9.2 Step 1 - Rhyming and Alliteration

Two of the earliest emerging PA skills are recognition of both rhyming and alliteration, making these prime considerations in the development of EL skills. Activities to increase children's awareness of the sounds of language are vital and, in this context, both rhymes and language games play an important role in developing PA skills (Bolduc and Lefebvre, 2012). Rhyming is important because it teaches the ability to isolate sounds in words. It also requires an understanding of the concepts of same/different/beginning/end. For many children it will be the first time they will have to detach the sounds of the language they hear from the meaning of words. Alliteration is important to building literacy skills because it teaches the ability to identify individual sounds in words and requires the understanding of the concept of beginning/first/middle/last. Moving on from identifying the end rhyme in words to identifying medial and last letter should only occur when the children become more accomplished (Harper, 2011).

Studies have shown that rhyme and alliteration contribute to reading in at least two ways: developing phoneme detection skills and helping children to group words with common spelling patterns thus demonstrating a consistent link between children's PA skills and reading (Bryant *et al.*, 1990; Harper, 2011; Gillon *et al.*, 2019; Bdeir, Bahous and Nabhani, 2022). However, some studies found rhyming to be a less useful predictor of early reading success when compared to phoneme segmentation. Further research also refuted the link between rhyming and alliteration and future reading success, instead hailing phoneme awareness along with letter knowledge as the best predictor of reading success (Ehri *et al.*, 2001; Suortti and Lipponen, 2016).

The ways in which both rhyming, and alliteration should be engaged with will be discussed next.

3.9.2.1 Recognising Rhyme

While learning language, children develop word associations; they know that a cat and a dog are both animals, have four legs and a tail. However, to understand rhyme the children need to focus sublexically on the PA structure of spoken language and focus on the sound structure rather than the meaning (Justice and Pullen, 2003). It may take time to recognise that the ‘sounds’ that are the same between cat, mat and dog, are cat and mat, not cat and dog. By changing the beginning letter/phoneme and keeping the ending chunk, children can hear that two words rhyme (Harper, 2011). While asking children to recognise same word endings when given an example is difficult for them, hence the next stage, generating rhyme, is more complex.

Teaching these skills requires listening exercises, where children’s attention is drawn to the sounds they are hearing and to distinguishing one sound from another. Central to this teaching and learning is the fact that it should always be taught in a playful manner, as advocated by our national framework, *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009c). Activities that children enjoy include:

- recording familiar environmental sounds and then identifying these sounds
- reciting words and nursery rhymes and drawing the children’s attention to the words that sound the same
- finding words that rhyme with the children’s own names and other familiar objects in the room
- playing with language.

Many of these activities can be engaged with throughout the day, without setting up particular ‘activities’ that the children have to engage with. Key to the learning process is that it is enjoyable for the children (Yopp and Yopp, 2022).

3.9.2.2 Generating Rhyme

Generating rhyme consists of giving the child a word and asking them for a rhyming match. For this task, children have to filter through their entire vocabulary to come up with another word that sounds the same (Schuele and Boudreau, 2008; Chen and McCray, 2012). Once the children are able to recognise rhyme, games like “I spy with

my little eye, something that rhymes with.....” support the development of rhyme generation skills, while tongue twisters are a fun way to learn about alliteration. Picture games to support children to recognise rhyming words provides opportunities for the educator to take multiple opportunities to repeat the rhyming words so the children can hear the rhyme (Yopp and Yopp, 2022).

3.9.2.3 Alliteration

Once children can rhyme and have an understanding of the ‘end’ sounds in words, we turn our attention to the ‘beginning’ sounds in words, alliteration. This refers to two words sharing a phoneme, the smallest unit of sound. The starting point should be beginning sounds which are easiest. Usually, children can identify their own name beginning sound e.g. P-eter so using words with Peter that do not sound like Peter but begin with a P, like P-iper can help them to make the link to the beginning sound.

Emphasising this playfully, by saying

“P-P-P-Peter P-P-P-Piper” can help draw children’s attention to the beginning sounds.

Learning off tongue twisters provides opportunities to emphasise the initial sound in a playful manner (Yopp and Yopp, 2022), for example

“Betty Bought a Bit of Butter“

or

“Peter Piper picked a pack of pickled peppers”

Also taking playful spontaneous opportunities to identify sounds on an ongoing basis (e.g., at break time saying *L-L-Let’s have L-L-Lunch!*).

Additionally, picking out two names from the setting can help the children understand, such as

“Did you notice that P-eter and P-auline have the same beginning sound?”.

Once children have acquired the skills of rhyming and alliteration, they will be ready to begin to learn about segmenting, beginning with segmenting sentences into words.

3.9.3 Step 2 - Segmenting sentences into words

As with all PA skills, segmenting ascends in complexity, from the full sentence to the segmenting, blending and manipulation of individual phonemes. Segmentation is important to reading success because it teaches that language is made of parts that can be separated and put back together. However it is a difficult skill for children to acquire, master and apply (Adams, 1990; Tabors *et al.*, 2001; Dickinson and Caswell, 2007; Snow and Oh, 2010). Sounds in spoken language are not pronounced separately but are blended into larger sound units *tosoundlikethis* (to sound like this). Regarding sentence segmentation, there is a space between each word that is not apparent in speech, all contributing to the complexity of learning to read (Ranweiler, 2004).

Teaching an awareness that sentences consist of individual words can be done through games such as Robot Speak, where the children speak like a robot (Yopp and Yopp, 2022). Children also enjoy games where they hop, count or clap for each word. Additionally, using building blocks where children build a block for each word to make a tower is a concrete way of demonstrating an abstract concept for the children when learning to segment.

3.9.4 Step 3 – Segmenting words into syllables

The next stage is related to syllables and the breakdown of words into smaller sound units. Words can have a single or multiple syllables. A syllable is defined by Yopp and Yopp (2022) as an “uninterrupted sound unit organised around vowel sounds” (p.7). Every syllable contains a vowel sound that may or may not be pre- or pro-ceded by a consonant sound.

Example

The one syllable words *cat, dog, fun, play* all have a consonant sound preceding the vowel and all the vowels are followed by another consonant sound.

Even though the word *play* has two letters preceding the vowel, the letters *pl* combine to make a single sound.

Additionally, using counting, clapping, hopping or building games are useful in this instance (Yopp and Yopp, 2022).

3.9.5 Step 4 - Segmenting - syllables into subsyllables - onset and rime

In refining the sounds in syllables, the smaller sound unit can be divided into what are also known as a subsyllabic unit of sound. The smaller sound unit that precedes the vowel sound in a syllable is known as an *onset*, while the second subsyllabic sound, the vowel and consonants that follow, are the *rime*.

Example

In the word **Green**:

The onset (the sound before the vowel sound): **gr**

The rime: **een**

Not all words, however, have an onset, for example the single syllable words *eat* and *in* do not have anything preceding the vowel; therefore those words only have a rime.

To help in the development of these skills, the “I spy” game can be changed to “I hear with my little ear words that start like....” to play first at identifying the onset or beginning sounds. Once the children begin to demonstrate the skill acquisition, the next phase is to help them to identify the rime or ending sounds in words which can be done through going on word hunts where the adult ‘finds’ the onset first and then the children say and hold the sound e.g. ‘m’ (mmmmm). When the rime sound is found e.g. ‘op’, getting the children to link the two mmmmmop to make the word mop. This is a playful way to get the children to engage in this activity.

3.9.6 Step 5 - Segmenting - from sub-syllables into phonemes

Phonemes are the smallest single sound we hear in speech, not in the printed word. All words are made up of phonemes. Some words, such as *I* and *a*, have a single phoneme. Sometimes the phoneme is made up of more than one letter. For example, the word *chap* has three phonemes: *ch – a – p*, where *ch* makes a single sound. This also occurs in words that have double letters such as *ee* in *seed* (*s – ee – d*) or *pool* (*p – oo – l*). Other words where letters double up to make a single sound are the *WH* words like *what*, *where*, *when*. However, the word *which* has only three phonemes *wh – i – ch* (Yopp and Yopp, 2022).

Reading to children using dialogic reading techniques, play and use of playful activities to stimulate learning, are all strategies that enhance children’s language and EL skills (Bowman *et al.*, 2001; Dickinson and Tabors, 2001; Gillon *et al.*, 2019; Yopp and Yopp, 2022).

3.10 The ‘Do’s’ and ‘Don’ts’ of PA teaching

Play-based activities are most appropriate for the age range of children who attend the ECCE programme (NCCA, 2009c) and activities for the most important development skills should be playful and fun, as in the games recommended throughout the previous section (Yopp and Yopp, 2009). Drill and rote learning should be avoided while child-led, interactive exploration and experimentation in language play should be encouraged as language play can “tap into their verbal abilities” (Read *et al.*, 2018, p.131), furthering their language development. The impact of child-led and dramatic play on the acquisition of literacy skills should not be underestimated (Landry *et al.*, 2006; Phillips *et al.*, 2008). Intrinsically motivated play achieves deeper levels of involvement in activities which leads to deeper and more relevant learning (Laevers, 2005). While research advocates for self-directed discovery (Piaget, 1952), it also recognises that some teacher-led times with appropriate information is needed (Landry *et al.*, 2006). Some argue for direct and explicit instructions to develop PA skills (Ehri *et al.*, 2001; Moats, 2020) while others argue against (Henry and Pianta, 2011). However, explicit and systematic types of instruction might include elements of instructional sequencing, modelling and explaining the task, scaffolding, and providing corrective feedback (Phillips *et al.*, 2008). Currently, many educators use

off-the-shelf structured programmes in an inappropriate manner, as they lack the required underpinning knowledge of both EL and PA skill development to support the needs of all children (Moats, 2009).

3.11 Conclusion

In summary, PA instruction can be integrated into a play-based curriculum that is supportive of the holistic development of the children (Ehri *et al.*, 2001) and when interventions are being planned it is important to consider a mix of child-centred and teacher-directed approaches. To learn the basic skills, children need a stimulating and engaging environment with opportunities for exploration, role play, creative expression and scaffolding as they develop early listening, speaking, reading and writing skills (Anthony *et al.*, 2002; Landry *et al.*, 2006). The best opportunities to teach and learn are those that are taken at a time when the application of a principle has concrete meaning for the child. Where educators have a rich understanding of EL and language development, are able to utilise that knowledge in their settings, research indicates they have a positive effect on children's outcomes (Piasta *et al.*, 2020). Unfortunately, the research also shows that many educators may have an inadequate level of knowledge and understanding of EL and PA to effectively support the children's developing skills (Crim *et al.*, 2008; Cunningham *et al.*, 2009; Neuman and Cunningham, 2009). Currently, there is no professional development and learning programme on EL and PA available that meets the needs of the ECEC sector in Ireland. Any available PA programmes, either Irish or international, are more suited to the primary sector, primarily because of the difference in school starting age of children in Ireland, compared to the international norm. The age range of children attending ECCE settings in Ireland falls within the age range for EL and PA skills (Burt *et al.*, 1999). Additionally, because of the educators' lack of EL and PA continuum knowledge, greater input other than an off-the-shelf programme is required to support them to promote PA skills with the children. Therefore, a professional development and learning programme that supports the development of educator's knowledge and skills, that influences them to practice and apply what they have learned in their own settings (Desimone, 2009; Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2017; Rogers *et al.*, 2020), and with the benefit of an expert, is an approach advocated by research to upskilling educators in a meaningful way.

In this chapter, literature from the two main pillars of this research study were explored: professional development and learning and EL. Within the professional development and learning pillar, PD and PL were explored with justification presented for utilising professional development and learning in this research study (Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2017; Sawyer and Stuckey, 2019). Following on from this, models of professional development and learning were presented and distilled, and a model for this research study was developed and explained. Coaching as a critical resource within a professional development and learning programme was identified (Elek and Page, 2019b), as were the techniques of observation (Desimone, 2009), modelling (Cunningham *et al.*, 2015), reflection (Schön, 2017) and feedback (Dominguez, 2017). Delivering a programme within the situated learning environment has clear benefits as the community of practice is already formed (Wenger, 2010).

The second main pillar researched was EL. Initially EL development was explored, followed by a discussion on the literacy continuum which was further distilled to the PA continuum and the elements within it. Next, models of EL were discussed and was followed by what is relevant to be included in a PA programme for educators within the ECCE context in Ireland. All of these will be key considerations in the development and design of the professional development and learning programme on PA for educators presented in the next chapter.

Chapter 4 – Methodology

4.1 Introduction

Most important for any study is the selection of an appropriate research design, in addition to the methods for data collection. As outlined in section 1.1, for this study a CAR methodology, utilising mixed methods, was conducted with a small group of educators in their own setting. While the educators were being observed working with the children, the children themselves were not the focus of this research and their words were only gathered in relation to their connection with the adults' words. Within this real, authentic context (Lave and Wenger, 1991), the study sought to develop and deliver a professional development and learning programme for educators in the area of PA to enhance their knowledge, skills, confidence and competence. Participating in research has often been the impetus for positive change in classrooms and is evidenced by teacher improvement, self-reflection and general learning that enhances classroom practices. Indeed, according to Elliott (1991, p.49), “the fundamental aim of action research is to improve practice rather than to produce knowledge”. Vaughan *et al.* (2019) concur with this belief as they contend that addressing problems of practice is fundamentally what all AR is all about.

This chapter outlines the research methods used to elicit answers to the research questions listed in section 4.2 below. Section 4.3 discusses the research design, while in section 4.4, I discuss my positionality which influences the theoretical framework that underpins this study and influences the philosophical approach taken in this study. Section 4.5 discusses my epistemological and ontological beliefs that place me within the interpretative paradigm. Section 4.6 details the methodology, identifying the research approach taken, while section 4.7 discusses the research cycles. Section 4.8 considers the sample context and selection while the data collection methods are presented in section 4.9. This is followed in section 4.10 by a discussion on data analysis and considers why Braun and Clarke's (2022) reflective thematic analysis (TA) best suited this study. Trustworthiness is discussed in section 4.11, followed by section 4.12 on Triangulation. Section 4.13 outlines the ethical considerations before

concluding the chapter. The next section, 4.2, begins with a restatement of my research questions.

4.2 Research Questions

The dilemma I encountered in my professional experience and confirmed by the literature (Cunningham and O'Donnell, 2015; Moats, 2009), was that educators are not sufficiently informed in the area of EL and specifically PA to enable them to effectively support children who are attending their ECCE settings. Consequently, the primary focus is to establish to what extent if at all, a professional development and learning programme on PA in a situated-learning context impacts the knowledge and skills of participating educators and in so doing influences their professional learning and practice. However, the review of relevant literature brought greater clarity to specific questions that needed to be asked to elicit the required solution to this dilemma. These research questions are:

- *From a review of the literature and an assessment of the participants' current knowledge level, what are the key elements of a professional development and learning programme to support their PA knowledge and skills?*

Knowledge gained through many years of visiting EY settings, both as an ECS and a Work Placement Supervisor on the BAECTL informs me of the prevailing practices in EY settings. The literature review provided information on the most appropriate literacy development strategies. Unfortunately, these are infrequently observed in classrooms despite decades of research indicating EL, specifically PA skills, are associated with future reading success (Dickinson and Tabors, 2001; National Early Literacy Panel, 2008; Bowne *et al.*, 2016). Therefore, it was necessary to find out what features of a programme could be put in place to promote a sharing of knowledge and skills that could lead to influencing a change in practice in the setting.

- *How do the various elements of the professional development and learning programme (e.g., workshops, observations, coaching, modelling, feedback, dialogue and reflective journaling) individually and collectively influence the educator's PA knowledge and skills?*

Professional development and learning programmes consist of various components, all of which should be a good 'fit' for the educators participating. Successful professional development and learning models usually feature multiple "active and collaborative" practices (Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2017, p.4). This study needs to ascertain from the educators which components were most effective in increasing their knowledge, skills, confidence and competence. Conversely, finding out which elements were least effective will help with the future development and refinement of the professional development and learning programme at the heart of this research.

- *How did the collaborative features of this intervention contribute to achieving a change in the educator's PA knowledge, skills and practice.*

Through this CAR study, collaboration and sharing of knowledge was promoted as beneficial to all participants. However, educators may not always find it easy to acknowledge to their peers that they do not know or understand something. Yet, changing the practices in a setting requires all educators to know and understand the reasons why. Collaborations with 'critical friends' who are involved in the CAR process, can provide a way of learning from and through practice (Riel, 2017). I wanted to find out what features of a programme could be put in place to promote a sharing of knowledge and skills that could lead to influencing a change in practice in the setting.

4.3 Research Design

The research design should be congruent with and emerge from the researcher's own beliefs and assumptions (Levers, 2013) which are formed both through previous engagement with theory and earlier personal experiences. It describes the overall plan and approaches taken to collecting and analysing data for the research (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p.26) and is guided by the paradigm underpinning the research

(Mukherji and Albon, 2018). The aim was to introduce an intervention to enhance the knowledge, skills, confidence and competence of educators, using a collaborative approach which would promote engagement and ownership, thereby enabling the transfer of new knowledge into action and practice. Kemmis *et al.* (2014) suggest when participants experience a sense of development and evolution in their practice, it leads to new understandings and ultimately, leads to change.

An interpretive/constructivist approach was taken to help elicit answers to the questions asked throughout the study and will be discussed in more detail in section 4.5.4. Braun and Clarke (2022, p.203) advise that using an interpretive approach, is “bringing in the researcher’s conceptually informed lenses to interrogate the ideas expressed”; additionally, the constructivist approach is acknowledging the “active role of the researcher in knowledge production” (ibid. p.184), which in this CAR approach, includes all of the participants.

AR can employ both qualitative and quantitative methods (Mukherji and Albon, 2018) so quantitative data in the form of a pre- and post- IQ were collected, while qualitative data were gathered through observation and field notes, audio recordings, focus group interviews and reflective journals. Data analysis using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2021) began following the collection of the data, giving due consideration to the theoretical framework that informed my study (Section 3.2).

4.4 Positionality

My ECEC journey began in my own sessional service where I spent 15 years working directly with the children. During this time, I was constantly up-skilling, even though for the first few years of my practice, there were no regulations regarding qualifications. Once QQI Level 5 in Childcare was introduced I completed it, followed by a Level 6 Supervision in Childcare Award. At this time, while still working part-time in my own setting I began working part-time as an Early Childhood Specialist (ECS) with IPPA, where my role was largely as a consultant, visiting settings to support educators. Following the introduction of Síolta, I, along with other ECSs from various organisations were upskilled as Síolta Mentors to support educators to improve

the quality of their services. Simultaneously, I was delivering ECEC programmes at QQI¹⁹ Levels 5 and 6 to educators already working in the sector who were seeking to upskill. While in IPPA, I was encouraged to further upskill, and so completed a B.Sc. in Education and Training, followed by a M.Sc. in Education and Training Management (Leadership). My next endeavour was a Post Graduate Diploma in Education (Special and Inclusive Education) (PG Diploma) and it was at this point I first encountered PA, linked to speech and language difficulties.

All these courses were part-time, delivered at times suitable for a working person, featuring small groups where adult learning principles were employed. Methodologies used supported active learning and promoted CoP's, all of which now inform my philosophical stance. Through IPPA, I received training in the Penn Literacy Network (PLN) programme delivered by the University of Pennsylvania, both here in Ireland and in Philadelphia, which focussed on the EL skills of oral language and book reading.

Following the PG Diploma, I became fascinated by this new-found knowledge and immediately began to observe and watch for these skills with the children in my own setting who were soon to leave for primary school. In our daily practice, we encouraged many EL skills such as oral language through book reading, discussions, supporting language development and vocabulary, rhyming and segmenting through nursery rhymes, action songs and clapping/rhythm games. Unfortunately, as we did not know the importance of these and their relevance to other PA skills, we did not have a regular focus on them, and many children had not yet developed the skills.

I closed my preschool and began working full time in IPPA, which subsequently became Early Childhood Ireland (ECI). This role included delivering QQI Levels 5 and 6, visiting students in their settings in addition to delivered professional development and learning workshops around the country to educators who had already

¹⁹ In 2012, Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) was established to take over the functions of the following 4 bodies: Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC); Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC); Irish Universities Quality Board (UIQB); National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI)

achieved their qualifications. In asking these educators what they knew about PA, the consistent response was that they ‘did phonics’. When I introduced the literacy continuum, most were astounded to discover their perception of phonics and its place on the continuum was incorrect. This is not uncommon with ECEC educators (Carson and Bayetto, 2018). I watched them wrestle with the new terminology ‘phonological’, ‘phonemic’, ‘phonics’, ‘onset and rime’, just as I had initially done when I first encountered this terminology.

All of this has strongly influenced my view that PA should be included in all ECEC programmes from Level 5 upwards. Most educators already engage in activities that promote some PA skills. However, without appropriate content knowledge and understanding of their impact, they tend not to give the time and emphasis to the activities which would take them to a new level.

When I ask myself ‘why am I doing this research?’, I know it is because there is a gap in the knowledge base of most educators, through no fault of their own, who do trojan work with the children, but who lack the required knowledge, skills, and confidence to input more. I want to develop an effective way to help fill this knowledge and skills gap and demonstrate just how easy it is to make a difference in the children’s literacy lives. I understand that many educators are coming from an educational base that did not focus on the ‘mechanics’ of developing language and literacy skills and therefore may have feelings of inadequacy around ‘teaching’ these skills. Consequently, significant work is required to ensure educators have the necessary content knowledge in this critical area, as well as the skills to support the implementation of this knowledge. Hopefully, this will impact on their own self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977).

4.5 My philosophical positioning

My philosophical approach determines how the research for this study is conducted. Beliefs and assumptions influence our decisions all the time, particularly regarding what research we will pursue, as well as the methodology and methods selected (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). In this study, I wanted to both fill a knowledge gap and solve a problem in an area, EL, specifically PA, that I am passionate about. I value the knowledge and skills of educators who have the best interests of the children they

work with at the center of their practice and want to do their best for them. I believe everyone looks at the world through their own lens that has been formed through their lived, life experiences (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). I am a people person and value conversations and discourses with educators as a means of coming to understand their perspectives. Our assumptions can be associated with human knowledge which are our epistemological assumptions; realities encountered in the research are my ontological assumptions; and the extent to which my own values will impact on my research study are my axiological assumptions (Saunders *et al*, 2015). Each of these will be briefly explored below.

4.5.1 My ontological position

Ontology is mainly concerned with the nature of reality, of what exists and asks what really is? What is it possible to know? (Snape and Spencer, 2003). It may be tacit or explicit. As a social constructivist who believes that knowledge is “created not discovered by the mind” (Andrews, 2012, p. 40), this orientation leads me to believe that people construct their own realities which are therefore impacted by their interactions and beliefs. Madill *et al.* (2000, cited in Braun and Clarke, 2022, p.183) contend that “not only can we only know about reality in and through our human practices, this is the reality that is taken to *matter*” (italics theirs). However, social constructivism, in restricting itself to the social construction of knowledge, makes only epistemological claims according to Andrews (2012) and makes no ontological claims. Nevertheless, Packer and Goicoechea (2000) argue that the ontological assumptions of social constructivist learning do exist but often go unnoticed because of their potentially unscientific or even meaningless nature. As a social constructivist I believe that individuals seek an understanding of their own world, providing a complexity of views. This study focused on the educator’s interpretation of the implementation of the programme and the elements they found useful to support their knowledge and skills. For this reason, the research questions seek to elicit the multiple realities and constructs of the educators through discussions and reflections. Closely associated with constructivism is interpretivism (Van Der Walt, 2020) which places knowledge as relative to particular circumstances, with multiple meanings and ways of knowing (Levers, 2013) and as an interpretive researcher I want to understand these constructs and what is believed and held relevant by the educators (Neuman, 2014).

4.5.2 My epistemological position

Epistemology is the study of knowledge, and it questions what we know and how we come to know it (McNiff, 2010). Aligned with Creswell (2014), I see knowledge as something we generate all the time, it is a living process – something that does not stand still and is a reality that is constantly evolving and is unpredictable (McNiff, 2013). This leads to ‘I wonder’ questions, which opens multiple systems of knowing (*ibid*). I believe learning is rooted in experience and reflections on the experience of practice, prompting such questions as; does my practice line up with my values? what do I do about that? I see encounters with others as opportunities for learning and growth. My epistemology draws closely from Vygotsky’s social constructivist paradigm, where I place value on collaborative learning and the co-construction of new knowledge, and where the learning of others helps to view new understandings from different perspectives. When engaging in the social constructivist approach, it is important to operate as a facilitator, who supports the learner to come to their own understanding of the new content, rather than a teacher who covers the material in a didactic manner (Bauersfeld, 1995).

I believe there are as many realities as there are people co-constructing new visions or theories. As all who are participating in the research study have differing levels of ECEC qualifications and different life experiences, they will all come from a different perspective, each bringing their own level of knowledge and understanding to the research. However, axiology, which refers to the researcher’s own beliefs and values, also plays a part. Axiology therefore had an impact on the ethical stance of the research. It is imperative that as a researcher, I am aware of my own values and how they impact on the research study (Killam, 2013), as this will help me to limit their [my values] effect on the outcome of the research study.

4.5.3 My axiological assumptions

My own values have evolved over time and have been impacted on by my own journey in education, so I can truly say I value the experience that educators bring to discussions on practice, which leads to new meaningful understandings. I value the co-construction of knowledge through discussions and practice in a CoP in a situated learning environment. I recognise everyone learns differently and believe professional

development and learning programmes should accommodate all learning styles through use of different methods. I firmly believe that new knowledge empowers educators in their practice and leads to personal growth and fulfilment.

4.5.4 Paradigms

A *paradigm* is a set of assumptions that provides a conceptual or philosophical framework for a ‘world view’ (Mertens, 2005; Mertens, 2012) to guide your research. My world view comprises the values and ideas that shape my vision and perspective and influences how I interpret things and the actions I take (Pervin and Mokhtar, 2022). There have been different views and controversies on the number of paradigms there are, ranging from Creswell (2014) who originally cited three paradigms but added a fourth later on, to Guba and Lincoln (2008) who cite five. However, for this research study I accept the determination of Yong, Md Husin and Kamarudin (2021) that there are four research paradigms: positivism, realism, critical theory and interpretivism. Positivism is a quantitative paradigm while the other three paradigms are used in qualitative research (*ibid*). Critical theory looks to critique and transform social, cultural and political values and consequently, is often connected with long-term studies of structures and processes. Realism believes the human mind is independent of reality. Realism can be direct realism (i.e. what you see is what you get), or critical realism, which draws on social theory to seek explanations for social phenomena (Stutchbury, 2022). The fourth paradigm, interpretivism involves interpreting the findings from the study which will be influenced by the values that lie behind a finding.

Because of my epistemological and ontological beliefs, the paradigm that best aligns with my values is the interpretative paradigm aligned with constructivism. Interpretivism believes, as I do, that each person interprets and understands the world around them differently, influenced by their social and cultural context, eliciting various responses to the same experience (Mukherji and Albon, 2018). Indeed interpretivists commend the “permanence and priority of the real world of first-person, subjective experience” (Schwandt, 1998, p.221). Constructivism is closely associated with interpretivism. According to Van Der Walt educators “work in a dynamic space-time or ‘a sea of energy of thought, a space at the edge of chaos’” (2020, p.61) and

require both reflection and theory construction to find their way out of the maze. Social constructivists believe people search for understanding in their own world in which they live and they “develop subjective meanings” (Creswell and Creswell, 2018, p.46) of their many, varied experiences, which are socially constructed and interpreted through interactions with others (Saunders *et al*, 2015). Because I value social interactions and believe meaning can be made through social situations, social constructivism also played a role in this study.

Interpretive/constructivist researchers view social reality as being embedded within the research setting, and making sense of what is occurring is a co-constructing process for the participants in the research (including the researcher). Using interpretivism requires the researcher to interpret elements of the research while remaining cognisant that there can be more than one interpretation of the data gathered. As the researcher, I had a responsibility to find ways to see and understand the diverse views of the experience that arose. I acknowledge the educators as experts of their own experiences, and I was interested in their individual contributions and their construction of knowledge. To provide greater insights and obtain clarity in what the educators were saying about their experiences of the study, it was incumbent on me to probe their “thoughts, values, prejudices, perceptions, emotions and perspectives” (Pervin and Mokhtar, 2022, p.422) throughout discussions.

This paradigm applies to this research because I was seeking to identify in-detail the experiences and knowledge of the educators. In this study, each educator brought their own values to the programme and their understanding was based on their own individual perspectives. In this way multiple realities, and ontologies, were brought to the research and added richly to the study (Van Der Walt, 2020). This study aimed to focus on the educator’s views of the interventions introduced and the socially constructed understandings and the multiple interpretations of the issues at the heart of the research. All of this contributed to the construction of a new picture which helped to answer the research questions. An important element of all research, particularly research located in this paradigm, is reflection. Self-reflexivity is key with both interpretivism and social constructivism. This self-critique of personal biases may influence the construction of knowledge. While reflecting on how my own cultural and social frame contrasts with those of the educators, I believed it might impact on how

and what they shared. This influenced my own interactions with them. However, as my past experience was that of an educator, I was empathetic to their initial discomfort in both being observed and sharing throughout the focus groups and countered this with strategies to relax them.

4.6 Methodology - action research

The following paragraphs trace the origins of Action Research, its purpose and usefulness in educational settings, and the transformative, reflective and collaborative processes associated with this approach. While CAR is the approach used in this study, it is a ‘modified’ version of AR, whereby the participants who are involved in the action research collaborate throughout the research study (Riel, 2019). A basic AR cycle follows a ‘reflect-plan-act-observe-reflect’ sequence (McNiff, 2010).

4.6.1 Brief historical background

AR can be linked back to Dewey in the 1920’s who believed that education should be a process of active engagement between teachers and learners. Later, in the 1940’s, American psychologist Kurt Lewin described AR as “proceeding in a spiral of steps, each of which is composed of planning, action and the evaluation of the result of action” (McTaggart, 1994, p.315). He linked this form of research to schools, teachers, and education in general and believed that participation by all stakeholders was required in order to gain an understanding of social practices to effect change. This construction of the theory, according to McKernan (1986), is what made AR an acceptable method of inquiry. More recently, Guskey (2002b) avows that AR is relevant in teacher education as it empowers professionalism through changes in attitudes, beliefs and perceptions.

AR is a methodology with dual aims: action, designed to bring about change in a community or programme, and research, designed to increase understanding (Dick, 2005). It is, effectively, “a change methodology and research methodology within a single process” (Dick, 2002, p.40-3). Many definitions of AR neglect to identify “the deeply reflective nature of the process” (Sullivan *et al.*, 2016, p.26), within which

teachers examine the themes embedded in their every day practices (Elliott, 1991). Likewise, Riel (2010) describes it as a systematic and reflective deep inquiry into professional actions and the impact of these actions in the workplace. Indeed Kemmis and McTaggart (1992, p.10) argue that “to do action research is to plan, act, observe and reflect more carefully, more systematically, and more rigorously than one usually does”.

In line with the purpose of this research project, AR is regarded as a particularly powerful approach to knowledge creation because its processes and practices help educators “to learn while addressing the challenges they care about” (Bradbury *et al.*, 2019, p.7). Furthermore, it is helpful in the context of this research whereby “specific knowledge (i.e. PA) is required for a specific problem (i.e. EL knowledge) in a specific situation (i.e. ECEC setting), or when a new approach (i.e. PA) is to be grafted on to an existing system” (Cohen and Manion, 1985, p.216). Similarly, Vaughan *et al.* (2019) argue that action researchers generally look to improve practice by maintaining a focus on an intervention within a setting, and frequently takes the form of multiple cycles. It is known for its capacity to improve the quality of activities undertaken in a situation, which in this project is EL and PA (Elliott, 2001) and is of course theoretically informed (Kemmis *et al.*, 2014; Cohen *et al.*, 2017; Cochran-Smith *et al.*, 2020). It differs from traditional research models by focusing, as within this research project, on an intervention to *improve practice* in a setting.

Action research can be individual or collaborative and emerged as a popular way to involve practitioners in all sectors to better understand their work (McNiff and Whitehead, 2010). However, identifying and addressing a particular issue through collaborative and reflective engagement can create “a momentum for change” (Howes *et al.*, 2009, 45). The same authors contend that AR considers the idea that collective involvement in a workplace enhances the potential for change for those who have a single goal and a vested interest in the outcome of the project. However, Vaughan *et al.* caution that AR is “inquiry that is done by or with insiders to an organisation or community” and should “never be done to or on them” (2019, p. 1). This concurs with my own view of AR, and the aspiration I hold for change as a result of this research study.

AR was selected for this research because it is "transformative social learning with a change agenda" (Mertle, 2019, p.7) whereby the stakeholders participate in cycles of enquiry and practice. Additionally, its usefulness for hands-on, small-scale research projects facilitates educators to reflect on and evaluate aspects of their practice, increasing their understanding (Dick, 2005; Denscombe, 2010; Koshy *et al.*, 2014). Enquiring about what is happening in practice and why helps generate valid and reliable information and can have an empowering impact on educators to act to effect the required change. AR has evolved over the years to include many modified versions, including Participatory Action Research and as used in this study, CAR.

4.6.2 Collaborative action research (CAR)

This research will be done "by or with insiders", and I will be using a Collaborative AR approach. Both collaborative AR (CAR) and participatory AR (PAR) involve a working relationship between the researcher and a community organisation. These terms are often used interchangeably, however, Messiou (2019) distinguishes between them, contending that CAR typically involves CoP's with different stakeholders involved in the research, while PAR typically involves students or service users. Riel (2017, p.2) describes CAR as an "iterative, cyclical process of reflecting on practice, taking action, reflecting and taking further action".

CAR places an emphasis on the "social, relational and interactive aspects" (Coughlan, 2014, p.2), emphasising the collaborative characteristics of the knowledge-generating change process of AR. CAR facilitates both the process and outcomes of research to have direct impact on social and educational issues. These processes strive for the participation of all relevant participants, in this case educators, creating the potential for increasing both the depth and significance of the research process (*ibid*). CAR impacts on the real lives of those who participate in it and helps to create strong connections between researchers and participants, builds knowledge, informs theory and changes practice (Riel, 2010). As an emergent process, it empowers educators to be change agents through the provision of opportunities to reflect, explore, implement and elaborate on ideas (Lawson *et al.*, 2015). CAR follows the previously mentioned basic AR cycle format of 'reflect-plan-act-observe-reflect' process informed by many (Elliott, 2001; Kemmis *et al.*, 2014; McNiff & Whitehead, 2016; Riel, 2017).

CAR is carried out in collaboration with those who have an investment in the outcome and who come together in a community of practice to develop a joint understanding of the process under enquiry (Messiou, 2019). For this reason, I deemed it the most appropriate approach for my research study. Models of AR tend to be spiral in nature, though all models assert that “in reality the process may not be as neat as the spiral suggests” (Koshy, 2005, p. 4) as any AR can get messy. For this research study, as there are no independent CAR models, I will follow Elliott’s AR model (1991) (Figure 4.1) as it includes a reconnaissance or a fact- finding and analysis within each stage of the cycle and requires reflection before moving to the next cycle.

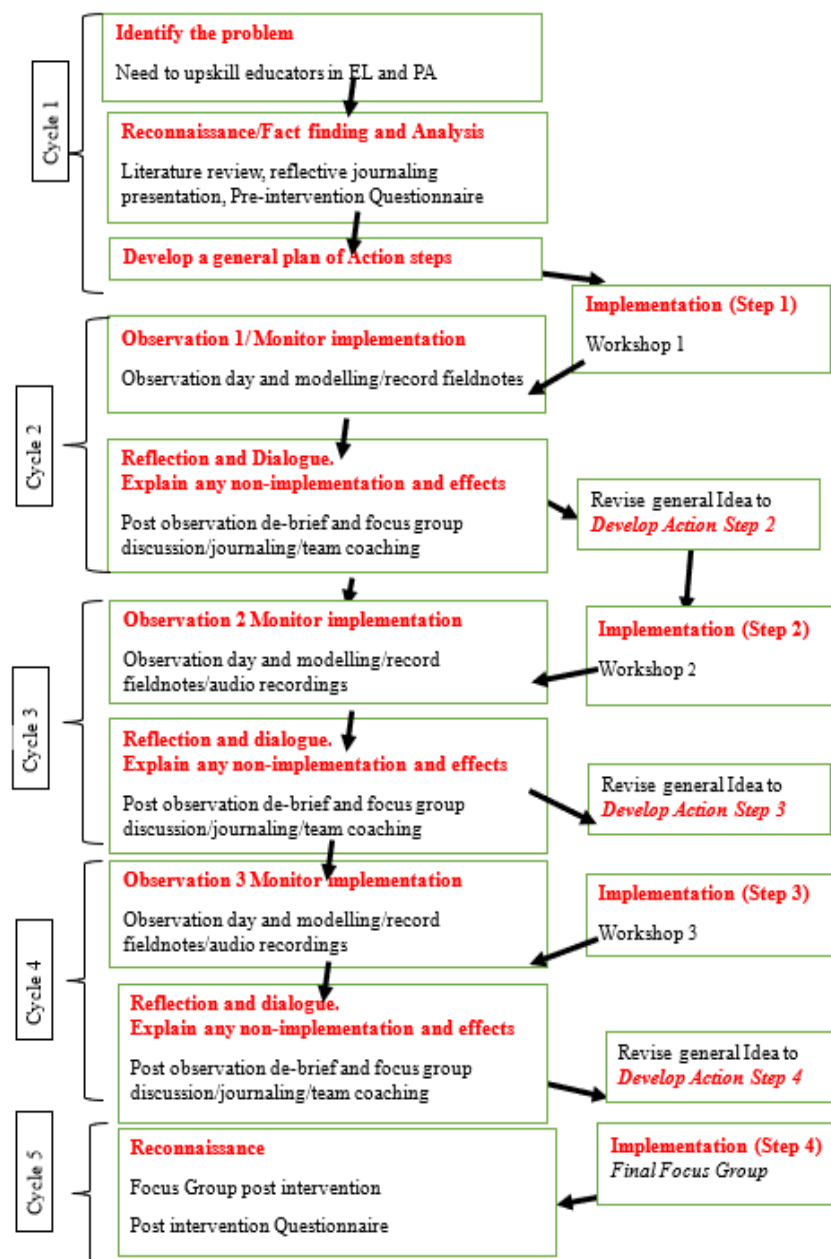


Figure 4.1: Elliott’s model of action research applied to this study (1991)

The writing in red indicates the steps advocated by Elliott while the writing in black indicates the research step taken. Elliot argues that the general idea should be allowed to change on foot of this reconnaissance. Throughout the research study, there are specific time allocations for this reconnaissance and reflection which will inform and alter subsequent intervention cycles, as required. Introducing the change/intervention as a part of the research process, and then evaluating how the new knowledge impacts on the educators' practice, provides a steppingstone into the next cycle of research (Denscombe, 2010; McNiff and Whitehead, 2010).

The next section briefly describes the research sample and context.

4.7 Sample context and selection

The sampling strategy for this research involved both convenience and purposive sampling. Convenience is used when there is a need to use a source that is conveniently accessible to the researcher (Andrade, 2021) while a purposive sample is used “to select respondents that are most likely to yield appropriate and useful information” (Kelly, 2010, p.317). With qualitative research methods, it is important to purposefully select participants that will best support an understanding of the problem and help to answer the research questions. This method also helps ensure that limited resources are used effectively (Palinkas *et al.*, 2015).

This research study was conducted in a privately owned, community based, sessional preschool in a rural town in Leinster. The preschool is situated quite near to me, but I had never visited the setting or met the owner. The setting has two preschool rooms both running a morning session (year one and two ECCE children) while one room also runs an afternoon session (year two ECCE children). It is co-owned and managed by two educators who work every day with the children in the rooms. I approached the setting and introduced myself and my research proposal to the two owners/managers and asked if they were interested in participating in the research. They confirmed that they were but would need to discuss it and get ‘buy in’ from the staff team before they would agree to begin any of the required consent procedures. At this point I left them an Information Sheet ([Appendix D](#)) which I hoped would add clarity to the discussion.

In addition to the two the managers, there are four other full-time and two part-time educators, making a total staff team of eight educators working in the setting. There are always three educators working with twenty-two children, in each room. Educators from the morning session in both rooms staff the afternoon, working alternate days. The ECCE year one morning group of twenty-two children were aged from 2 years and 8 months to 4 years. Three children had English as a second language. There were no children in the group with additional learning needs. In the afternoon group, ECCE year two, the children were aged between 4 years and 5 years and 6 months, one of whom had English as a second language. There was one child in this group who was diagnosed with Autism and was non-verbal.

Five educators (including the managers) agreed to participate in the programme. The educators who did not take part were never in the room throughout the observations. The staff-team were all women. Two had level 9 on the national framework of qualifications; one had a level 8 while another who had level 7 was in her final level 8 semester; the last educator was completing level 6. The qualification levels of the staff are listed below in Table 4.1. However, the levels of experience vary as some completed their studies before working in the sector, resulting in just two with over 10 years' experience, two with 2-5 years' experience and one with just a single years' experience.

<i>Master of Education with Early Childhood Specialisms (QQI Level 9)</i>	<i>Bachelor of Arts in Early Childhood Teaching and Learning (QQI Level 8)</i>	<i>Childcare QQI Level 6</i>	<i>Years working in ECEC</i>
2 staff members			11-15 years
	1 staff member		11-15 years
	1 staff member		2-5 years
		1 staff member	6-10 years

Table 4.1: Qualification levels and years of experience of participating staff

4.8 The research cycles

This research study was carried out over a six-month period, from December 2022 to June 2023, and consisted of five cycles of research. In accordance with (Cohen *et al.*, 2017) I clarified the timescale at the outset. This infused a note of realism into the study, impacted on the questions asked, type and quantity of data collection instruments chosen, and helped identify the boundaries the research needed to operate within. Cycle 1 was the planning stage of the research, which was followed by cycles 2,3 and 4. Each of these cycles involved the implementation of the professional development and learning programme, while cycle 5 was the data collection and analysis phase. The details of cycle 1 are discussed next.

4.8.1 Cycle 1 (Figure 4.2)

This cycle involved the planning stage of the research and included the establishment of baseline knowledge and refinement of research instruments. I met with the two owners and gained consent from them to consult with the remainder of the team (see ethics section 4.13 for more details). Once all consents were received, I met with the educators and issued the initial pre-intervention online questionnaire. This meeting was important as it was the starting point of building a relationship with all of the educators and establishing trust. The educators completed the pre-intervention questionnaire during the session. As it was online and anonymous individual educators could not be identified, ensuring freedom to honestly disclose their level of knowledge. I was aware of the importance of asking the right questions to ensure I gathered the base knowledge-level of the team. This questionnaire, in addition to the conversations throughout the session, helped to identify our starting point. Following discussions, I also carried out a brief tutorial on reflective journaling.

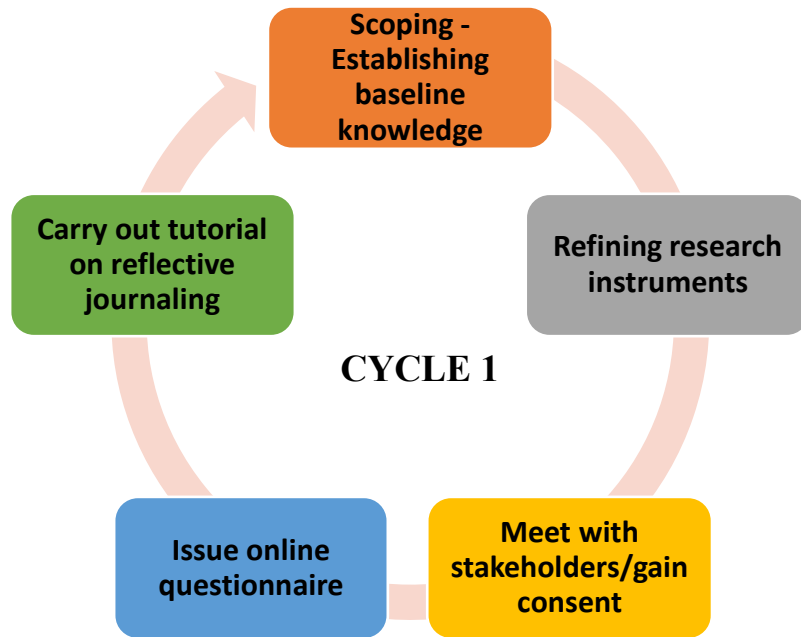


Figure 4.2: Cycle 1 of the intervention: Planning Stage

4.8.2 Cycles 2, 3 and 4 (Figure 4.3)

These cycles involved the development and delivery of the professional development and learning one-hour workshops, the content focus of which were informed by both my research questions and the literature review. Using adult education principles as espoused in the theoretical framework that underpins this study, I capitalised on the knowledge and experience of the educators. Four weeks after each workshop, I carried out the on-site observations over a three-hour period in each room. Throughout each observation, I was noting the level of implementation of activities and strategies that had already been discussed during the workshops. I also took opportunities to incorporate modelling when occasions arose, along with feedback and coaching.

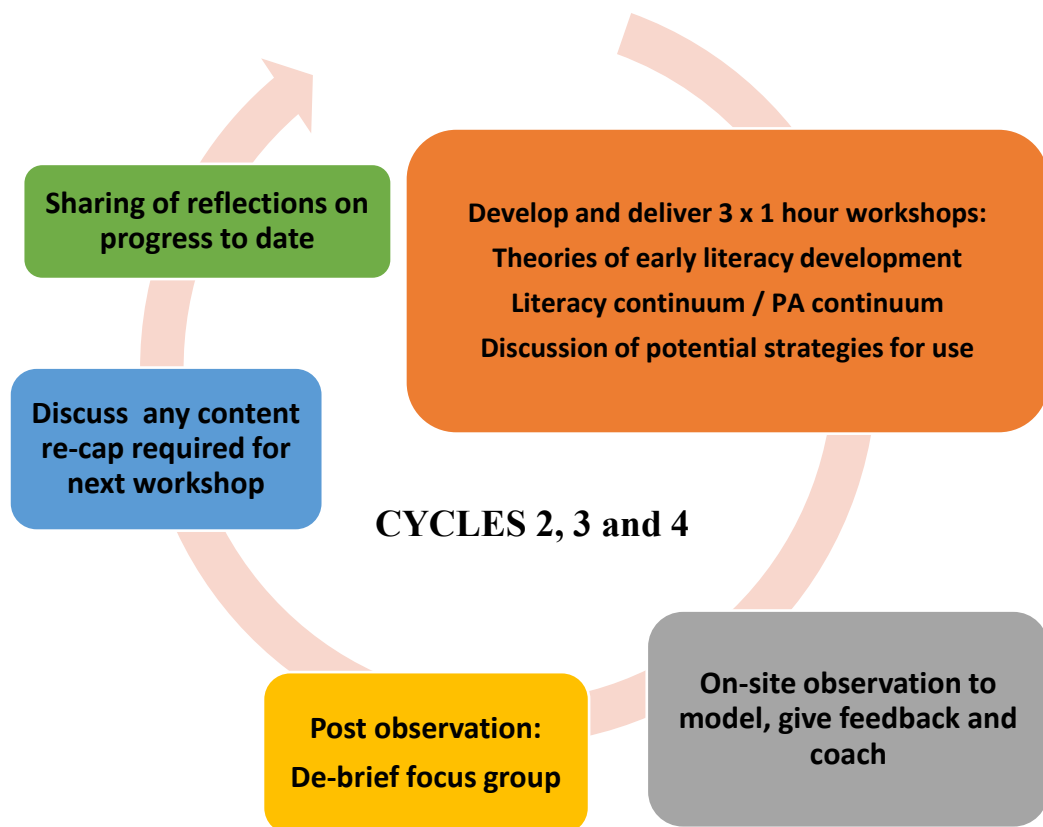


Figure 4.3: Cycles 2, 3, and 4 of the intervention: workshops and observation phase

We know that providing content alone is not sufficient to change practice (Joyce *et al* 1987; Casey and McWilliam, 2011), however providing modelling and feedback during an observation can prove effective in the implementation of strategies during subsequent observations (*ibid*). At the end of each day, a de-brief discussion group was facilitated to ensure educators were all comfortable post-observation and to answer any questions regarding modelling opportunities taken.

It also provided an opportunity to find out if anything could be done to improve the intervention and data collection process (McMahon and Winch, 2018). Using reflections from their journals on their practice through the time between the workshop and the observation day, educators also took these opportunities to request elements they wanted further input on at the beginning of the next workshop.

4.8.3 Cycle 5 (Figure 4.4)

Cycle 5 involved reading through all the data already collected to help guide the questions for a focus group with the educators. This aimed to capture their thoughts and feedback on my research questions. I wanted to discover which components of the programme they considered had the greatest impact on their PA knowledge and skills, confidence, and competence. The original plan was to issue the post-intervention questionnaire a few weeks after Cycle 5 to see what, if any, differences in knowledge were apparent and sustained in their practice. However, as COVID had impacted the start date of the programme, it meant the issue date would have been during the summer break. Following discussions with the educators, it was decided to leave it until the new term and the new children had settled in. As such it was issued six months after Cycle 5.

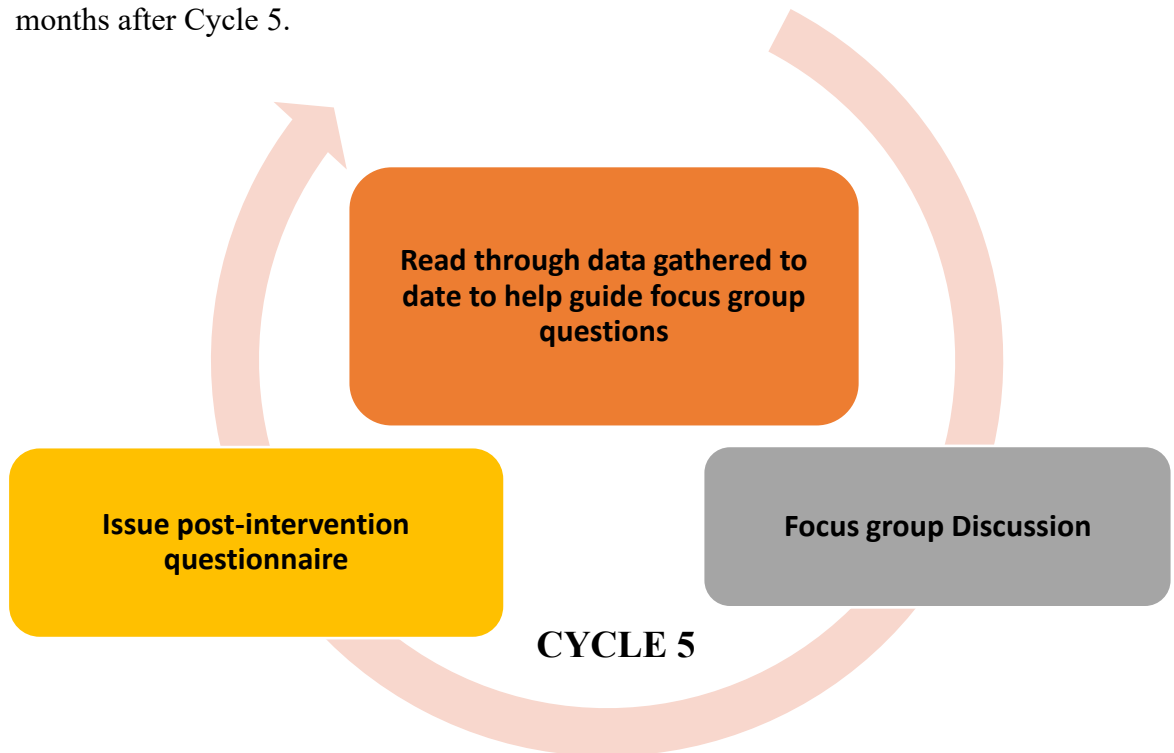


Figure 4.4: Cycle 5 of the intervention

Having complete Cycles 2, 3 and 4 (the interventions), a final focus group to discuss the programme was carried out. This was semi-structured and the questions ([Appendix E](#)) were informed by my research questions and my field notes taken throughout the observations. Further questions arose throughout the discussion. This focus group was also recorded to ensure accuracy in the data collection.

4.9 Data collection

The data collection tools selected for this study were heavily influenced by my interpretivist and social constructivist lenses.

4.9.1 Online questionnaire

To establish the educator's baseline knowledge of the elements of EL and PA, a pre-intervention online questionnaire ([Appendix G](#)) was used, which facilitated ease of completion and submission (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2017). As the questionnaires were non-identifiable, it also ensured the educators did not have to make a 'public' declaration of their current EL knowledge. Online Surveys provided by Maynooth University was the platform that was used. The initial questions sought data on participants' qualifications and experience, while the subsequent questions were framed to elicit their knowledge of EL development and the current practices and activities used to promote these skills. Multiple choice questions using a Likert scale, with a space for a qualitative response, were used. Nine questions in total sought quantitative data, although most also had a 'comments' slot offering a space for qualitative information. Marrying closed questions with open-ended feedback spaces within the questionnaire provides respondents with "a window of opportunity for the respondent to shed light on an issue" providing us with "rich and personal data" (ibid, p. 476). The data gathered pre-intervention gave an insight into how the intervention might be framed. The same questionnaire was re-issued some months after the programme end to see if there was any difference in the responses offered, which might indicate a change in knowledge and potentially indicate improved sustained practice. Anonymity offered protection for any lack of knowledge, which meant changes in knowledge and practice would be captured as a group, rather than on an individual level. Both the research questions and the literature review informed the questions asked.

4.9.2 Workshops

While the purpose of the workshops was to provide content, activities and strategies, the discussions that took place supported the development of greater understanding of the new knowledge and strategies. These discussions helped the educators see when

and where they might best use a particular strategy (Committee on Early Childhood Pedagogy, 2001). As these workshops were timed for immediately after a working day, unplanned discussions on what was already working, or not working, occurred naturally throughout each session. Workshop one was held the end of January, workshop 2 was six-weeks later in mid-March while workshop 3 was again six-weeks later in the end of April. The workshops were audio recorded for validity. Activities and resources were provided during each workshop to support the educators understanding of the various concepts and to help them engage in the different activities with the children (Yopp and Yopp, 2022). A selection of these resources can be seen in [Appendix H](#).

4.9.3 Focus groups (including de-brief discussions)

Focus groups were used to find out whether there had been any change in the educator's PA knowledge, skills, confidence, or competence and a change to their practice. Following each observation day, all educators participated in a de-brief discussion (focus group) following three hours of being observed. As an experienced and skilled facilitator, I used different strategies to encourage full participation. I noted, however, that one educator was a much quieter participant, and I was conscious of not being an active participant in the discussions as this might impede participation. This qualitative data collection strategy was an unstructured conversation-style discussion where valid information from multiple perspectives on topics, issues and/or events of common concern were explored (Ruane, 2005; Gibbs, 1997). Bou and Sales (2022) discuss how everyone approaches the same issue from different standpoints and what might appear simple to one educator may appear more complex to another. This being so, the different voices can broaden and enrich the conversations and support each other to "qualify, complement or interpret their narratives" (Bou and Sales, 2022, p.17). One person's thought will prompt another person's memory and from this interaction, rich descriptive data can emerge.

The final focus group took place four weeks after Observation 3. This was semi-structured, and questions posed were concerned with how they interacted with and used the new knowledge and skills discussed within all of the workshops, in their practice. Wenger (1998) contends that learning occurs within and because of

interactions and not just as a result of the content input through the workshops, rendering the focus groups a place of further learning. I was also cognisant of not imparting my own views that might steer the group in a particular direction (Denscombe, 2010). The focus groups were audio recorded for validity. The most data were gathered through the discussions in de-brief group discussions following each observation and the final focus group.

4.9.4 Observations, field notes

Observing educators in their natural surroundings (Lave and Wenger, 1991) is a technique that can reap rich data as the researcher can see them as they make choices and react to situations that might never arise for discussion during an interview or a focus group. In this research, observation was used to give a better understanding of how the educator's practice already supported EL and PA, and to clarify where further support might be needed. Each observation day was planned for four weeks after the workshop, providing time and space for the educators to implement the new activities and strategies. On each observation day, I spent three hours observing in one room in the morning and then observed in the second room for the afternoon. Educators wore an audio-recorder which helped the researcher to capture some conversations that might otherwise have been missed as a result of noise level in the classroom. However, the observer effect can cause a change in behaviour, as those being observed may well feel self-conscious that they are under scrutiny (Denscombe, 2017). To mitigate against this, I visited the setting on a few occasions before the research began to become familiar with the educators and offer reassurance that I was not there to judge their practice, rather to support them to enhance their already good practice. It also presented an opportunity for the children to see and speak with me so as not to present as a curiosity when I arrived for the research observations. As a previous educator myself, I also reassured the educators that I understood how children can respond when there is a visitor in the room.

Audio/voice recording is a common tool used in research to collect information. As our human memory is "unreliable... prone to partial recall, bias and error" (Denscombe, 2010, p.120), audio recorders helped to ensure accuracy of the data gathered for research purposes. While many hours of audio were gathered throughout

the observation sessions, much of it was unusable as in a busy playroom, the background noise of the children sometimes drowned out what was being said. However, in some instances, I was able to confirm my own fieldnotes with the audio recordings. I took field notes concurrently to ensure I took note of the context within which conversations occurred, eliminating the need to transcribe immediately after the event to support accuracy (Denscombe, 2017). According to Phillippi and Lauderdale (2018, p.381), “qualitative field notes are an essential component of rigorous qualitative research” as they enhance other data recorded and help to provide a rich context for analysis. By noting the context and time when I observed/heard an educator say/do something I thought might be significant, I was able to match it up with the conversation recorded on the educator’s audio recording, adding to the validity of the data. In addition to recording all workshops and focus groups, all five educators wore voice recorders during each observed 3-hour session. These were small unobtrusive recorders worn around their neck to facilitate the capturing of a rich record of the language both the educators and children used throughout the observations (Thibodeau-Nielsen *et al.*, 2021). These recordings enhanced the written information collected in my fieldnotes and allowed me to overcome many of the challenges associated with observing and recording data in a busy ECEC setting. Appendix E holds an excerpt from the transcript from the final focus group.

4.9.5 Coaching with modelling and feedback

Bully *et al.* (2006) (cited in Spelman *et al.*, 2016, p.32) caution that a change in practice following a workshop is rare, and “fewer than 10% of teachers actually implement instructional innovations following workshops or in-service experiences”. The aim of coaching is to produce the best possible improvement in the workplace, therefore coaching, modelling and giving feedback throughout the observation days played a key role. Professional development and learning can be a great way of expanding educator’s knowledge and skills particularly when aligned with “collaborative planning, structured opportunities for practice with feedback, and follow-up coaching” (Guskey, 2017, p.36). The role of the coach has “become increasingly important” (*ibid*) in professional development and learning, supporting changes in practice and providing feedback on educators’ practice. Changes in practice

are more likely to occur with the input of a coach (*ibid*) who is physically present and scaffolds learning (Vygotsky, 1986).

Throughout the observation, opportunities were taken to model strategies whenever possible (e.g. when a child brought me over a book on crocodiles, I commented “that’s a big word, how many claps do you think?” and together, we clapped out crock-o-dile”). When seeking a change in practice, it is important to model how and when this change can occur. Modelling offers guidance in action and enhanced by feedback and support (coaching), is considered an effective way to support learning for educators (Cumming and Wong, 2012). Feedback was given immediately after each observation to the educators in each room and discussed both individually and/or collectively, as appropriate.

The feedback was specific and clearly articulated. To be of benefit to their practice, it must be accepted and understood (Keiler *et al.*, 2020). Timely, descriptive feedback, explicitly labelled as such and connected to the observations in the learning environment (Jug *et al.*, 2019) on the use of techniques and strategies, were key to learning and potential change. It is important that as the researcher I am non-judgmental and constructive in the feedback I offer, as anything other will be taken as criticism and potentially will block learning (Keiler *et al.*, 2020). While one-to-one feedback was offered, none of the educators availed of it. Real-time coaching and modelling with feedback, as used in this research study, aimed to improve the development of specific skills.

4.9.6 Reflective journals

Asking the educators’ themselves is the best way to gather evidence of their learning (McNiff, 2017, p.104). The educators kept reflective journals which they used to document their learning in addition to what they thought and felt throughout the study. They referred to these journals in the de-brief discussions after each observation and used them to help highlight their successes and challenges over the previous weeks. Campbell *et al.* (2004) consider variations in the terms log, diary, and journal, identifying the log as being more like an aide-memoire, which is selective in what is

recorded; a diary can contain anything while a journal is like a diary but is more intentional, including deliberate thoughts and reflections on practice. However, while I regularly requested the educators to be vigilant about making entries, the journals that were finally submitted were not substantial. As the researcher, I too kept a reflective journal as part of the data collection from which extracts are used as part of the data analysis. The educators' reflective journals, although not substantial, gave some excellent insights into how they progressed between each observation. Sample journal records can be viewed in Appendix E.

4.9.7 Abbreviations and initialisms for collection data

To provide clarity for the reader, the initialisms used to identify and connect the various data collection points and dates are identified in Table 4.2 below.

Data Collection Method	Initialism	Dates
Pre-intervention Questionnaire	Pre-IQ	Issued 26/1/2022
Post-intervention Questionnaire	Post-IQ	Issued 1/12/2022
Workshop 1	WS1	31/1/2022
Workshop 2	WS2	14/3/2022
Workshop 3	WS3	25/4/2022
Observation 1	Obs. 1	15/2/2022
Observation 2	Obs. 2	29/3/2022
Observation 3	Obs. 3	10/5/2022
(Post observation) de-brief discussion 1	DD 1	15/2/2022
(Post observation) de-brief discussion 2	DD 2	29/3/2022
(Post observation) de-brief discussion 3	DD 3	10/5/2022
Final Focus Group	FFG	8/6/2022
Researcher's Field Notes	RFN	Jan-June 2022
Reflective Journals	RJ	Jan-June 2022

Table 4.2: Abbreviations and initialisms identifying when data was collected

The educators have been assigned pseudonyms (**Ena, Nina, Lena, Tina, and Gina**) to maintain their anonymity. While their names can be used in connection with the data collected throughout the research cycles, as the pre- and post- IQ's were anonymous, it

is not possible to link their names with the qualification level and years of experience identified in table 4.1.

4.10 Data analysis

4.10.1 Quantitative data

Data analysis is essentially about reducing the large body of data gathered to make sense of it and to allow it to be interpreted (Bryman, 2016). While both quantitative and qualitative methods were used in this research, the only quantitative collection tool was a short questionnaire issued both pre- and post- intervention. As there were only five educators to complete the short questionnaire, and the questions were to help identify both the starting point for the research cycles as well as capturing in a quantitative manner the finishing points for the educators, I analysed the collected data without the use of any software packages. As there were so few taking part in the research, I decided that using a hands-on approach was best. I used colour-coding for both the quantitative and qualitative data as I felt I would become much more immersed in the data, reading it over and over to identify codes and themes than if I used a package.

4.10.2 Quantitative data analysis

In order to analyse the qualitative data collected, thematic analysis (TA) was used to analyse the de-briefing discussion groups, the focus group data, the data resulting from the fieldnotes and the on-site observations, as well as the data from the reflective journals. TA is a method for “developing analysing and interpreting patterns across a qualitative dataset” (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p.4). Its goal is to identify and use themes to address the research and say something about an issue. It is also a method that “works both to reflect reality and to unpick or unravel the surface of reality” (*ibid*, p.81). Following Braun and Clarke’s guidance, I utilised their six-step framework, identified in Figure 4.5. I will now describe how I engaged with this framework, phase by phase.

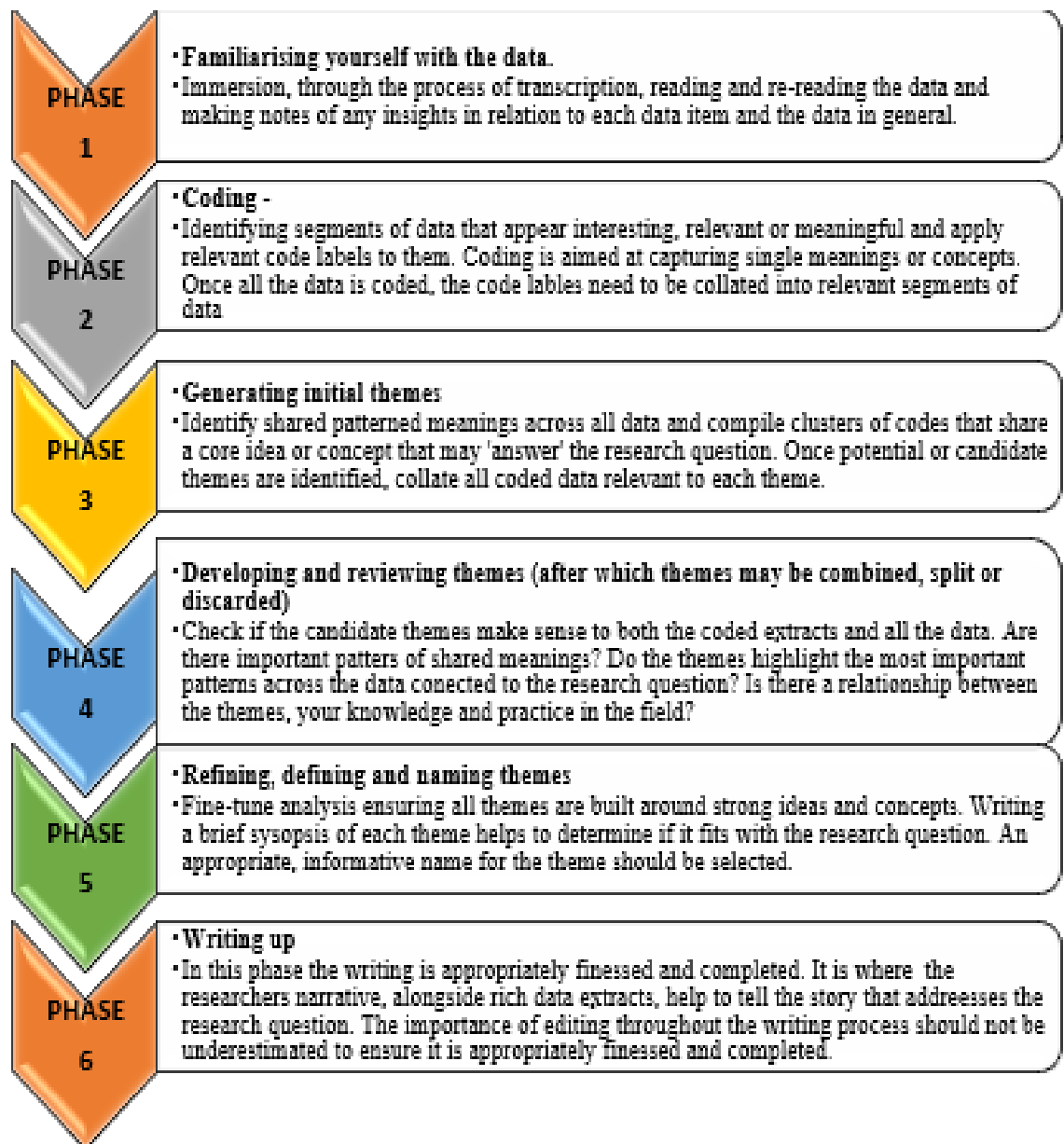


Figure 4.5: Braun and Clarke's 6-step analysis framework (adapted by researcher from Braun and Clarke, 2022)

4.10.2.1 Phase 1

Beginning with phase 1, I familiarised myself with the data. I did this through listening back to the audio recordings a considerable number of times while transcribing the texts. This enabled me to become very familiar with the data as well as eliminate irrelevant recordings (e.g. recordings of the children's chatter and other elements that did not connect to the research). While doing this I aligned my observation notes along with the transcriptions from the audio recordings which then facilitated me to make notes on the actual transcriptions to explain their context. These notes later supported me with coding.

4.10.2.2 Phase 2

The next step, phase 2, concerns generating initial coding of the data and identifying segments that “appear potentially interesting, relevant or meaningful” (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p.35) for the research question. According to Bell (2005), these codes are like tags or labels that assign meaning to the descriptive words recorded, and help to bring together data that were collected from different sources, into the same frame of reference. I had already a number of pre-determined themes based on my research questions. Some words, phrases and sentences were identified that held a specific meaning for my research and segments that comprised similar ideas, attitudes, thoughts and feelings” (Mukherji and Albon, 2018, p.357) were given the same code. Codes should be applied consistently across the data to ensure trustworthiness. Because the numbers partaking in my research were small (five educators), all the coding was done by hand using highlighters, and no data analytic software was used. I began by going through the data to highlight words and phrases that broadly connected with my research questions and the pre-determined codes of knowledge, skills, confidence and competence.

However, I was also open to recurring words or phrases that did not link directly with any of my questions, but which I could identify with. This process is called open coding whereby the word or phrase does not fit with any of the pre-defined codes and is entered as a potentially new code (*ibid*). I re-visited the data several times until I was happy that I had captured everything there was to take from these transcripts. As can often happen, this step almost merged into phase 3 for me.

4.10.2.3 Phase 3

Phase 3 is generating initial ‘candidate’ themes, which are “patterns of shared meaning, united by a central concept or idea” (Braun *et al.*, 2021, p.341). As general themes were guided by the research questions and the literature reviewed, the data were analysed and coded with this in mind, rendering it a deductive, rather than an inductive TA (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017). Good themes, according to Clarke and Braun (2014), have to work together to form a clear analytic story and can emerge from the data itself (inductive coding) or from the theoretical or epistemological position (deductive) of the researcher (Xu and Zammit, 2020). I had already a number

of pre-determined themes based on my research questions (knowledge, skills, confidence, competence) and had coded with these in mind. However, other themes emerged connected with the programme delivery and the impact of feedback and coaching on the overall process.

4.10.2.4 Phase 4

Phase 4, developing and reviewing themes, concerns determining if the initial ‘candidate’ themes make sense in relation to the coded extracts and the full dataset. Just as my research questions had informed the data collection questions, so too did they inform the data analysis and were considered ‘a priori’ themes. This can sometimes pose a problem particularly if data not connected with the ‘a priori’ themes is set aside as not relevant. However, as previously identified, new themes emerged in this analysis from data that did not directly connect with the a priori themes. Again, both steps 4 and 5 seemed to merge for me.

4.10.2.5 Phase 5

Phase 5 concerns refining, defining and naming themes, in other words, refining to such an extent that the central core of the theme was understood, as well as being clear about what it encompassed. At this stage a key element was that the content of the data extracts were interrogated to ensure they were all feeding into the story of the named theme, as well as identifying whether or not this refinement had found any new sub-themes. The more I distilled the data, the more it became apparent that while knowledge and skills are inextricably linked, new knowledge impacted most on confidence, which then empowered the educators to take opportunities to develop their pedagogical skills, leading to competence. This revelation altered the way my themes had originally been aligned.

4.10.2.6 Phase 6

Finally, phase 6 concerns the final analysis and writing up of the analysis within the research study which should convince “the reader of the merit and validity of your analysis” (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.93). While engaging in this data analysis, I remained conscious at all times of my biases. I had developed this programme for the

educators and of course I wanted it to have a positive impact, but it also needed to be considered effective through the research data gathered throughout the programme. For this reason, the trustworthiness of the research process is key and is discussed in the next section.

4.11 Trustworthiness

The credibility of this CAR study, as in all qualitative inquiry, is quite dependent on the ‘trust’ attributed to the teller of the tale. Trust is determined by credibility and dependability and according to McNiff & Whitehead (2016), can be established once you produce evidence to support your claims. Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that credibility is one of the most important factors in establishing trustworthiness which was particularly important in this CAR study as the participants were collaborators in the research process. To establish trustworthiness, several strategies were employed. First, to allay power dynamics between the researcher and the educators, the researcher engaged in visits prior to the study commencing to become familiar with the team, the children and the setting. Mertens (2019) advocates for a prolonged engagement with the setting as this enables a deeper understanding of the nuances of the setting. It also helps in the establishment of a rapport and trust with the educators in the setting, leading to more authentic and reliable data, and ultimately, to greater credibility.

4.11.1 Credibility

Credibility ensures there is a congruence between the research findings and the reality being studied, in other words whether the findings are credible or believable. It is important that the data recorded was interpreted by me in the way it was intended. For this reason, any unclear or poorly audible recordings were member-checked. This practice, which increases credibility, involves asking a research participant to verify either a transcription or interpretation (Creswell and Creswell, 2018; Mertler, 2019). I was able to replay the recording for the educators who confirmed what was being said. While my fieldnotes gave context to the situation, my notes of the narrative were sometimes unclear. Clarification of meaning was also sought during discussions post observation and any focus groups. On another occasion when a journal entry was

unclear, I connected with the educator to get clarity. In order to minimize invalidity, Silverman (2017) recommends member-checking the initial findings to confirm the interpretation of conclusions drawn from the data. Their comments can be seen as an additional source of data rather than being a “true validation process” (Mukherji and Albon, 2018, p.359). My own reflective journal records after each observation day also guided me in my interpretation of the data gathered and steered preparations for the subsequent meetings and discussions.

When there is a single observer, as in this study, the observers’ subjectivity could be an issue. Once I had aligned the data with the relevant themes, I again member-checked to see if my interpretation of their words in the data was accurate. This member-checking had a very positive impact on the educators, adding to the development of trust, as they recounted that they felt they were being listened to. Lincoln and Guba (1985) consider this to be the single most important provision that can be made to reinforce a study’s credibility. Ultimately, credibility was ensured in this study through the development of an honest, open and transparent relationship with the educators.

4.11.2 Dependability

Dependability, on the other hand, demonstrates the consistency and reliability of the study’s results. This seeks to ensure that the study was actually measuring what it set out to measure. Ensuring dependability requires that the research method be reported in such detail to enable readers to establish that proper procedures have been followed and that future researchers could repeat the study. However, Shenton (2004) advocates that the work should be described in great detail, thereby enabling future researchers repeat the process, while acknowledging they will not necessarily get the same results. Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue there are close ties between dependability and credibility. They contend that in practice, a demonstration of credibility goes a long way to ensuring dependability. To enable other researchers depend on the research, rich descriptions of the research design and implementation, as outlined through the cycles in this research study, along with the details of what actually happened and the evaluation of the effectiveness of the process, should be provided (Shenton, 2004).

4.12 Triangulation

Triangulation is the use of multiple methods of data collection, potentially using multiple sources, and/or investigators or theories to ensure a comprehensive understanding of a particular phenomenon (Carter *et al.*, 2014) or “some aspect of human behaviour” (Cohen *et al.*, 2017, p.141). This study was enhanced by using a variety of additional data collection tools, for example field notes, recording devices, reflective journals and member-checking. However, there is an argument that suggests that data triangulation presumes that a single data source is inferior to a multiple data source (*ibid.*). However, I concur with Gorard and Taylor, (2004, p.43) who contend it gives a study “the ability to enhance the trustworthiness of an analysis by a fuller, more rounded account, reducing bias, and compensating for the weakness of one method through the strength of another”. I believe triangulation adds a richness through diverse viewpoints that a single source would not bring in addition to reducing the possibility of bias. Trustworthiness and validity in this research study was achieved through the use of multiple data collection methods. Researcher observation and field-notes added context to the observation audio recordings, focus group discussions and reflective journals. Data drawn from across the sources came together within the themes to provide data for analysis and inform the findings.

4.13 Ethical Considerations

Ethics are the code of conduct that we are guided by to ensure we *do no harm* to others through our research. This does not mean physical harm, rather the harm that could be caused throughout the research process (Braun and Clarke, 2021). In all research studies, ethics are considered a fundamental starting point and should not be considered as either a burden or an afterthought (Mertens, 2019). Our ethics are guided by our own value code, the value code of the institution connected with the research, MU, and I have also been guided by the EECERA (Ethical code for Early Childhood Researchers, 2016). Cohen *et al.* (2017) remind us of our responsibility for the decisions taken on ethical matters and the actions associated with these decisions. All research requires that measures are in place to ensure the rights and welfare of participants are protected and indeed it is important we think about the research participants as people with dignity, feelings and rights, rather than research subjects (Kane, 1995). Ethics are of particular importance while using AR as it is small scale, is

localised (Koshy, 2005; Ruane 2005), and is not only researching with the participants but is aiming to influence their practice (McNiff, 2010). Throughout the research process, I engaged in ethical thinking (Creswell and Creswell, 2018) to ensure I am living to my own values and the research values promoted by MU at all stages, before, during and after analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022). To begin with, ethical approval for this research study was sought and granted by Maynooth University (MU) Social Research Ethics Sub-Committee before beginning the research. I was cognisant that particularly for this research, specific consideration had to be given to consent, both educators and parents; assent, from the children; and power relations, both in relation to the managers and the rest of the educators as well as between me, the researcher and all of the educators. I will address each of these now, in turn, beginning with consent and assent.

4.13.1 Consent and assent

In the initial reconnaissance stage of this research, as stated in section 4.8.1, I collaborated with the joint owners of the preschool who in turn, spoke with the full staff team, offering an opportunity to participate in the study. Once approval was obtained from the MU Ethics Committee, a meeting was organised with the managers to provide detailed information on the proposed project, the proposed start and finish dates, level of involvement for the educators, the children and of course their parents. The managers then met with their full staff team and the parents, sharing the appropriate Information Leaflets. Following on from this I met with the educators, seven of whom attended (this included the two managers) and answered any questions they had. I also organised to meet with the parents, and just five parents attended their meeting. While all parents did not avail of the opportunity to meet in person, all did receive information from the managers of the setting in addition to the Parents Information Sheet ([Appendix I](#)) before they were asked to sign the consent for their child to participate. To avoid any misunderstandings regarding the research, the nature and purpose of the research was clearly defined and communicated to all potential participants (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). I explained the process in detail, the written records to be documented and in the case of the educators, the audio recordings gathered throughout the research. In this way I made it clear what each person was consenting/assenting to participate in. I also informed everyone how the

data would be stored, analysed, reported and disseminated, aiming at all times to cause no harm (Bell, 2005; Blaxter *et al.*, 2010). I made myself available for any question that might arise relating to the research, to help establish a sense of trust and respect. Information Sheets and Consent Forms were provided for both educators ([Appendix J](#)) and parents ([Appendix I](#)) to be signed and returned to the managers, should they agree to participate. These consent forms acknowledged the rights of the participants throughout the research. All parents signed the Consent Form. All were reminded of their right to withdraw from the research at any stage during the process (McNiff and Whitehead, 2010; Bertram *et al.*, 2015; Chen *et al.*, 2019). Five of the educators also signed the consent forms.

Children need to be provided with full details about the content and process of the research, in a manner in which they can understand, and be provided with the choice of participation (Bertram *et al.*, 2016). For this reason, I sought assent directly from the children themselves (Skånfors, 2009). To begin with, the assent form for the children was shared with the parents with a request that they would explain it to their own child at home. [Appendix K](#) shows the assent form that was used. Next, I visited the children in the setting and explained it again, reminding them I would be writing the stories of their games, reassuring them that their names would not be used in any of my stories. I asked them to put their mark on the assent form if they agreed to me watching and writing about the stories in their room, and recording the chats they were having with the educators. Before each observation I reminded the children I wanted to see their games and write stories about their play and the chats they might have with their educators. I asked them to put a smiley sticker on the page or draw their own smiley, whichever they chose to do, if they were happy for me to do this. All of the children either drew a picture or used a sticker. Throughout the observations I would continue to look for signs of assent from the children and remind them they were allowed to change their minds any time they chose (Mukherji and Albon, 2018).

4.13.2 Confidentiality

Confidentiality is another ethical issue that arises in research. Some participants may seek to have their identity remain confidential, as it may allow more freedom of expression and independence in decision-making (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). As

this study necessitates the educators engaging in the research process along with their managers, it is particularly important that their identity is protected, when necessary (e.g. in the completion of the questionnaires). As the questionnaires were online and anonymous, the educator's identity was protected. However, throughout the rest of the data collection, a system of anonymising all data, through the use pseudonyms, was utilised. Any names mentioned within the audio recordings were anonymised on transcription. The key linking the participants to pseudonyms and all recorded data was stored securely on my encrypted laptop, using a password-protected word document. I also ensured any reported data did not include any information that might identify individual participants.

4.13.3 Power relations

The managers were taking part in this research as equal participants in the team. I was aware this could be challenging as they negotiate the balance between being potentially a more knowledgeable other who leads the team in the day-to-day basis to being one of the educators who is learning alongside the rest of the team. However, daily they work side by side with the educators in the rooms with the children so a good working relationship, based on equality, is already established. For the rest of the educators, this might be difficult as they may not want to let the managers or colleagues know what they do not know. According to Webster-Deakin (2020), while all the participants in CAR are insiders, there can still be hierarchical relationships that might exclude some voices. Having previously run my own setting and engaged with my own staff in professional development and learning, I can understand this dynamic from both sides. I was also well into my practice before I came to understand the literacy continuum so can speak with understanding on the change in practices that will be required.

To mitigate against the challenges power relations might pose I used a pre-intervention questionnaire to discern the early literacy base knowledge level of the team, providing an opportunity for all educators to honestly disclose their level of knowledge without feeling they are letting the setting down. To alleviate this fear, the pre-intervention questionnaire to help identify the educators' baseline knowledge level was anonymous (Cohen *et al.*, 2017). McNiff contends that power exists in the relationships between people (2005) and there may be a perception of my expertise, power, or knowledge as

a lecturer in MU. However, my previous role as an educator in an ECEC setting supported mutual understanding and helped to develop a trusting relationship.

The research was designed around workshops, observations and coaching. It was my responsibility to manage the discussions within those components to ensure no participant felt inadequate or uninformed. As feedback was an important part of the coaching process, I was mindful of trying to give one-to-one feedback as much as possible. However, the educators mostly declined this offer, preferring instead to engage in discussions with the whole group. This, I felt, was a demonstration of their comfort in the whole process. However, member-checking, in the form of one-to-one chats, was an important part of the process helped and “equalise power relations” (Cohen *et al.*, 2017, p.188). While there was no evidence of any power struggle throughout the workshop discussions, the de-briefing discussions and the final focus group, I remained alert to the possibility. However, as we were using a CAR approach, it meant that everyone was fully involved in the study as the educator’s feedback helped to set the agenda for the programme and together, we co-constructed new understandings and practices (Cohen *et al.*, 2017; Jean McNiff, 2017).

4.13.4 Data Management and Storage

All transcripts from the audio recordings and my own field-notes are held on my MU One Drive, accessed through my encrypted laptop, which is accessible only to the researcher. Any hard copies collected (i.e. the consent forms and reflective journals), are held securely in a locked cabinet. The key to the pseudonyms is held securely in a separately coded document on my encrypted laptop. Data collected through the questionnaires were through the secure online questionnaire platform provided by MU. Once all questionnaires were completed, the data were downloaded and stored securely on my MU One Drive account. All data stored will be held for a ten-year period, after which it will be destroyed. Electronic data will be re-formatted while all hard copies will be shredded.

4.13.5 Limitations

Some limitations were identified in this research study. To begin with, the Pre-IQ was intended to be the main source of information regarding the educator's starting knowledge. The data produced is dependent on the honesty of the educators as they were asked to identify their current EL and PA knowledge. As a result of the questionnaire design, more than one option was available to tick on some questions. This provided potential for an inaccurate account of their knowledge to be recorded which could potentially skew the starting point of the content input in the programme. In this instance, discussions during Cycle 1 gave a more accurate account of the educator's knowledge and combined with the Pre-IQ, informed the starting point of the professional development and learning programme.

Data were collected throughout the observation sessions using audio recorders worn by the educators, in addition to my own field-notes. Unfortunately, the audio recorders provided significantly less data than anticipated. This was due to the background noise of the children's chatter rendering sizeable portions of the recording inaudible.

Time was a limitation. The time allocated to the programme was insufficient to ensure the educators had a full understanding of the more complex end of the PA continuum. Because of the impact of Covid 19 restrictions, the PA programme was later starting than initially planned, leaving insufficient time before the summer break to add on another session.

4.14 Conclusion

CAR is a process carried out with people to provide a path of learning *from* practice and *through* practice that helps effect change *in* practice (McNiff, 2017) which was the desire of this research study. Located in the interpretivist/constructivist paradigm, the design of the programme and the intervention carried out were informed by both my theoretical stance, which was informed by the theories of others, my theoretical framework and the literature review. The participant educators brought a wealth of experience to the learning process and were open and willing to learn more about EL and PA to help develop their practice (Knowles, 1977). Their practical, hands-on learning and application of new knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978) in real-life situations

following a content input, which was followed by observation, coaching that included modelling and feedback, was supported through reflection and their own CoP (Wenger, 2010).

This chapter began with a restatement of the research questions, followed by an exploration of the research design to assist with answering these questions. My positionality, which influences my own philosophical stance was discussed next. The approach taken to the research, to the data collection and analysis was outlined, describing Braun and Clarks (2022) six steps of reflective thematic analysis. Finally, issues relating to trustworthiness and ethics were addressed.

Chapter 5 will present and discuss the findings to this research study.

Chapter 5 - Findings and Discussion

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents and discusses the findings obtained based on the data collection methods described in Chapter 4. Beginning with a restatement of the aim and research questions, it progresses to a discussion on the development of the themes and subthemes. Each theme and subtheme are presented using the data gathered which in turn is analysed through the lens of the relevant literature. While most of the data collected was qualitative, a Pre- and Post-IQ questionnaire delivered some quantitative data, and these results form an essential part of the overall study.

The intention of this CAR study is *to establish to what extent, if at all, a professional development and learning programme on PA in a situated-learning context impacts the knowledge and skills of participating educators and in so doing, influences their professional learning and practice*. Research has documented that children who present with literacy difficulties in their early school years can continue to struggle throughout their education (Dickinson and Caswell, 2007; NELP, 2008; Nugent *et al.*, 2016; Breadmore *et al.*, 2019). Fundamental to developing good literacy skills is the development of PA skills which is the focus of this study.

The dominant themes were identified following a distillation of the data and informed the formation of the questions for the final (semi-structured) focus group. As recommended by Braun and Clarke (2021), an iterative process of thematic analysis was adopted, utilising data from each cycle and converting it into three themes. Initial deductive themes were further combined, refined and added to, before being further broken down into sub-themes. As identified in chapter 1, recognising that this study had two main strands of research and following a review of the literature, three overarching questions arose which are outlined in Table 5.1.

Research Questions	
Q. 1	From a review of the literature and an assessment of the participants' current knowledge level, what are the key elements of a professional development and learning programme to support their PA knowledge and skills?
Q. 2	How do the various elements of the professional development and learning programme designed (e.g., workshops, observations, coaching, modelling, feedback and reflective journaling) individually and collectively influence the educator's PA knowledge and skills?
Q. 3	How did the collaborative features of this intervention contribute to achieving a change in educator's PA knowledge, skills and practice?

Table 5.1: Research Questions

Using my interpretivist and constructivist lens, the data were analysed and discussed against both my theoretical framework and the relevant literature. Therefore, the data are explored under the themes and subthemes listed below in table 5.2.

Theme 1 - Knowledge - knowing more, doing better	Subthemes 1. Knowledge and practice conflict 1.1 Current knowledge and practice 1.2 New knowledge and practice – the conflict 2. Knowledge leading to confidence 3. Knowledge and confidence influencing skills 4. Knowledge, confidence and skills influencing competency 5. Knowledge, confidence, skills and competency leading to changed practices
Theme 2 - Capacity building methodologies	Subthemes 1. Resources and materials 2. Observation - look and see 3. Modelling - show me how 4. Feedback - asking and telling
Theme 3 - Reflection within a Community of Practice	Subthemes 1. Reflection hesitancy 2. Reflection - giving and receiving feedback 3. Reflection in a Community of Practice 4. Reflection leading to self-belief and supporting others 5. Advocating to parents and other stakeholders

Table 5.2: Themes and Sub-themes

The chapter is divided into themes and subthemes. Data were gathered from a cross-section of all sources to reveal the experiences and insights of the educators. Some reflections from my own journal provide an insight into my own engagement with the educators and my thinking throughout the process. See section 4.7 for a reminder of the profile of the educators taking part in the research.

5.2 Theme 1: Knowledge - Knowing more, doing better

From the data, five sub-themes emerged under theme one, and each is explored in turn. The first sub-theme, knowledge and practice conflict, relates to the current EL and PA knowledge of the educators, and is discussed in the next section.

5.2.1 Knowledge and practice conflict

There appeared to be two perceptions of EL prevailing within this educator team. The first is that they already 'do' literacy as well as is required in an ECEC setting, while the second, which is divergent from this, is that they do not know enough about the rules of language (grammar etc.), the EL continuum in general or PA in particular, to teach it to the children. To develop literacy skills, children need to be afforded appropriate opportunities by the adults who care for them and are responsible for their education (Kennedy *et al.*, 2023). These adults need to have a strong understanding of the necessary knowledge and skills that underpin later reading success (Carson and Bayetto, 2018).

At the beginning of the programme, during WS1, a discussion ensued regarding their EL practices and they stated they believed they were already working well with literacy practices. This was evident when Lena said:

I think we do it very well, like we do stories every day, and we do writing and phonics quite often too (Lena WS1).

This was confirmed by Nina who added:

Yea we definitely do it already but probably need a greater understanding about it all (WS1).

5.2.1.1 Current knowledge and practice

The data helped to identify what the educators valued and deemed important in the development of children’s literacy skills. At the outset of the study the importance of helping the children to develop literacy skills was believed to be *very important* by four out of the five educators, while one considered it to be *important* (Pre-IQ). They all agreed that talking, listening, and reading to the children were some of the ways to achieve this (Pre-IQ). Two considered that teaching phonics was part of their role and one identified tracing letters as a way they could help the children develop their literacy skills (Figure 5.1).

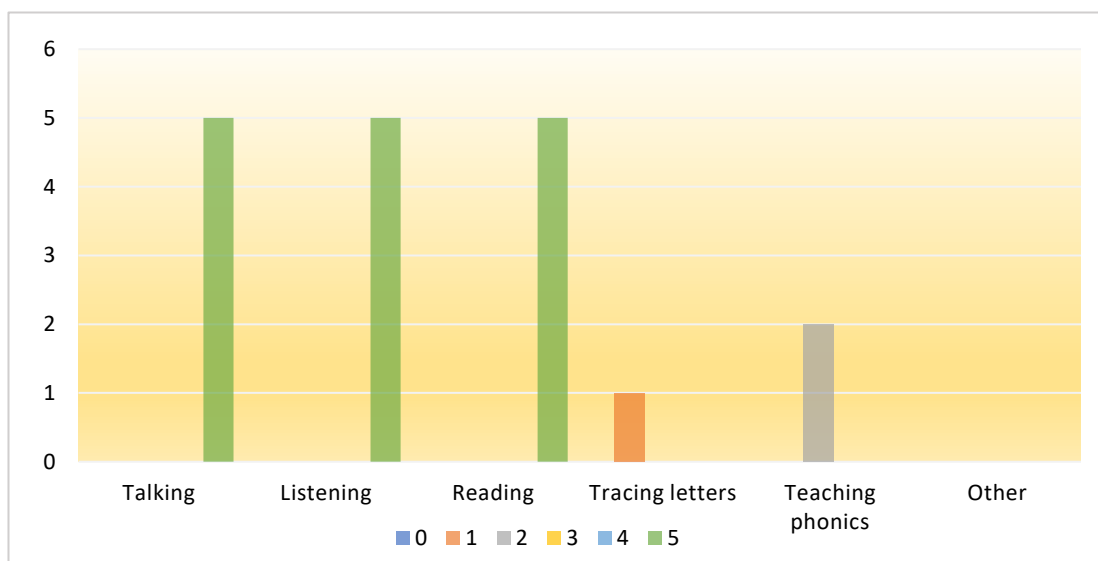


Figure 5.1: Q 6: Pre-IQ How to support literacy skills

The questionnaire also checked their current level of understanding of PA (Q7Pre-IQ). While all considered it to be related to hearing individual sounds in words and manipulating the individual sounds in words, three also believed it to be about recognising alphabet names and matching them with words (Figure 5.2), confusing it with phonics.

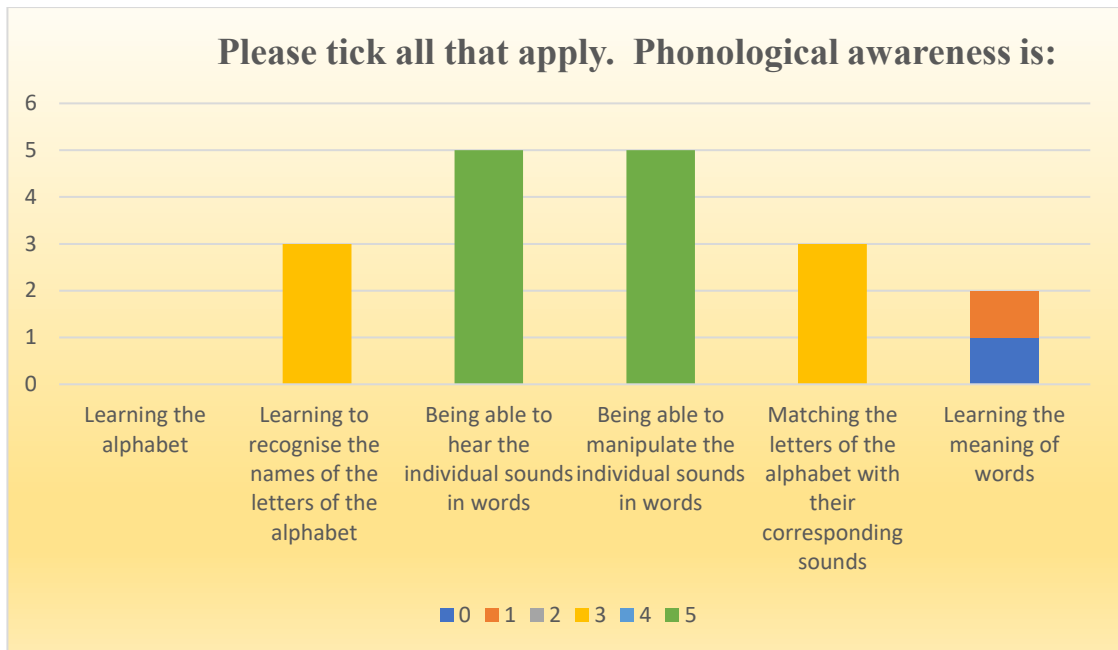


Figure 5.2: Q 7: Pre-IQ Phonological awareness is..

When asked how knowledgeable they felt regarding early literacy development, two felt ‘*knowledgeable*’ while three felt only ‘*somewhat knowledgeable*’ (Q9Pre-IQ). This would concur with previous international studies which indicate that educators self-reported PA knowledge is often overestimated while that knowledge, which previous questions tested, indicated differently (Moats and Foorman, 2003; Carroll *et al*, 2012; Carson and Bayetto, 2018).

A lack of understanding with regards to phonics was identified as four of the educators stated it is learning to recognise the names of the letters of the alphabet (Pre-IQ) while three of the educators believed it was being able to hear the individual sounds in words (Figure 5.3).

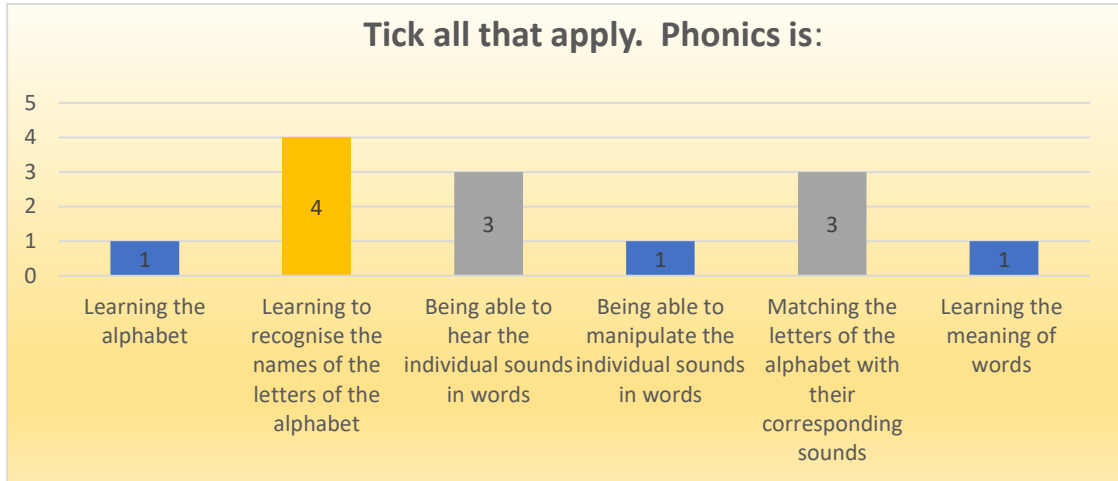


Figure 5.3: Q 8: Pre-IQ Phonics is..

Early in the research study, it was clear from discussions that the educators were surprised at where ‘phonics’ appeared on the EL continuum. After WS1, an entry in my journal noted:

I could see from the looks on their faces that they were surprised where phonics appeared on the EL continuum scale and when I broke down the PA continuum into a ladder, they appeared even more surprised (RJ Researcher 31/1/22).

However, over the period of the programme there were many discussions regarding the nature of the continuum and the manner in which children oscillate between the different stages.

Even though some of them had indicated in the Pre-IQ, that they allocated time to teaching phonics each day, their actual lack of knowledge of phonics and what skills the children needed to be able to effectively engage with phonics, became more apparent. Clearly, some were trying to follow a scripted and didactic method from an off-the-shelf programme, without any background knowledge. Lena confirmed this misperception when she acknowledged:

I didn’t realise how much children have to learn before you do phonics (Lena, WS1) while Nina and Ena added:

It’s not what I thought it was (Nina, WS1).

How come we never hear about PA from schools? All we hear about is phonics. That is why we do the Jolly Phonics (Ena, WS1).

This concurs with research which indicates that educators' own knowledge of both PA and phonics is often not well-developed (Crim, Hawkins, *et al.*, 2008; Skibbe *et al.*, 2016; Joshi and Wijekumar, 2020). Even while using the scripted intervention programmes, educators need sufficient background knowledge to enable them to tailor it to the needs of their particular group of children (Moats, 2014).

However, three also correctly identified in the Pre-IQ, that phonics included matching the letters of the alphabet with their corresponding sounds. Yopp and Yopp (2022) contend that there is often confusion about the terms PA and phonics but confirm the terms are not synonymous and should not be used interchangeably. This confusion was also apparent in early discussions with the educators, where they initially appeared confident that what they already do with the children was the correct sequence to prepare them for school. An entry in my own journal after WS1 indicates my unease regarding my questionnaire and their responses:

From our discussions on the continuum this afternoon, I can see that a lot of the answers that were in the Pre-IQ were possibly the educators ticking any of the boxes that they thought might fit. None of the educators had a clear idea of what PA or phonics was, or the difference between the two. Yet the Pre-IQ indicated that three of them knew that phonics included matching letters to sounds. Perhaps I should not have allowed them to tick multiple boxes in the questionnaire which might have resulted in a clearer picture of what they actually know. (RJ Researcher 31/1/22).

This aligns with the view of Patten (2017), who contends that respondents may give inaccurate answers if they think these answers are most desirable.

The final question asked about their ability to teach the various PA elements. One educator considered she had *excellent* ability to teach rhyming while the remaining four indicated they were *good*. Three considered they were *good* at rhyme recognition and production while two educators considered themselves to be *fair* in their ability to teach these skills. With the increasing complexity of tasks in alliteration, segmenting,

onset and rime, only one considered themselves *good*, while the remaining four ticked the *fair* box (Figure 5.4).

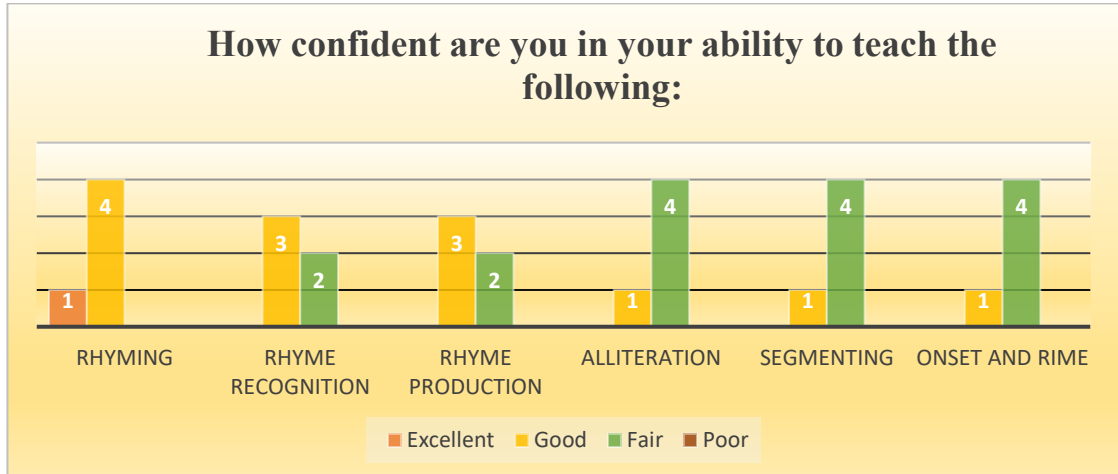


Figure 5.4: Q 10 Pre-IQ Confidence in ability to teach PA

Their self-assessment of skills can inflate their own level of knowledge and render it difficult to both assess and teach skills to children if they themselves are not proficient in them, which aligns with Carson and Bayetto’s (2018) contention. Raising the PA knowledge of the educators is key to supporting them to both assess the children’s knowledge level and help develop their skills.

The early discussions and the Pre-IQ responses contributed towards the development of the professional development and learning programme. While the qualification level of this group of educators is high, initial findings would indicate, that although they engage well with some very good literacy practices such as reading stories and storytelling, their actual knowledge and understanding of EL in general and PA in particular, is weak. However, they are anxious to learn as was confirmed by the first entry in Nina’s journal:

I am very excited to learn and gain new information and insights – new ways of doing things (RJ:Nina).

Knowles (1984) contends that adults have an intrinsic motivation to learn, and they bring a wealth of experience to the learning process and are eager to apply new knowledge to their practice as soon as possible.

In summary therefore, there would appear to be significant gaps in the educator's self-reported knowledge about EL and PA. It appears they lack the fundamental content-specific knowledge of EL development in general, and PA in particular, to enable them to effectively support the children to gain the necessary skills to become better readers later on. This is in alignment with Cunningham and O'Donnell's (2015) assertion that educators need content-specific knowledge and expertise in what they want to teach.

The next sub-theme presents and analyses the findings relating to the conflict educators felt between their current practice and the new knowledge being proffered and considers how that has impacted on the educators.

5.2.1.2 New Knowledge and practice – the conflict

New knowledge can also lead to a conflict or disequilibrium between current practices and new information (Piaget, 1936). The educators were encouraged to take on-board the new knowledge and marry it with their current knowledge (Knowles, 1989; Moll, 1990; Piaget, 1936; Vygotsky, 1978). This can lead to a conflict regarding current practices and new information as they try to 'match' new theories to their existing practices and reach a state of equilibrium. While these educators already had some very good practices in place in their rooms, increasing their knowledge of the theory behind EL and PA could lead to a greater understanding of pedagogical approaches and practices. This disconcerted feeling was highlighted by Ena, Tina and Lena after observation 2:

I suppose until it comes naturally it is going to feel awkward. Like this morning when I was playing the jigsaw with A, everything he said I was thinking – what can I rhyme with that? (DD2, Ena)

Tina and Lena added:

and trying to do it in a natural progression as well (DD2, Tina)

Yea trying to fit it into the day where it's not forced, if that makes sense? (DD2, Lena)

This identifies the feeling of disequilibrium that is being felt by the educators as their current 'comfortable' practices are being impacted by the new information as it is beginning to alter how they operate. This is typical in AR and requires reflection to help lead to new knowledge and practices (Elliott, 2001; Manfra, 2019). It also reinforces why professional development and learning is most effective, with increased likelihood of change being sustained, when there are opportunities to make the connections to everyday practices in real-life situations. However, Guskey (2021) cautions that unless there is evidence of the change in practice being worthwhile, it will soon be abandoned in the classroom.

Practice also appeared to be privileged over theory when there was an initial hesitancy with some of the educators regarding the workshop (theoretical) input prior to the observation session. During the de-brief dialogue after observation 1, a discussion developed regarding the sequencing of the programme. Some of them said they would have preferred in-class modelling before the workshop content:

I know we have to do the workshops to learn about stuff... But if you could do the modelling first and show us, it'd be great... then we'd see what you were talking about... seeing it done is a much better way to learn about something, for me anyway (Lena, DD1).

Tina added:

Yea if you came in first to show us how it's done (DD1, Tina).

This knowledge-theory conflict discussion ensued on the requirement, and indeed benefit, of subject-matter knowledge (theory) for quality practice and how educators need to both understand the content as well as understand how to teach it (Neuman and Cunningham, 2009). Even though the workshops were interactive and included the provision of resources and strategies that we practised with each other, what they

were clearly indicating was that they would have preferred the observation day with modelling in the classroom with the children, first. In the DD1, I asked:

I'm wondering if I came in and modelled it first without giving you the content, the rationale or 'reason why', would you have been aware of the importance of rhyming and recognising rhyme to begin with? Or would you have dismissed it and said that's just rhyming, we always do that anyway? (DD1, Researcher).

Following further discussion, it was agreed that we would continue with the next workshop delivering the content prior to the observation day as this theoretical input offers an explanation for how theory is embodied in their practice (McNiff & Whitehead, 2016). As this was a CAR study and was being jointly guided by both the researcher and the educators, we agreed to keep this under review. Nina commented:

I love seeing your interpretation of what you are doing with us, how you do things. And I understand a lot more when I see things, but I see what you are saying... we need to know what and why before we can understand how... is that it? (DD1, Nina).

This addresses the belief that while some people prefer to participate in the practice and need to experientially engage before they can understand the theory behind a practice, others need a rationale and need to understand the theory for why something is happening. Everyone brings their personal foundation of experience to the learning process (Knowles *et al.*, 2005). In some instances, this is sufficient to understand new experiences. However, others need the vicarious experiences of others to develop an understanding of the new information which explains the preference for modelling first. Content knowledge on its own is not sufficient to enhance their literacy practices. It is the combination of both knowledge and pedagogical skills that Gore and Rosser (2020) contend are most often linked to changes in knowledge and practice. Indeed, many argue the educators cannot teach what they do not know (Burgess *et al.*, 2001; Justice *et al.*, 2008; Moats, 2014; Stark *et al.*, 2019; Grifenhagen and Dickinson, 2021). Therefore, even though they currently engage in many tasks that support EL,

because they are not fully informed of the rationale, their engagement in these tasks can lack an appropriate focus.

To understand where PA came on the continuum, we began the first workshop with the full EL continuum which elicited lots of data through discussion, particularly when we focussed in on PA. In conversation with the educators, there was a consensus around their current practices in relation to rhyming when both Lena and Nina commented:

we do a lot of rhyming stories, like the Julia Donaldson books, they love them
(WS1, Lena),

and we do quite a lot of basic nursery rhymes too (WS1, Nina).

Following each subsequent workshop, the educators identified and discussed the skills with which the children required additional assistance (i.e. rhyme recognition and production, alliteration, segmenting, and onset and rime). Also, strategies that could be used to support the development of skills were demonstrated. To come to know what the children know, the educators had to engage in assessment *of* and *for* learning. From the outset, initial discussions pointed to the educator's belief that most of the children in their setting had good PA skills. They discussed their current use of rhymes and rhyming stories and felt that a lot of the children would actually be right up at the phonics point in the continuum:

I think a lot of ours would be ok with most of this, well the older ones anyway, whatever about the younger group (WS1, Lena).

However, as their own PA learning progressed, a lack of knowledge regarding the continuum became apparent and some hesitation was expressed regarding whether or not the children could recognise and produce rhyme, alliterate etc. This was evidenced through the comment:

Well, I know they can say the rhymes and I'd say they can recognise rhyme anyway, but I'm not sure about the rest... (WS1 Gina).

This concurs with research carried out by Carson and Bayetto (2018) whereby educators tended to overestimate their knowledge level and “were not aware of what they knew and did not know” (2018, p.70). However, just as it was important to identify the baseline knowledge of the educators in this research, it was important for them to help identify what children can and cannot do. That is, skills they already have mastered and those with which they need additional support (Schachter and Piasta, 2022). Moats (2014) cited in Carson and Bayetto (2018), reminds us however, that educator’s knowledge and understanding of literacy development is often limited as they have not themselves been taught these skills. To be able to assess the children’s PA level, they themselves would need to have a full understanding of what PA entails. Fortunately, new knowledge can lead to greater confidence, and this is explored next.

5.2.2 Knowledge leading to confidence

As I was seeking to embed this new knowledge in their practice (Showers and Rolheiser-Bennett, 1987; Justice *et al.*, 2008; Neuman and Cunningham, 2009; Sawyer and Stukey, 2019; Rogers *et al.*, 2020), it was important I listened to their voice to hear how they felt they learn best and incorporate as many of their preferences into the programme as possible. Their responses produced something much more revelatory. Within their comments, their growing sense of confidence was obvious as a journal entry dated after WS2 stated:

because Annette is making things more practical and less academic, I think I’m learning more (RJ Gina 9/4/22)

while a subsequent journal entry dated after Obs. 2 stated:

definitely reinforcing things... the book that Nina was reading completely made sense with what we had done, the rhyming and all that (RJ Gina 12/4/22)

An increase in knowledge and confidence was detected in their language as they spoke throughout our meetings and appeared to no longer be concerned with naming what they did not know. Words repeated constantly by them and recorded in my field notes were:

recognising things more (DD1 Gina)

importance of that (DD1 Lena)
opportunities we didn't capitalise on (DD2 Tina) and
hearing sounds I never noticed before (FFG Ena).

Although these comments appear contradictory to their original assessment of their own knowledge, this aligns with Carson and Bayetto (2018) contention that the actual knowledge and self-reported knowledge of educators were different. However, collaborative and job-embedded professional development and learning, such as this programme, can, according to Darling-Hammond *et al.*, (2017, p.vi), be a “source of efficacy and confidence.... Can result in widespread improvement” in practice.

Furthermore, a growth in knowledge was recorded within the Post-IQ where again they all correctly identified talking, listening and reading as ways they could help the children to develop literacy skills (Figure 5.5).

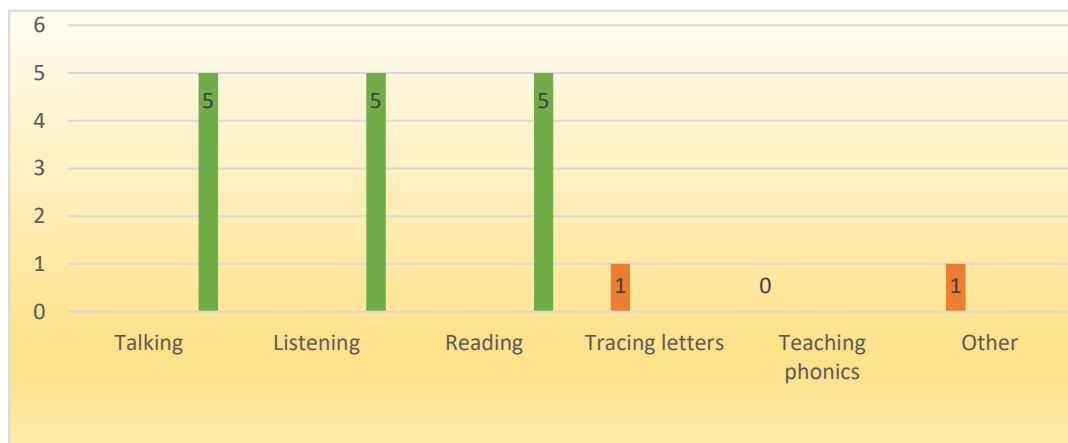


Figure 5.5: Post-IQ How to support literacy skills

By comparison though, in the Pre-IQ, two of the educators had identified ‘teaching phonics’ as one of the skills, while in the Post-IQ, none of the educators selected phonics as a way they could help develop the children’s literacy skills. Also in the Post-IQ, when asked to identify what PA is, unfortunately, there was a mix of

responses with some still identifying alphabet skills as part of PA. However, there was a reduction from three educators to one in response to *Matching the letters of the alphabet with their corresponding sounds*.

Over the first few months of the study, this marked growth in their understanding and knowledge of PA instruction became more apparent and could be seen to impact their confidence and their practice. Lena recorded:

my confidence is growing as I realise how much we are doing (RJ Lena 26/4/2022).

A week later she recorded examples of the children rhyming their own made-up song “*hokey dokey nokey lokey gokey*” and added:

my confidence is growing more as I see these events unfold naturally during the day. I’m noticing more rhyme myself too (RJ Lena 5/5/2022).

This confidence was also apparent in the post-IQ when five educators felt ‘Knowledgeable’ in the area of EL development, by comparison to just two in the Pre-IQ, while three had felt ‘Somewhat knowledgeable’ (Figure 5.6).

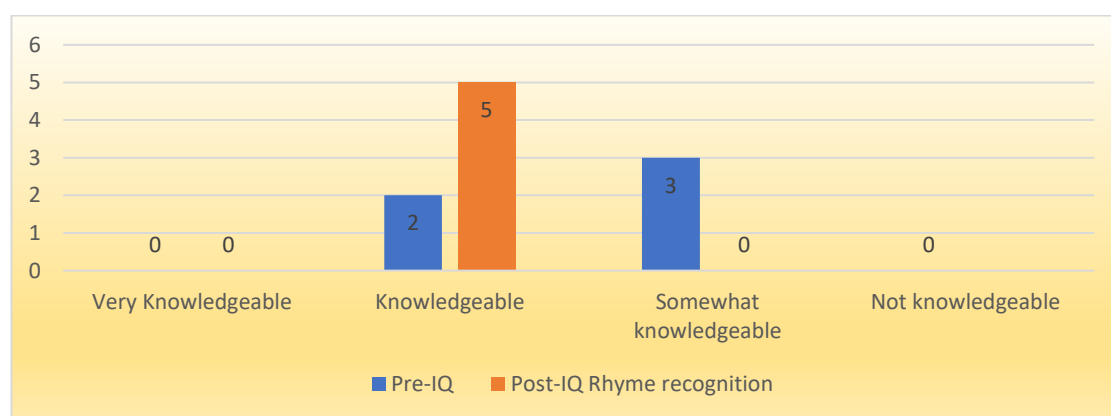


Figure 5.6: How knowledgeable do you feel in the area of early literacy development?

They all reported an increase in their confidence to teach rhyme recognition and production, alliteration, segmenting, and interestingly, onset and rime, although

interestingly, in the Post-IQ, they had selected *good* and *fair*. Their increase in confidence aligns with the opinion of Cunningham *et al.* (2015) who contend that the educator's own improved knowledge of PA most likely renders them more effective in helping children hear and manipulate the sounds of language. In other words, they become more skilful in helping the children to develop PA skills. This is discussed in the next section.

5.2.3 Knowledge and confidence influencing skills

During WS1 we discussed how the educators could, in-the-moment, informally assess the children with the basic rhyming skills and detect their level of skill. However, to be able to assess the children's skills, the educators themselves need to have an understanding of the continuum and what is required. Having talked about recognising rhyme, there appeared to be an air of confidence that most of the children already had that skill:

the afternoon group are probably better able with the rhyming and all that anyway – like with everything we have done today. Although I'm not so sure beyond that, I'll have to wait and see what comes next (WS1 Ena).

We discussed strategies they might use to carry out this assessment. However, Carson and Bayetto (2018) caution that the success and accuracy of these assessments also depends on the educators own PA knowledge. The informal assessment included chatting with the children to play with words that rhyme. Children of this age regularly demonstrate their verbal prowess through using playful verbal skills like mimicry and wordplay (Read *et al.*, 2018). During WS2, the educators who were working with the children in the morning group said:

when we did it... it was like 'leg, peg, egg' and they could say that and add more. But when they had to pick out two that sound the same [generate rhyme]... I think it nearly went over their heads a bit (WS2 Tina).

I did it with K in the bathroom today and he was telling me a few words, he was flying with it. But when I tried with A he didn't seem too into it to be honest, so I don't know... (WS2 Lena).

It was clear from these comments that both Tina and Lena were able to assess in-the-moment where the children's abilities lay. This confidence in their assessment of the children's abilities regarding rhyme recognition and production was new. They also appeared to be able to recognise the variance between the different children in the same group. The afternoon group though had a somewhat different experience:

we were doing Jack and Jill went up the... and they were like hill, sill, pill. But they are an older group where in the morning they are quite young ... but they have another year (WS2 Nina).

The educators were recognising the variance in the ages of the children and the stage they appeared to be at, as they commented on the differences between the morning and afternoon group. These reflections also gave them a rough idea of where they might focus with each group. While their own knowledge at this stage was still quite limited, they continued to experiment with the children based on what we were covering throughout the workshops. They were completely incorporating it into their day as recounted by Tina:

At lunch one of the boys started doing a little rap song. He was rhyming out people's names and he said, "Kai was a cool guy, Jai is a day". We all got involved with him, it was great fun (RJ Tina n.d.)

Being able to have these opportunities to practise skills with the children and incorporate the activities into the normal daily routine, was confidence-building for the educators and provided opportunities to blend theory and practice in an authentic, real-life situation (Nelson *et al.*, 2020). Their increasing knowledge was demonstrably impacting on their confidence and abilities. As their knowledge increased, so too did their ability to assess the children in-the-moment and act on the findings. During observation 2, I recorded the following vignette in my fieldnotes:

Gina was assessing rhyme recognition with K and T while they made a Jack and Jill jigsaw. She pointed at Jill saying, there's **Jill**, she's on the **hill** and she

has a **bucket**, which words sound the same, [emphasising each word] **Jill**,
bucket or **hill**?

K answered first saying: **Jack**;

while T said: **no it's Jill and hill**

Well done said Gina. Now can you tell me another word that rhymes with Jill
and hill?

To which T responded: **bill**.

Yes, said Gina. K you and I are going to have to practice some more rhymes,
aren't we?

(RFN Obs. 2).

Schachter and Piasta call this “a type of teacher expertise” (2022, p.516) where
educators observe something and keep a mental note which impacts on their plan for
working with the children. This ‘expertise’ requires not just knowledge, but also
confidence and skills in order for it to influence the competency of the educator. This
is discussed in the next section.

5.2.4 Knowledge, confidence and skills influencing competency

As we proceeded through the research cycles and engaged with the workshops, the
complexity of new knowledge was also increasing. Building on what they had already
learned through each workshop and the practices they had engaged in with the
children over the preceding weeks, they comfortably progressed through rhyme
production, alliteration and on to segmenting sentences and words. They also appeared
to enjoy all the new games introduced to promote these skills and readily recounted
how they were already applying their new learning in addition to how they might
adapt current strategies to promote new skills, demonstrating a new level of
understanding and competency. This was articulated by them during DD2 when Nina
said:

I played with the instruments today with the children getting them to tap, and
shake to make it fun sounding out, and identifying syllables in words (DD2
Nina).

Tina added:

At circle time we sounded out each person's name to how many claps they have breaking each name down. They really got to have fun with this. The child with the most claps was thrilled he did! (DD2 Tina).

Nonetheless, she also noted:

The afternoon class seem to be grasping the concept, but the morning group are struggling (DD2).

A week later she recorded in her journal that although both groups were not at the same level there were still "lots of positive experiences" as she engaged with the different strategies and activities (RJ 6/4/2022, Nina). Again, this appears to point to increasing competence and self-belief in her ability to assess the children and recognise that there are always variations with children who are at different ages and stages.

However, as we progressed through syllables, to onset and rime and phonemes, all of which were presented and discussed in W3, it appeared it was a step too far for some of the educators. Those who struggled to understand it themselves, naturally had difficulty explaining it to the children (Cunningham, *et al.*, 2015; Moats, 2020; Piasta and Hudson, 2022). Ena noted:

we planned to introduce onset and rime in our room today but decided against it at the last minute. We agreed we don't really understand it ourselves, so we need to understand it properly ourselves first (RJ Ena 3/5/2022).

Being able to acknowledge this denotes a new level of confidence as at the beginning of this study, there was a reluctance to acknowledge any lack of EL knowledge.

However, Tina recounted how a child from the older group, J, had come up to her out of the blue and said:

can you say ddd-oooog, so I said dog. Very good said J, now can you say ccc-aaaat? And I said cat. She said very good again, turned and walked away! She seems to have grasped the onset and rime (FFG Tina).

This ability to manipulate the sounds in spoken language is highly connected to later successful reading ability (Yopp and Yopp, 2009) so educators should capitalise on children’s natural propensity to play with words (*ibid*). The Pre-IQ indicated that while some good EL skills were engaged with daily, not all of the educators did so, and indeed it was only for short periods of time. The literacy activity being allotted the most time out of the daily three-hour session was story reading, whereby four of the five educators allocated 11-20 minutes while the fifth educator allocated less. How time was being allocated for the various literacy activities altered over the period of the programme. Learning phonics was a weekly affordance by one educator while the other four educators only allocated time for monthly engagement, with the time attributed to this activity varying between 5 minutes and 11-20 minutes. While reflecting on and acknowledging how far they have come in their EL and PA knowledge, they all articulated the change in their practice regarding time spent focusing on different activities. This was borne out in the Post-IQ which identified increases in time spent on developing PA skills (Figure 5.7). The biggest change was with nursery rhymes which are now a daily activity for all educators for 6-10 minutes. Phonics are still a feature for two educators; however, less than five minutes monthly is spent on the activity.

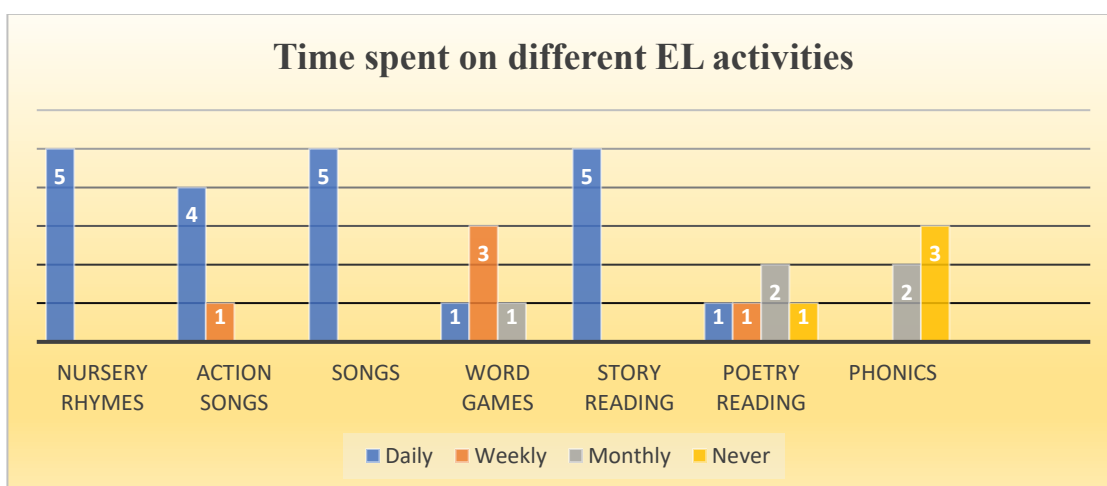


Figure 5.7: Q 4 Post-IQ How much time is spent on different EL activities

Songs and story reading were always a daily activity, and this appears to still have a similar time allocation within the daily routine. Word games were a daily activity for

only one educator and that has not changed. However, while two educators used to only use wordplay monthly, now only one does so, meaning that three educators engage in wordplay on at least a weekly basis, denoting a change in practice (Figure 5.8).

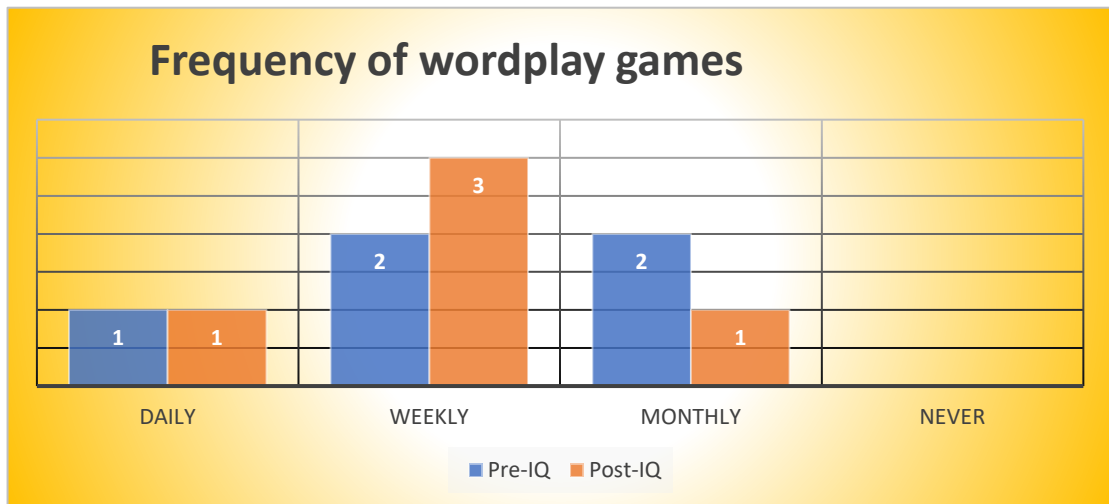


Figure 5.8: Frequency of wordplay activities pre- and post-intervention

Knowing ‘what’ to teach is essential. However, without knowing ‘how’ to teach the ‘what’, educators will be unsuccessful in their endeavours. Educators need to be skilled in how they impart this knowledge to the children, in addition to having specialist literacy knowledge, if they are to successfully promote the development of EL and PA skills (Piasta and Hudson, 2022). Increased knowledge leads to confidence which in turn impacts on skill competency. As the children begin to demonstrate new skills, the educator’s confidence appeared to grow. Cunningham and O’Donnell contend that teaching PA skills requires a knowledge of both “child development and pedagogical strategies” (2015, p.53). The next section discusses the impact of knowledge, confidence, skills and competence on the educators and their practice.

5.2.5 Knowledge, confidence, skills and competency leading to changed practices

Reflecting on and acknowledging how far they had come since the beginning of the programme, the data indicated the new-found ability of the educators to promote EL,

in particular PA, throughout their day had contributed to a change in their practices. This was demonstrated in the FFG when Nina said:

It creates more opportunities... if you were only doing it as part of a small-group lesson you'd be stuck with that time whereas by knowing how it works everywhere else, you bring it into every moment of everyday (FFG Nina).

Likewise, Ena felt:

sure we are doing it all the time now (FFG).

Phrases like:

- it doesn't have to be structured (DD3 Tina),
- can be implemented anywhere at any time (FFG Ena),
- lots of ways to play with language (DD3 Lena),

were heard increasingly throughout the study, particularly in the final focus group where the educators were discussing the impact of the programme on their practice:

Yea now we know it doesn't have to be structured like, even walking to the bathroom with you singing songs, getting them to finish the ends (FFG Tina),

This was confirmed by Lena who said:

And just.. it can be implemented anywhere at any time, it doesn't have to be when we are all sitting down, doing work... like you imagined it would have been (FFG Lena).

These views are in accordance with those of Cunningham and O'Donnell (2015) and Cunningham *et al.* (2015) that increases in teacher content knowledge links closely with their instructional practices and their specific pedagogical knowledge contributes to their effectiveness as educators. A key feature emanating from the data is the ease with which they now support the children's developing skills and how the children are joining in:

There's no big pressure on it, it's all natural, it's all flowing (DD3 Gina).

Speaking of how they are all having fun with words and as the children try to be better than each other, they described how this sometimes results in the use of usually

forbidden language in a rhyming situation. Lena recounted a story where J and P were sitting at a table drawing and testing each other, rhyming words with animals:

J said Cat, P responded with Rat; J- Dog, P-Hog; J-Bunny, P- funny; J-Duck, P-F***. They laughed their hearts out for a minute then continued, J-Ass, P-BumBum, and they started laughing again (FFG Tina).

This type of playful verbal skills are exhibited regularly by children in this age group (Read *et al.*, 2018). For the educators, having the knowledge, confidence, skills and competency influences their ability to capitalise on this naturally arising small group situation, engage the children further and potentially individualise learning opportunities for the two children involved (Platas *et al.*, 2015). As the educator's own skill levels continued to increase, their ability to engage competently in assessing the children's skill levels became more noticeable, in particular their ability to assess in-the-moment and make changes and additions to what they were doing.

The more they engaged in language play with the children, the more confident and competent they became. The data collected during Obs. 3 clearly exhibited this when I recorded:

Tina was in the library, reading an Itsy Bitsy Spider story to three girls. It was a rhyming story and as she read it, she emphasised both syllables in the words (It-sy, bit-sy spi-der) and the rhyming words (spout/out). One of the girls suddenly said "spi-der has 2 sybalels (sic). Well done C, said Tina (RFN Obs. 3 10/5/22).

Further data recorded at the de-brief discussion following the observation added to this:

When C noticed that, I was like "Oh my God this is what Annette was talking about, it suddenly clicks with them" (DD3 Ena).

Their growing ability to observe and recognise the children's skill level was encouraging:

So we went back to basics kind of yesterday with the rhyming to try and...we were like ok let's go back again to this. And even actually, I don't know we kind of went a little bit harder like advanced, not like...where we done (sic) really

easy rhyming previously we kind of brought it up a level yesterday. But we found it was just... it was too advanced for them still (DD2 Lena).

This quote highlights Lena's growing knowledge of PA, as well as her ability to assess the children's skills and determine in-the-moment what her next strategy should be.

There was a consensus that while some of the children are really progressing and regularly making up silly songs and playing with rhyme with their friends, others are still trying to understand how to play with words. However, they were reassured with the confirmation that the age range in the setting is impacting on this (Carson and Bayetto, 2018). Their ongoing assessments of the children and their increasing skills and competence will also play an important role as they continue to help the developing PA skills, which according to Piasta and Hudson (2022) requires high-quality instruction and knowledgeable teachers.

5.2.6 Summary of theme 1: knowledge-practice conflict

Content knowledge is the basic level of knowledge that educators are expected to have to foster good EL practices in children. Gaps in this knowledge can impact the educator's confidence in teaching EL and PA skills (Weadman, Serry and Snow, 2023). This theme indicates an increase in knowledge throughout the five cycles of the intervention. It is clear from the voices of the educators that their EL and PA knowledge has increased, in particular their knowledge of rhyming, alliteration and segmentation, and how to help the children develop these skills. However, the programme did not appear to give sufficient time to ensure all educators felt knowledgeable enough to teach the more complex skills like onset and rime and segmenting from sub-syllables into phonemes, stages we did not manage to achieve during the workshops. A further input on onset and rime was requested during the final focus group. However, as we were approaching summer break, it was requested that it be postponed until the new academic year.

The educators demonstrated increased knowledge and confidence as they discussed different children's abilities and how best to support them. Both confidence and knowledge are necessary components to enable them to be effective in their

assessments *of* and *for* learning with the children. In addition, the need to be competent in their pedagogical skills to be able to effectively teach EL and PA skills to young children. The data clearly show that the educator's pedagogical skills and competence is also improving, demonstrated by their ability to provide appropriate, in-the-moment, learning opportunities for the children. Knowledge certainty affords them the opportunity to recognise how they could use and improve their current practices to benefit the children's learning. This is important for the educators because as Cunningham *et al.* (2015) claim, effective literacy educators need to possess both knowledge and skills.

The data further indicated that they had preferences as to how they learn best. Throughout the study the educators were constantly verbalising their preferences regarding the professional development and learning programme methods being used. The next theme explores which particular professional development and learning component, or combination of components, contributed most to the educators' learning and development.

5.3 Theme 2: Capacity building methodologies

The educator's capacity to effectively teach PA skills was built through a variety of ways. This theme listens to the educators' voices as they inform the data of which elements of the professional development and learning programme they found the most informative, and had the greatest influence on their practice. The different strategies used to support the transfer of knowledge and skills were workshops, on-site observation with coaching that included modelling, feedback and reflective discussions. Analysing the data through the lens of the second research question, seeking to find which components or combination of components best supported the educators learning, a sub-theme arose, that of learning style preferences. This sub-theme listens closely to the voice of the educators' as they express their thoughts on what worked best for them throughout the programme, in particular throughout the coaching process. The second sub-theme explores the impact the observation days had on the educators. Sub-theme three listens to the educators as they explain how modelling supported their developing knowledge and practice, while sub-theme four

hears how feedback, both individually and through group dialogue, impacted their learning and influenced a change in their practice.

I will now explore this theme beginning with the first sub-theme, resources and materials.

5.3.1 Resources and Materials

From the outset, and re-iterated through the coaching and modelling process, educators referred frequently to having a preference for they termed, visual learning. Their comments resonated with me, and I made a note to ensure I had physical resources to share with each workshop. I was conscious that they were referring to active and experiential learning processes, i.e. kinaesthetic learning. I was also aware that they were least comfortable during the workshops and so made them as interactive as possible, ensuring there was an activity or strategy available to help them make sense of each new theoretical input. We practised with these resources during the workshops to help the educators become familiar with how they worked. We also practised activities that did not require physical resources e.g. clapping or tapping games. Cunningham *et al.*, 2015) assert that a deep knowledge of pedagogical strategies is required to teach PA. The provision of instructional resources are also identified as an essential element and may well, according to Zaslow et al (2010) (cited in Cunningham *et al.*, 2015) increase the possibility of “sustainability and fidelity to the approach” (p.64). I could see that providing resources for them to work with certainly engaged them more closely with each task in hand. In the final focus group this was discussed:

I liked the activity examples we had. So going through the start going oh my God and then just seeing the plain simple activities of, it was like.. like ah... triggers (FFG Ena).

This was confirmed by Nina who said:

Yes, I was thinking that's fine, you can get your head around that and do it easy enough (FFG Nina)

While Lena added:

I liked the activities you gave us to do, like without anything, like clapping out the syllables in their names (FFG Lena).

And Gina followed with:

Yea we are really having a bit of fun with it some days, aren't we? Last week we were clapping out their names and breaking it down and you kind of see they are interacting more without even thinking of it (FFG Gina).

Provision of both resources and activities at each workshop to support the educators in the development of the PA skills was considered by them to have been key in assisting them to engage in the various activities with the children. Yopp and Yopp (2022) contend that the provision of resources enhances the experience for both the children and the educators. However, seeing how the educators used these resources and implemented the different strategies was necessary to ensure this programme was being developed in an effective manner. The data gathered regarding the observation days are discussed in the next section.

5.3.2 Observation - look and see

Observation days provided opportunities for me to observe their practice and model. The three observation days were planned for approximately two weeks after each workshop. This was to allow time to put new knowledge into practice and for the educators to decide if there were particular strategies with which they needed support. Noting the practices of the educators as they went about their work with the children, I was cognisant of finding out more about the educators' knowledge and their normal practice. However, on Obs. 1, I detected a self-consciousness, the observer effect, which led to what Denscombe describes as the *halo effect* (2003, p.66) with some of the educators. This means that those being observed alter their behaviour to take account of the purpose of the research. This was confirmed during the de-brief discussion following the observations by a few of the educators:

And then everything they said, I was thinking – what can I rhyme with that (DD1 Nina).

Ena added:

I definitely used it (rhyming) 'cos I was so conscious! You know what you were saying mellow yellow? I was definitely doing things like that (DD1 Ena)

Followed by Lena:

I've just been conscious of doing what you had spoken to us about the last time (during WS1) (DD1 Lena).

However, an educator who was working with both the morning and afternoon groups noted:

I definitely felt more relaxed in the afternoon, but I think it's because I'd already done it. But I think also this group is so different here - like I don't know; you just feel differently yourself (DD1 Nina).

Based on these comments I reminded the educators to record their experiences with the children in their journal to give me insights into their practices. However, as the programme progressed, they became more comfortable with me in the room, observing their practice. Following Obs. 2 I recorded in my journal:

The self-consciousness had a positive effect... it didn't seem to stress them out. Instead, my presence seemed to act as a trigger... a reminder... and in fact enhanced their practice (RJ Researcher 30/3/22)

This was confirmed by Tina:

I think sometimes when you were in the room it helped because you'd say something and it would trigger me, like with coola boola... it reminds me to do it (DD3 Tina).

Nina added to this as she said:

I liked how as part of the programme you took the opportunities to engage with our day-to-day practice with the children and take opportunities to bring our awareness to implement our learning or extend our knowledge further (DD3 Nina).

It was also becoming apparent that increasingly they were linking in with each other and discussing the programme amongst themselves as they shared a common

viewpoint about how the observation days provided the greatest learning curve for them all:

I think for us all the modelling and discussions on the observation days had the greatest impact on our learning (FFG Nina).

The rest of the group nodded in response to this and said

Yea.

They discussed that while the workshops gave them the reason why, and we practiced new strategies with each other, how these strategies worked with us, did not always work with the children. Ena explained:

that draw a rhyme was good craic and seemed so easy when we did it with you but only a few of them got it when we did it with the group (DD2 Ena)

and Tina added:

I tried the rhyme away with some in the afternoon and they didn't manage it either (DD2 Tina).

Providing opportunities where the educators can actively learn through observing modelling and then practice it themselves is considered an effective coaching strategy (Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2017; Desimone and Pak, 2017; Scarparolo and Hammond, 2018). It is apparent that they came to value having someone observe their work, and their growing expertise and competence impacted on their practice and how they worked in the rooms with the children. The next sub-theme discussing modelling, describes how being able to observe someone else engage with activities and strategies impacted their learning.

5.3.3 Modelling - show me how

A key issue emanating from the data was being able to see theory in practice and it was apparent from the outset that educators needed a clear vision of what good practice looks like (Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2017). The desire to see how I would utilise some of the strategies and activities was verbalised on more than one occasion. During WS1 as we played with some of the resources Nina said:

I'd love to see your interpretation of what you are doing with us to them. I'd love to witness that myself... yes. And I probably would be more of a visual learner than anything else. So I'd probably get more from that myself (WS1).

A few weeks later after Observation 1, it arose again:

I'm a very visual learner, I just need someone to do something and then I'm like, ok that's it! (DD1 Nina).

Tina confirmed this adding:

I think it's more the simplicity of it, as in it seemed over complicated and then when you saw it done so simply, you were like, this is just like a bit of craic, let's just have a bit of fun with words and the kids all joined in and enjoyed it (DD1 Tina).

During the observation days, when opportunities arose to coach and engage in classroom modelling and provide timely 'in-the-moment' feedback I took them, as changes in practice are more likely to occur with the input of a coach who is actually present (Guskey, 2017) and can model and scaffold the learning (Vygotsky, 1986). During **Obs. 2**, in my fieldnotes I recorded that while playing with cars and trucks under my feet, two boys began to include me in their conversation. I signalled to Gina to pick up a book about trucks and join us. Then I pointedly said:

look, your truck is stuck in the muck (Researcher)

to which the educator responded:

yea did you hear that boys, **truck stuck** and **muck** all sound the same, they rhyme (Gina)

The boys continued playing while one of them kept repeating:

stuck truck we're crashing, stuck truck we're crashing. (FN2 Researcher)

Gina later said to me:

as soon as you had said stuck muck and truck, I copped what you were doing, thanks! I wouldn't have thought of that myself. It really is easy isn't it when you know what you're doing. (FN2 Researcher).

Watching me react to naturally arising opportunities on observation days, gave them the confidence to try themselves:

When you see it done once, you don't mind having a go yourself and when you know you can do it you'll do it over and over again (DD2 Lena).

Already I could hear the confidence building in her voice. Modelling and then giving the educators a chance to practice the skill in situ is one of the best ways to support the sustaining of new practices (Darling-Hammond, Hyler and Gardner, 2017; Hinojosa, 2022). Assisting learning through what Vygotsky (1976) called 'guided discovery' appears to be favoured by the educators. The educators continued to take opportunities throughout the session in a playful manner in accordance with recommendations by Yopp and Yopp (2022). For example, I noted that at the end of circle time Nina said:

whoever is sitting on a mellow yellow chair bring it back to the table, now whoever is sitting on a mean green chair, it's your turn... (FN2 Nina).

This modelling of rhyming in an appropriate context for the children, encourages prediction of either rhyming or alliteration words and adding to the silly sound of words when they manipulate words during wordplay, helps to engages them and develop their skills (Yopp and Yopp, 2009).

All of the educators spoke about how valuable observing the modelling was to their practice. Lena said:

I think it made a difference to me... those times you were here showing us, definitely I gained more understanding about what we were talking about (FFG Lena).

They all nodded in agreement.

Throughout the data collected, this sentiment recurred again and again:

I think once you see it you get into it (DD1 Gina),

Definitely seeing how you done it (sic) made it easier (DD2 Tina),

When you said 'pick the opportunities as they arise' I kind of thought, but they never will, but now I saw you do it, I see what you mean (DD3 Ena).

There were also occasions when the children interacted with me, and I took opportunities to model rhyming, alliteration and segmenting activities with them. This modelling was acknowledged by the educators who said they liked modelling:

because hearing the phrases you were just dropping into the conversation was giving me ideas of how I could do it ... I was over-thinking it and saying to myself, I can't think of anything that rhymes (DD2 Gina).

Likewise, Lena said:

I think it's definitely down to seeing how you do it and then doing it yourself and building on that (DD2 Lena).

These comments are aligned with Lave and Wenger's (1991) contention that professional development and learning should address practice issues and engage educators in concrete everyday tasks while Darling-Hammond *et al.* (2017) contend that modelling of instruction provides educators with a clear vision of what best practice looks like as it offers guidance in-action. Being in the classroom and taking opportunities was seen by the educators as:

A trigger... when you said something it brought things into my head because I wouldn't have ordinarily spoke (sic) like that (DD3 Ena).

In the FFG, Tina concurred with this sentiment as she said:

Modelling is definitely where my confidence came from... those times you were here showing us, definitely I gained more understanding and competence (FFG Tina).

The rest of the educators nodded in agreement. This also reflects Scarparolo and Hammond's (2017) findings where the teachers concluded they liked the coach in the role as demonstrator.

Opportunities arose throughout the observations to assess the children's level of PA. Taking these, I demonstrated how through playing some word games, the children's ability to recognise rhyme could be assessed. I then encouraged the educators to play

similar games with some of the other children. Again, the modelling was effective and Lena confirmed this when she said:

It's easy really to check if they can rhyme, isn't it? You just have to play word games with them. I was over-thinking it again, looking at it like I had to test them, but it's just something fun I can do if I'm sitting with them doing jigsaws or drawing (DD2 Lena).

This is in accordance with Cunningham and O'Donnell's (2015) contention that strategies that actively and intentionally draw the children's attention to the sounds of speech are consistent with research demonstrating the most appropriate and effective practices in PA instruction. It is clear from the comments throughout the data that having a supportive coach who can model theory to practice is what the educators find enhances their own learning. This concurs with Cunningham *et al.* (2015) who also contended that having a supportive facilitator who scaffolds the educators' learning in a trusting and supportive environment, with effective feedback, impacted greatly on the learning. The next section discusses the findings relating to feedback given throughout the programme.

5.3.4 Feedback – asking and telling

Previous research indicates direct observation of the educators on-site helps provide “specific data for feedback... descriptive, constructive and nonjudgmental” (Jug *et al.*, 2019, p.245). A key point emanating from the data is that the educators considered feedback to be valuable and was an important way of helping to steer them in their interactions with the children. During DD1 Gina said:

I want to know if I'm not getting it right, and how I can change that (DD1 Gina)

This was followed by Ena commenting:

I'd like to know too. It can only help! (DD1 Ena)

As the programme progressed, similar comments were made by the rest of the educators:

I suppose I just want to know how I can do it better (DD2 Lena)

and from Nina

I think we can all learn from each other's feedback (DD3 Nina)

These comments indicate their openness to feedback and their willingness to ask questions and find out more about how they can change their practice. We began each post-observation de-brief discussion using the ask-tell-ask process (French *et al.*, 2015). Initially they self-evaluated how they felt each session went. This self-evaluation is a critical part of the feedback process as it helps them self-reflect and be more aware of what they said and did throughout the observation. I then gave feedback on what I saw, speaking first about the good practice observed and commending the opportunities taken. For example, after Obs. 2 I commented:

I really liked the way you were taking opportunities to alliterate with the children, using the Irish words Mary Muc, Michael Madra, Cathal Capall, you were killing two birds with the one stone - learning the Irish animal names and you were really emphasising the initial sounds so well done! (DD2 Researcher).

Missed opportunities were then discussed followed by a strategy to ensure those opportunities were not missed in the future. To encourage the educators to use the opportunities that naturally arose, rather than try to manufacture opportunities. For example, from DD3 I gave the following feedback:

an opportunity I saw that was missed was upstairs this morning when J was playing with threading beads. One of you could have sat down beside him and played a segmenting game with him. You would probably have attracted more over to play too, and it would have been a nice little unplanned small group activity! Using opportunities the children have already set up for us is too good a gift to pass by! (DD3 Researcher).

In accordance with Sanyal (2017) and Keiler *et al.* (2020), I was conscious of making sure they understood my feedback so they could benefit from it. Fortunately, using my field-notes I was able to recount opportunities taken and missed throughout the session. Feedback proffered by me in de-brief discussions also suggested they should:

Take the easy pickings. Don't be looking for really hard and difficult opportunities, take what is in front of you all the time. You know, like at break

time say things like – ‘hey it’s time for lunch you bunch – oh did you hear that? Those words rhyme – they sound the same’! When they hear rhyming words on an ongoing basis it begins to click with them (DD1 Researcher).

Some weeks later, after Obs. 2, I suggested:

Don’t look a gift horse in the mouth! If the children are engaging in an activity you think you could utilise for PA development skills, ask them if you can join them. Remember they have already engaged with the activity. You are just using it to meet different objectives! (DD2 Researcher).

While the educator’s appreciated the brief, in-the-moment feedback given to them individually, there was an openness within the group to giving each other feedback throughout the de-briefing dialogues that took place after each observation day. This was demonstrated when Gina mentioned she had tried to get L and D to play some alliteration games:

I said to them K-Kai k-kicked a k-kite, can you hear that, the same sounds at the beginning of the words? Now you try one, maybe start with D-david... but D responded: D-david k-kicked a k-ite (DD2 Gina).

Ena then commented:

I don’t think it’s just them though, I think we have to do more work with a few more in that room, maybe we should make up an activity and play it with them in small groups, that might work (DD2 Ena).

This promoted the development of shared understanding of their goals and their action plan on how to achieve these goals (Jug *et al.*, 2019). Pianta *et al.* (2012) suggest that professional development and learning programmes that combine multiple components and includes feedback can produce promising and sustainable benefits.

5.3.5 Summary of theme 2: capacity building methodologies

The data gathered demonstrate the educator’s growing acknowledgement of the importance of the different coaching elements (modelling and feedback) to the learning process for them. While initially their preference was not to have the content

input first, following discussions they acknowledged this need. In line with both Darling-Hammond *et al.* (2017) and Scarparolo and Hammond's (2018) models of professional development and learning (section 3.4.2 and 3.4.3), the data gathered from the voices of the educators suggest that coaching that includes modelling, reflection and followed by effective and timely feedback are best aligned with their styles of learning. Reflection is covered in more detail within the final theme. However, these professional development and learning models, in addition to a plethora of other research (Landry *et al.*, 2011; Lane *et al.*, 2014; Desimone and Pak, 2017; Rogers *et al.*, 2020), also identify content focus as a key element to enable change in practice. It was interesting to see that even as their confidence increased, their preferences remained with the situated-learning opportunities. Evident also throughout all the discussions is the desire of the educators to discuss with each other content, strategies and approaches to practice within the setting. This learning through a community of practice is what is discussed in the next section.

5.4 Theme 3 – reflection within a community of practice

This theme was an inductive theme that emerged throughout the study. While distilling the data that referred to the development of this CoP, there appeared to be five sub-themes emerging. The first sub-theme, reflection hesitancy, listens to the voices of the educators at the start of this study and their discomfort at being asked to reflect as part of the study. Subsequent sub-themes are reflection and feedback; reflection in a CoP; reflection, self-belief and supporting others; and advocating to parents and other stakeholders. Throughout these sub-themes, the educators are recounting their experiences of reflecting together as they strive to become successful literacy educators, as they introduce PA strategies into the setting. This naturally occurring CoP emphasises the importance of situated learning within the practice field (Lave and Wenger, 1991) (see section 3.2.3). Situated learning theory suggests that learning takes place through the connection of prior knowledge with real context learning in the learner's own environment, in the company of others (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Boud, 1994), as was the case here. I will now discuss the sub-theme reflection hesitancy.

5.4.1 Reflection hesitancy

At the outset of this study, in order to develop an effective professional development and learning programme, I needed to become familiar with the educators, their knowledge level and current practices, which then facilitated an informed start. While all cycles in the research are important, cycle 1 was a key phase as it outlined the initial steps to be taken to ensure the professional development and learning programme developed met the needs of the educators taking part. Elliott emphasises the importance of ‘fact finding’, particularly at the outset of the research, to determine the “state of affairs or situation one wishes to change or improve” (2001, p.72). The first sign of hesitancy arose on the induction day while discussing the reflective and collaborative nature of the research, and the manner in which their observations and reflections would directly influence the planning of each cycle (Riel, 2017). I detected a note of disquiet and anxiety regarding the reflective journal when Ena commented:

I always hated having to write up reflections in college. I’m no good at it (Ena RFN 27/1/22).

This comment was followed by:

I don’t quite hate it. I just don’t think I’m any good at writing... I don’t think I’ll be any help to you (Tina RFN27/1/2022).

Subsequently, this fear was allayed with the offer to make a brief, previously unplanned, input on reflective journaling in addition to the provision of a template to support their reflections ([Appendix L](#)). Their journals would provide them with an opportunity to document in a confidential space any reflections they had, positive or otherwise, on implementing PA strategies. This divergence from the original plan with a previously unplanned input, is in concurrence with what McNiff (2016) names as the ‘messiness’ of AR. Although this study was just beginning, the messiness was already becoming apparent. Following the input one of the educators commented in her journal:

it really helped and the simple template... with the prompts makes it easier than just writing on a blank page (RJ: Lena).

Supporting the educators to become more reflective and to question what they see, hear and experience can help to enhance their professional practice (Schön, 1987). It is

also a useful tool to help educators gather their own thoughts before discussing them as the staff group, as within a CoP. In addition, reflection can help educators to make sense of feedback they receive as part of their work. Reflection and giving and receiving feedback is discussed next.

5.4.2 Reflection - giving and receiving feedback

In concurrence with Elek and Page (2019), reflection in this study involved discussion and problem-solving with the researcher and the team of educators. Acknowledging the need for reflection to enhance learning throughout the study, the educators reflected using Edwards (2017) reflection-before, -in, -on, and -beyond practice as a means to enhance knowledge, skills, confidence and competence. *Reflecting-before*, on the learning that occurred through the content-focussed workshops was critical to the educators attempting to implement it in practice in the classroom. Discussions revealed a need for the educators to tease out what might work best with the different groups. Ena recounted:

we're doing the alliteration games with the afternoon group but we chatted and decided the morning group are not there yet (DD2 Ena).

Some weeks later after Obs. 3 Nina observed:

lots of positive experiences unfolding. Important to not overthink and just take a step back and observe, what works for one group, may not work for the other group. I know not to get caught up on that (DD3 Nina).

Reflecting-in happened 'on the hoof' as they worked with the children while *reflecting-on* and *reflecting-beyond* provided an opportunity to look back as a group on their individual experiences of strategies used. In concurrence with Edwards (2017) and Helyer (2015), this helped to determine what worked and did not work as Nina said:

we were trying to get them to clap for syllables but they hadn't a clue so we backtracked and stuck with clapping for full words, you know, breaking up the sentences (DD3 Nina).

In addition, feedback given early in the programme began to impact more on the educators as they become more aware. It also helped to identify where they might make changes and improvements to practice, going forward. Lena observed:

I think the one thing that stuck out for me actually was when we discussed how important listening is as well, like hearing the sounds and noticing exactly what you hear.... But the listening side of it definitely made me more conscious... (DD3 Lena).

Lena added to this conversation when she said:

I think we definitely have more of an emphasis on listening to sounds and emphasising rhyme. Yea we have more of a focus on it now (DD3 Tina).

While they do not recognise these discussions as giving or receiving feedback to and from each other, that is exactly what is occurring within this staff group, as they discuss what they observed worked for each other. They are constructing new knowledge in association with others, as is contended by social constructivism theory (Vygotsky, 1978). Sociocultural learning theory posits that learning is a social process fostered through interactions with others (ibid). Throughout this study the educators discussed the ongoing changes to their practice and how this supported their connections with each other and the children. Their conversations with each other, sharing experiences and co-constructing new meanings, concurs with Vygotsky's (1978) belief that learning happens first through collaboration with others (interpsychological) and then through its integration into what we already know (intrapsychological), to construct new understandings. The educators reported changes in their practice as a result of their discussions with each other:

it was great really having each other to bounce off of... you know the way we know each other so well we can talk about what we don't understand and someone else will surely understand better and explain it (FFG Gina).

As this study progressed and the educators became more confident in their knowledge, they regularly spoke of how, during their reflective discussions (the CoP) they shared how they were gaining confidence to have fun with the process, as Tina recounted:

between us it does bring a good bit of craic which is nice. Like someone doing a rhyme and then someone will throw in a word. It's playful and fun (FFG Tina).

Getting to the stage where the children are playing with language has promoted an air of fun in the setting Lena reflected during the final focus group:

it even brings in fun with the staff. As they are having fun, and we are having fun, we have interactions together... we are laughing saying these things with them going around the building... you are laughing at what they are saying because even though it doesn't make sense, they are playing with language and we are joining in the craic (FFG Lena).

In the final focus group Nina also reflected:

on a personal level, this programme has made me re-evaluate some areas of my teaching and implementing of tasks. It gave me new insights and provided many learning opportunities. The children benefited from our learning as it gave us ideas and an awareness of how to simplify what we were doing which had better outcomes for their learning and development (FFG Nina).

The post observation de-brief discussions and the final focus group facilitated this reflective process and provided an opportunity for me to offer timely, positive descriptive feedback that the educators were able to connect with and understand (Jug *et al.*, 2019; Keiler *et al.*, 2020). All the educators made it clear they welcomed advice on how they could improve what they were already doing. Engaging with and reflecting on this feedback as part of a professional team is reflecting in a CoP and the data relating to this are explored in the next section.

5.4.3 Reflection in a Community of Practice

This CoP evolved naturally within the setting, promoted by the reflective practice that research informs us is required to enhance quality improvement in ECEC (Peleman *et al*, 2018). As the full staff team were not engaged in the research, this was a smaller, more focussed CoP than the full practice team. From early on in the study it was apparent that a separate CoP had evolved, although they themselves did not call it this. They felt they were just sharing literacy experiences and knowledge. Being able to reflect on and discuss their successes and challenges with each other was a bonus, as they explained:

because you feel like you are doing it as a team (FFG Gina).

Ena concurred as she said:

Yea I think that everybody doing it together and everybody on the same page helped (FFG Ena).

This concurs with Vygotsky's (1978) contention that learning is socially constructed and is socially negotiated by the community (Lave and Wenger, 1991). These discussions assisted in their reflection on their experiences which they needed to enable them enhance their practice (Helyer, 2015).

The educators identified both learning from and in collaboration with their colleagues as key to their own growth over the programme which is in accordance with Jensen and Iannones (2018) assertions that reflecting on and sharing personal experiences in groups is important. They also felt empowered to influence changes in each other as individually they developed competence using different strategies (*ibid*). While discussing with each other how a specific strategy might not have worked for them with a particular group of children, another team member would offer suggestions and potential solutions. For example, while discussing clapping as a segmenting strategy that was not working with some of the children, it was volunteered by Ena:

that didn't work for me either so instead I got the ball and we rolled it to each other for each word and that seemed to work (DD3 Ena).

Within this staff group there was a breadth of experience and throughout the discussions it was clear that some were looking up to the 'experts' in the group. As

considered by Moats, these expert teachers will have “the knowledge, strategies and materials to judge what to do with particular children... on the basis of observation, evidence for what works, and knowledge of the science of reading, child development, and content” (2020, p.17). Onset and rime proved to be particularly difficult for the educators to take on board. Nina indicated she felt she understood it when she said:

I think I’ll be ok – I’ll go over the slides again and I’ll be able to figure it out
(W3 Nina).

However, the other educators voiced their lack of confidence:

I don’t think I’ll be able to do that. I don’t think I could explain it well enough
(DD3 Tina)

While Lena asked:

can you explain that again (DD3 Lena)

Gina added:

I need it again too please (DD3 Gina)

Finally, Ena said:

I think I’ll need some time to digest that to understand it enough to teach it (DD3 Ena).

Their lack of confidence in their understanding of onset and rime was reiterated again in the final focus group, where most of the educators said they still did not understand onset and rime sufficiently to be able to teach it but were happy to try and learn from the other educator. This, however, brought a hurried response from that educator who said she did not feel she knew it well enough to teach anyone. In fact, a journal entry relating to onset and rime recorded:

this is harder than the other things we’ve done so have to discuss and plan again
(RJ Nina 17/5/22).

This lack of understanding regarding onset and rime was also noted in the journal of the educator with the least experience, where after the final workshop she recorded

I'm glad the others seem to understand this [onset and rime] because I don't. At least I can watch them do it and learn that way (RJ Gina).

This is in concurrence with Lave and Wenger's (1991) contention that CoP's should address problems of practice and situated learning environments should provide learners with the opportunity to explore their challenges collaboratively and reflectively, leading to meaningful knowledge in context and rich learning situations. I will now discuss the next sub-theme, Reflection leading to self-belief and supporting others.

5.4.4 Reflection leading to self-belief and supporting others

The new-found confidence in how they are implementing strategies and changing in-the-moment to meet the children's needs demonstrates a new self-belief in the educators individually and as a staff team. Even within their own small group, some were evidently already moving into the role of expert as they offered to support each other's learning. Additionally, they began to draw other staff who were on the periphery, into their community (Lave and Wenger, 1991), sharing their new knowledge and skills. Final focus group data recorded comments like:

I have really relaxed and I'm learning to just have fun and not force it
(FFG Gina)

While Lena added:

we were doing some things like this before but we just didn't realise the impact and the importance of it (FFG Lena).

Ena concurred:

I don't think I'd have learned as much though if we weren't all doing this together. Being able to talk about the bits that work and the bits that don't work has really helped me to become much more confident. I really feel like I'm good at this now (FFG Ena).

This was followed by affirmations from the rest of the group. These findings are in concurrence with Lave and Wenger (1991) who asserted that when learning is socially constructed, competence is not defined on an individual level, rather it is socially negotiated by the community. Contributing and participating in the community is how the individuals learn (*ibid*).

While having discussions about various strategies to use in their rooms, the educators who did not opt to participate in the study became interested. This supports Lave and Wenger's (1991) contention that in communities of practice, participation is initially peripheral but slowly increases in engagement and complexity. To keep the staff team who were not participating in the study somewhat informed, slides from the presentation were shared at their staff meetings:

We went through the first presentation at the staff meeting and explained it as best we could. I think they were really interested... surprised too just like we were at the continuum! (DD2 Ena).

This ensured that when the participating educators were introducing new strategies to develop PA skills, the others had some idea of what was going on. Being willing and able to support the other staff was an indication of their knowledge and confidence (Bandura, 1977). Self-efficacy was evident as they confidently and competently began to support each other in their work. In-situ job-embedded professional development and learning can be a source of confidence for educators in the process of adopting new practices. (Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2017). Bandura theorised that seeing peers succeed raises beliefs that they too can become competent. Just as the educators had learned through the vicarious experience of observing me during the modelling process, so too the non-participating educators wanted to learn from the others in the setting. After the final focus group I recorded:

I think they are really enjoying being the 'experts' in the teaching and learning experience with the rest of the staff team (RJ Researcher 9/6/22).

In fact, when Ena expressed doubt in her ability to teach onset and rime, Tina stepped in and offered to go over it with her again. This was an indication of the competence that Tina felt as she offered support to her colleague through a sharing of knowledge and is demonstrating a true community that is sharing practice (Wenger, 2010). This

confidence also began to extend to the parents/carers in the setting. This are discussed in the next sub-theme.

5.4.5 Advocating to parents and other stakeholders

Although there were few opportunities to share their new knowledge with the parents throughout the programme, when opportunities arose they took them. Advocating to parents regarding the development of literacy skills and recognising how best they might support parents, going forward, is a further demonstration of their developing confidence and self-efficacy. Their new knowledge impacted on their personal and professional confidence as they began to speak with self-assurance to others, particularly the parents, of their PA work with the children. While the educators play an important role in the development of EL and PA, parents as their primary educators have a greater influence on the children's learning. Therefore, it makes sense to develop a strong partnership with the parents of children attending their setting. While the parents had been informed at the outset of the intention of the programme, after Workshop 1 an information sheet was issued so the parents could continue working and playing at home with the children ([Appendix M](#)). However, on enquiring about interest from parents after observation 2, Ena commented:

we don't really have a lot of time to interact with parents at the door anymore – not since Covid – so there's not really any space to have those conversations (DD2 Ena).

Gina added:

I'd imagine a lot of them would have questions if we were to ask them. But there's just nothing forthcoming. Covid has changed a lot (DD2 Gina).

However, no further interest was indicated until they were on an outing and opportunities arose for conversations with the parents. One of the parents began discussing it, asking what they were doing as her son was always trying to recognise rhyme – sometimes he got it right and sometimes he got it wrong! Ena recounted the conversation she had with the parent:

So I just explained what we were doing. I was able to tell her these things connect to later reading skills. That's why we do things like that (rhyming and alliteration). I think if she had questioned me going back a few months though, it would have made me think twice. But now I was like oh well I can answer that for you ... before you might second guess yourself. (FFG Ena).

This new confidence was a recurring narrative amongst the educators and the discussions with the parents on the outings was relayed back to the focus group with comments like:

I felt ok explaining it to the parents, I could say why we were doing it and the importance of doing it (FFG Lena),

Tina added:

yea and I was telling them how much craic the kids get out of it all, sure it's not learning for them, it's just fun, and they should try doing it at home too (FFG Tina).

This aligns with the thinking of Skibbe *et al.* (2000) who claim parental scaffolding of literacy learning is particularly supportive when pitched at the right level. While talking to these parents on the outing, Tina tried to explain the change in their practice with regards to teaching the phonics programme they used to use:

I tried to explain how far down the line phonics was but I don't think she got it. I think maybe we should use the continuum at the Parents' Information meeting before they begin and then they'd know (FFG Tina)

This demonstrates a quantum leap in terms of the confidence of the educators. Their pride in the newfound ability to explain, justify and advocate for PA and not phonics was evident in their comments. *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life, The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People* (DES, 2011) states that parents have an important role to play and have much to offer ECEC settings regarding literacy. Parents need to know how best to support their children's emerging skills and the Strategy suggests the ECEC setting has a role

to play in this. This conversation aligns with the strategy's recommendation of raising parental awareness of their capacity to support their child's learning and skill development (*ibid.*).

5.4.6 Summary theme 3: reflection within a community of practice

As I read through the data multiple times, it was clear that the learning process for this group of educators was not only enhanced by a CoP but it would seem it was a necessary component of their learning process. Their reflective conversations helped them identify the differences in how the learning was being applied between the two different class groups so when a strategy might have been effective with one group of children and educators, it did not necessarily mean it would be effective for the second group or other educators. The CoP provided a safe reflective space to discuss these challenges and learn from each other (Wenger, 1998) and develop new strategies to enable them apply what they have learned, to improve. This concurs with the contention from Darling-Hammond *et al.* (2017, p.18) that professional learning communities "can be a source of efficacy and confidence in the process of adopting new practices". The confidence generated through this CoP afforded them the self-assurance to be just as playful as the children with their new knowledge and skills to the extent that they continued their playfulness and experimenting with language outside of the classrooms, while moving around the building.

5.5 Conclusion

This chapter presented and discussed the findings from five cycles of a CAR study. The findings demonstrate that an increase in knowledge impacted the educators' confidence, which in turn helped their developing skills and competence, all of which led to a change in their practice. Their increasing confidence over the period of the professional development and learning programme was palpable as they readily explained their practices with both the children and parents, discussing how both they and the children were learning. Their growing ability to assess the children's PA level and make in-the-moment decisions regarding strategies to use was evident in the data.

Their methodological preferences were identified early in the study and the data articulated their preference for engaging with this programme as a group, providing a forum where they could discuss the challenges with particular strategies and/or children. Cunningham *et al.* (2015) contend that studying in groups can contribute to developing a competent and confident team that are well equipped to meet the children's needs. This CoP proved to be an integral part of their learning process and provided a space for them to bring other staff into their learning space. Having the confidence to advocate to parents was an unexpected outcome that emerged from the data, and confirmed the new-found knowledge, confidence, skills and competence had a significant impact on their professional personas.

The next chapter revisits and answers the research questions, considers the contribution to knowledge in addition to recommendations for policy, practice and research.

Chapter 6 - Conclusions

6.1 Introduction

Phonological awareness skills are key EL skills that children need to have to be able to learn to read (Justice and Pullen, 2003; Shanahan, 2005; Schuele and Boudreau, 2008). However, these skills do not develop naturally in the same way that language skills can develop. For that reason, they need to be taught. The age range of children attending the ECCE preschool scheme in Ireland is from two years and eight months to five years and six months which is the key stage for children to begin to develop PA skills. Therefore, the educators who work in these settings need to know and understand their role in the development of PA skills. Unfortunately, not just in Ireland, but at an international level, educators do not appear to be informed sufficiently to enable them effectively support the development of these skills (Moats and Foorman, 2003; Moats, 2014).

The aim of this study was to establish how a professional development and learning programme on PA in a situated-learning context influences the knowledge and skills of educators thereby influencing their professional learning and practice. To achieve this, I developed a bespoke professional development and learning programme on PA and delivered it in-situ to a group of educators. Research indicates that effective professional development and learning impacts on knowledge, practice and efficacy (Desimone, 2009; Labone and Long, 2016). To consolidate what was learned from the study, the research questions, originally presented in section 1.4, are again presented and answered in section 6.2 below. Additionally, the findings and key insights are summarised in the context of the literature review and the theoretical framework. Section 6.3, and its subsections, address my contribution to knowledge from a theoretical, professional practice and policy perspective. Section 6.4 and its subsections consider recommendations for policy, practice and future research.

6.2 Revisiting the research questions – key insights

I will now present and answer each of the research questions, drawing on the more significant findings from the study in addition to engaging with the academic and policy literature explored in chapters 2 and 3.

6.2.1 Research question 1

The first research question was: *From a review of the literature and an assessment of the participants' current knowledge level, what are the key elements of a professional development and learning programme to support their PA knowledge and skills?*

The literature provided a starting point in addressing this question. It is clear from chapter 3 that teaching PA involves significant knowledge of both child development and pedagogical strategies. Consequently, educators who have a “rich understanding” (Cunningham *et al.*, 2015, p.63) of EL can apply that knowledge in the classroom to support developing PA skills. The literature informs us that PA follows a developmental progression and children acquire an awareness of larger units of sound first, before becoming aware of smaller units, right down to phonemes (Adams, 1990; Justice and Pullen, 2003; Bailet *et al.*, 2013; Yopp and Yopp, 2022). When designing this PA programme, it was important that the programme structure reflected the developmental progression of PA as outlined in the PA continuum, which was also outlined in chapter 3.

The Pre-IQ's were also valuable in providing information of the educator's current knowledge and practices. While the Pre-IQ found that the educators engaged in the development of good basic foundational skills such as rhyming, singing and reading, the time they reportedly spent engaging in these types of activities was quite limited. The results on what they already knew regarding PA skills were inconclusive, as some had ticked all available boxes, attributing the same skills to both PA and phonics. This would suggest that in line with international research, educators in general have a poor understanding of PA, how it develops and the manner in which they could successfully support the development of these skills (Crim *et al.*, 2008; Cunningham *et al.*, 2009; Cunningham and O'Donnell, 2015). It was apparent they were unclear in their

understanding, proving their self-reported knowledge and their actual knowledge were misaligned (Cunningham *et al.*, 2009; Carson and Bayetto, 2018). Knowing how good or reliable the evidence we gather is enables us to establish what specific knowledge and skills the educators need to learn (Guskey, 2017). Through merging the data collected in the Pre-IQ and from field notes in the initial induction workshop, I focused on what Darling-Hammond *et al.* (2017, p.5) identify as “specific academic content”. Although the educators had some valuable EL practices in place, their knowledge regarding PA skill development was low. Therefore, while their current practices supported the children on the lower end of the EL continuum, findings indicated they required input on PA knowledge and pedagogical strategies to support the children to develop an understanding of sound units and rhyming skills.

Existing knowledge impacts on how new knowledge is assimilated and applied. As this was a CAR study, each intervention cycle accommodated the educators existing knowledge, added new knowledge to what they already knew and informed the subsequent workshops. Each educator brought a varied background of prior knowledge and experiences to the professional development and learning, and this was key to how each approached the new learning (Knowles, 1980). Because some of the educators had indicated a low level of knowledge, the first content input began with explaining the EL continuum and with basic rhyming skills. The workshops were taking place in their own workspace (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Stein, 1998), which appeared to promote a confidence within them as they engaged openly in discussion and sharing their understandings regarding EL in addition to rhyming and current practices. Adult learning theory purports that experience enables adults to apply their learning in a more effective manner, rendering new material that is connected to prior learning more easily understood (Knowles *et al.*, 2005). The experiences of the educators as reported in this study confirms that the authentic real-world tasks that allowed exploration, trial and error, contributed greatly to their learning (Knowles, 1980).

It was important to build on what the educators already knew and did well. They had identified they read a lot of stories and enjoyed doing nursery rhymes. Building on this, the focus began with the first step of the PA continuum, rhyming skills.

Subsequent workshops moved up the continuum at a pace dictated by them. Moving to segmenting, beginning first with sentence segmentation, and working our way up to the smallest unit of sound, the educators' knowledge and skills were greatly enhanced. Having opportunities to practise these skills with the children in their own settings, in the company of others on the programme, was key to their learning.

Having clearly identified where the starting point for the programme needed to begin, the next decision was to determine what instructional strategies or practices were most likely to achieve the desired learning outcomes, which led to the second question regarding the programme elements, which will be addressed in the next section.

6.2.2 Research question 2

The second research question for this study was: *How do the various elements of the professional development and learning programme developed (e.g., workshops, observations, coaching, modelling, feedback and reflective journaling) individually and collectively influence the educator's PA knowledge and skills?*

A focus of this professional development and learning programme was to improve the literacy development knowledge level of the educators and this question sought to discern which specific elements of the intervention showed the strongest evidence of an increase in knowledge. The findings identified workshops, observations that included coaching using modelling and feedback, and reflection as the educators preferred effective elements in this professional development and learning programme. These will be addressed in turn below.

6.2.2.1 Workshops

The cycles of each intervention began with workshops, offering content knowledge, strategies and activities. After a two-week period whereby the educators could practice the strategies and activities with the children, the on-site observation took place. Following on from this, the findings highlighted how the workshops were an effective means of delivering PA content knowledge while also proving to be key in supporting the development of links to prior knowledge. In fact it became a space where they supported and influenced each other's understanding (Bou and Sales, 2022), with the

more knowledgeable others supporting the less informed (Vygotsky, 1978; Lave and Wenger, 1991), while also again confirming the relational aspect of the learning process.

The evidence indicated that the workshops contributed to the increasing knowledge of the educators and prompted informed discussions on potential strategies to transfer this knowledge into practice. This marked an increase in confidence within the team, demonstrating a strong link between knowledge and confidence. Having opportunities to observe this newfound confidence in the educator's knowledge in-situ, further informed the study on the extent of the changes to their practice. This was relayed by all the educators in section 5.2.4. The observations will be discussed in the next section.

6.2.2.2 Observations – opportunities for coaching using modelling and feedback

It is evident that the professional development and learning programme delivered in-situ contributed to real changes in instructional practices in the classroom. It provided opportunities for educators to practise and apply their new learning in their own setting while being observed by an 'expert' which is, according to the literature, an approach that supports upskilling in a meaningful way (Desimone, 2009; Darling-Hammond, *et al.*, 2017; Rogers, Brown and Poblete, 2020). Observing educators in-situ long enough to see repeated practices helped identify what practices the educators deemed important (Cohen *et al.*, 2017), as well as identifying where further support was required. While they initially found being observed to be stressful, they also indicated the coaching strategies of modelling and feedback throughout the observation days provided the greatest learning curve for them.

These observation days proved to be mutually beneficial, offering opportunities to both show and be shown. Findings revealed the educators had learned from and acquired new knowledge through observing the researcher take opportunities to model practices as they arose (Bandura, 1977) . This was confirmed by Gina when she discussed how opportunities she had observed the researcher take (look...book...truck) helped her to extend the learning for the boys in question (section 5.3.3). This

study also supports other previous research indicating that learning on-the-job provided opportunities for the educators to connect their expanding knowledge with new practices (Knowles, 1989; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger *et al.*, 2002; Wenger, 2009).

During the observations, opportunities were taken to coach through modelling and giving feedback-in-the-moment to the educators, both on opportunities taken and missed. During observation 1, the researcher demonstrated taking some rhyming opportunities with the children while chatting about a storybook. In the de-brief discussion later, the educators suggested they would have preferred to have seen some modelling prior to the content input, as they believed it would have benefited them more. We discussed the order of the programme and the need for what Darling-Hammond *et al.* (2017) term the specific academic content to precede the observation day. The modelling opportunities taken were connected to this input.

This study reveals a strong connection between the modelling and feedback elements of the professional development and learning, the educator's learning, and the establishment of new beliefs and practices. A common thread throughout the findings was the declaration by all the educators that they are visual learners. Seeing the theory in practice through the use of visual demonstrations was most beneficial for them (Freese, 2006). Also, questions posed by the researcher in-the-moment caused them to reflect and question their own practice (Desimone and Pak, 2017; Morgan and Bates, 2018). As coaching opportunities for modelling and providing honest feedback in-the-moment arose, they were taken by the researcher. Previous research studies carried out by Scarparolo and Hammond (2018) have indicated this creates opportunities for the establishment of new beliefs and practices, grounded in the educators' own learning experiences. This is also true for the educators in this study as the findings identified very clearly that modelling and feedback considerably impacted on their learning which Lena confirmed when she said "those times you were here showing us, definitely I gained more understanding about what we were talking about followed by Tina's assertion "Modelling is definitely where my confidence came from..." (FFG, see section 5.4.1). Some opportunities were taken by the researcher in-the-moment and strategies were modelled and more importantly, explained to the educators. Gusky

(2002) argues that honest feedback on efforts is required to ensure new changes to practice are sustained. This study found that this was an effective teaching and learning approach.

6.2.2.3 Reflection

Reflection through collaborative dialogue in addition to their individual reflections in their journals, can lead to transformed learning and practices and influence the application of new knowledge to other situations and occurrences (Mezirow, 1997). Utilising this element within the professional development and learning framework supported reflection both on- and for- further action (Schön, 2017) as the collaborative discussions helped pose and answer reflective questions. This supported the educators with opportunities to see things from different perspectives and inform new practices (Varghese et al., 2022). Reflecting on one's own practice can lead to significant personal transformations (Mezirow, 1997) and this study suggests that self-reflection occurred both in discussions and through their reflective journals.

As a result of the inputs through the various professional development and learning elements, knowledge and confidence continued to increase. The findings indicate that as confidence in their skills grew, there was an increase in the frequency with which PA development strategies were engaged in with the children, leading to an increase in their own competence. This contributed not just to their knowledge but also to their confidence, as they learned through co-participation in the shared practice of their lived-in, real life experiences (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Running parallel to this, the data indicated an increase in their ability to recognise and take opportunities with the children. Their increase in knowledge, confidence and competence influenced the frequency of their engagement in PA development strategies. Bearing in mind that regularly practicing these new-found skills, led to an increase in the quality of the interactions and significantly improved the educator's competency levels. This is in alignment with Cunningham *et al's*. (2015) findings which indicate that when the quantity of PA activities increased, the quality of the activities also increased.

In general, this study found that workshops, observation and coaching that included modelling and feedback, in addition to reflection, contributed greatly to the educator's

knowledge, confidence, skills and competence. Using their new knowledge, they learned how to take opportunities to enhance the children's PA skills as they arose, and through their discussions, to recognise and assess the missed opportunities. Of greatest benefit to themselves and the children was their developing confidence and competence on how to re-engage with those missed opportunities, going forward. The way discussions amongst colleagues in the setting progressed helped to inform the third research question.

6.2.3 Research question 3

This was a CAR research study which set out to build knowledge, inform theory and ultimately, change practice (Riel, 2017). The third research question was: *How did the collaborative features of this intervention contribute to achieving a change in the educator's PA knowledge, skills and practice.*

The collaborative features such as dialogue and conversations throughout the study contributed to the building of knowledge, impacting the educators learning and influencing changes in practice on an on-going basis. Learning through discussing the experiences of others to reach a shared understanding that generates new knowledge and further dialogue, is a feature of collaborative learning (Mezirow *et al.*, 2010). CAR helped the educators to recognise their own view as one perspective and through collaboration, encouraged them to extend their own viewpoint to understanding the multiple perspectives of the rest of the team (Riel, 2017). Sharing discussions relating to their authentic experiences enabled them to arrive at new understandings and supported the development of new practices. They valued the new knowledge learned through participation in collaborative conversations with their colleagues and particularly valued and acknowledged these dialogues as contributors to their growth as professionals.

Also highlighted in this CAR study was the way in which the interactions and relationships in the setting influenced how opportunities were taken for improvement (Riel, 2017). Through these collaborative practices, this study highlights the relational nature of ECEC and confirms the effectiveness of social learning (Bandura, 1977; Vygotsky, 1978; Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2017). Coaching, using modelling and

feedback, was another collaborative strategy used whereby the educator's practice was crucially influenced through the sharing of expertise regarding content and research-based practices (*ibid.*). These research-based practices, in addition to instructional resources and the establishment of a professional learning community, are requirements of a successful professional development and learning programme (Cunningham *et al.*, 2015).

A strong connection was made in the findings between the educator's increasing content and pedagogical knowledge of PA skills and their capacity to support PA development with the children. As increased knowledge and confidence improved their ability to assess the children's skills levels, regular use and practising of these new-found skills led to competence and a whole new cycle of confidence. This finding was emphasised throughout the professional development and learning study as month by month their knowledge increased and practices changed (Wasik and Hindman, 2011; Cunningham *et al.*, 2015; Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2017). While some questions on the Pre-IQ returned inconclusive answers on the educators PA ability and content knowledge, the Post-IQ was more exact in recording improvements in both knowledge of PA and changes in practice. Therefore the educator's ability to enhance the children's PA learning was greatly augmented by their own developing knowledge and skills (Cunningham *et al.*, 2015). This aligns with other research carried out whereby the educators' own improved ability to perform PA tasks was cited as the reason for a change in practice (*ibid.*). This ability was enhanced by the opportunities provided, through the provision of activities and resources, to practise their skills to the point they became explicit in their practice. However, the extent of the change in practice was limited by the level of their increased knowledge. Their own struggle to fully understand the more complex end of the PA continuum left them unable to support the development of these skills in the children.

The findings suggest the provision of strategies and resources that support the teaching of skills added greatly to the educator's learning (Neuman and Cunningham, 2009; Snow and Oh, 2010), and contributed to a change in their knowledge and skills. Throughout the study the demonstrations using appropriate strategies and resources added to the knowledge of the educators and generated both discussions and

reflections on whether they were useful. This use of resources is referred to in the literature as an effective means of increasing the possibility of sustained improved practices in the setting (Cunningham *et al.*, 2009; Cunningham *et al.*, 2015). In this study, the increasing knowledge of the educators supported their ability to develop further resources to support their own teaching. Their mutual commitment to provide opportunities and experiences for the children that would enhance their learning created a sense of belonging. This was apparent as they joked with each other and created a sense of fun while learning to develop PA skills (Wenger *et al.*, 2002).

Significantly, considerable influences on their learning leading to a change in their knowledge and skills was attributed by the educators to the discussions they had as a staff team in their CoP (Wenger *et al.*, 2002) which evolved naturally. The findings indicated their reflections became discussion topics while they were together, as they teased out practices that worked and did not work, developing a shared practice. The knowledge gained through interacting with others within their own domain resulted in transformed practices. The evidence from this study identified not just the collaborative elements but also the community elements of interactions, relationships and learning from other CoP members as key elements of how this programme was enhanced for them (*ibid*). Collaborative conversations with each other were valued very highly. Reflections, both in their journals and throughout discussions, revealed they valued the input of their peers regarding problem-solving which led to changes in their practice and aligns with previous research (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Stein, 1998; Desimone, 2009; Zaslow *et al.*, 2010; Schön, 2017; Peleman *et al.*, 2018). The opportunities they created themselves for collaboration and the sharing of ideas and practices greatly enhanced this professional development and learning experience and clearly demonstrated a change in the educator's PA knowledge and skills.

In summary, in addition to the literature informing these findings, my theoretical framework also undergirds them. Knowles' (1984) theory of andragogy posits that adults learn actively and in the company of others, building on their prior knowledge to create new understandings, as occurred in this study. Vygotsky's (1976) social constructivist and sociocultural theory contents that we socially construct our own understanding of new knowledge through our interactions with others and was visible

throughout the study. Lave and Wenger (1991) situated learning theory supports the view that groups of people with common interests can learn together, as these educators did, to develop their understandings and practices through regular interactions and the sharing of knowledge and support.

6.3 Contributions to knowledge and scholarship

This study was initiated because of the researcher's realisation of a gap in the knowledge base of most ECEC educators who lack the required knowledge, skills and confidence regarding EL and PA skills. This is also acknowledged in the literature (Crim *et al.*, 2008; Cunningham *et al.*, 2009; Cunningham and O'Donnell, 2015; Weadman *et al.*, 2023). Previous research studies have identified that children who present with reading difficulties early on in their school careers often remain poor readers throughout their entire education (Breadmore *et al.*, 2019; National Early Literacy Panel, 2008). ECEC is well positioned to support the development of these skills with young children in their preschool years as the literature also confirms that educators who have the required knowledge and skills can influence children's developing literacy skills prior to entering the school system (Cunningham *et al.*, 2009; Ciesielski and Creaghead, 2020; Elek *et al.*, 2022).

This section identifies the key contributions to knowledge this study makes from theoretical, policy and professional practice perspectives.

6.3.1 A staged model of professional development and learning

The ultimate goal of this professional development and learning programme was to influence the PA practices of the educators in this setting. A critical and unique feature of this programme was its collaborative nature, whereby the educators co-constructed the programme with the researcher, suggesting changes as it progressed (Riel, 2017). Specifically, the application of new learning in authentic situations where they had opportunities to try out new practices under the guidance of a coach, impacted positively on their knowledge and confidence, skills and competence. The professional development and learning stages for PA learning in figure 6.1 outlines the stages of this learning and development programme and the actions associated with these stages

that supported the educators to reach a state of enhanced pedagogical competence and self-efficacy.

Stages 1, 2 and 3 link directly with the workshops. All EL models explored in the study recognised as key the need to begin to input knowledge where the educator's gaps were evident (Desimone, 2009; Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2017; Scarparolo and Hammond, 2017) as occurred at **stage 1**. **Stage 2** recommends the preparation and delivery of content which should be developed with a strong theoretical foundation while **stage 3** advocates the provision of strategies and resources within the workshops with time allocated to engage with these as adults and discuss how they might be applied with the children. At **stage 4** the strategies and activities are introduced and practiced with the children in real-life situations which aligns with the assertion of Chen *et al.*, (2019) that these hands-on occasions provide opportunities to construct new knowledge. **Stage 5** acknowledges how making connections between theory and practice can cause disequilibrium for educators as reflection leads them to oscillate between the two as they encounter "unexpected challenges that required adaptations" (*ibid*, p.10) to ensure the new practices are effective with the children they are working with. **Stage 6** advocates that the practice of skills should be a regular occurrence in the setting, taking time to practice the skills using the different activities and strategies provided (Yopp and Yopp, 2022). The connections of PA theory to practice, in addition to increased time spent practicing PA skills with the children leads to **stage 7**, where there is evidence visible of increased understanding and skills leading to enhanced pedagogical competence and self-efficacy on completion of the programme.



Figure 6.1: A staged model of professional development and learning developed by the researcher

This staged model of professional development and learning clearly identifies the stages of learning through the PA programme in this study. The blending of theory and practice was evident through the embodiment of PA skills into everyday practice. This praxis was enhanced through collaborative contributions to the programme development in addition to the ability and opportunity educators had to practise and hone their emerging skills in a situated learning context. This staged model clearly identifies the stages the educators went through to bring them to an enhanced pedagogical competence and knowledge as well as increased feelings of self-efficacy. However, the model could be used to support educators to upskill not only in PA development skills in ECEC, as in this programme, but for any area of practice in other education sectors.

6.3.2 Knowledge Stairs - levels of knowledge

Imparting new knowledge that influenced practice was one of the foci of this study. Throughout the programme different knowledge levels were identified with the educators. These levels of knowledge have been captured in a knowledge staircase, developed by the researcher, in figure 6.2. To begin with, as identified by Carson and Bayetto (2018), there was a discrepancy between the educator's self-reported knowledge and their actual knowledge as they were "not aware of what they knew and did not know" (p.70). Because of this, I considered *level 1* to be **knowledge misinterpretation**.

This led directly to the next step on the stairwell, *level 2* where there was a definite conflict between current practice in the setting and the new EL theory acquired in the workshops. Indeed, it was identified by Lena in WS1 when she said she did not realise how much the children have to learn before *doing* phonics. This then manifested itself in what I considered to be **knowledge hesitancy** as they struggled with the knowledge that although they had thought they were *doing phonics*, they were now coming to the realisation that there were so many skills for the children to learn first. *Level 3*, **knowledge self-consciousness** was when they initially struggled in the researcher's presence while being observed, an issue also acknowledged by Denscombe (2003).

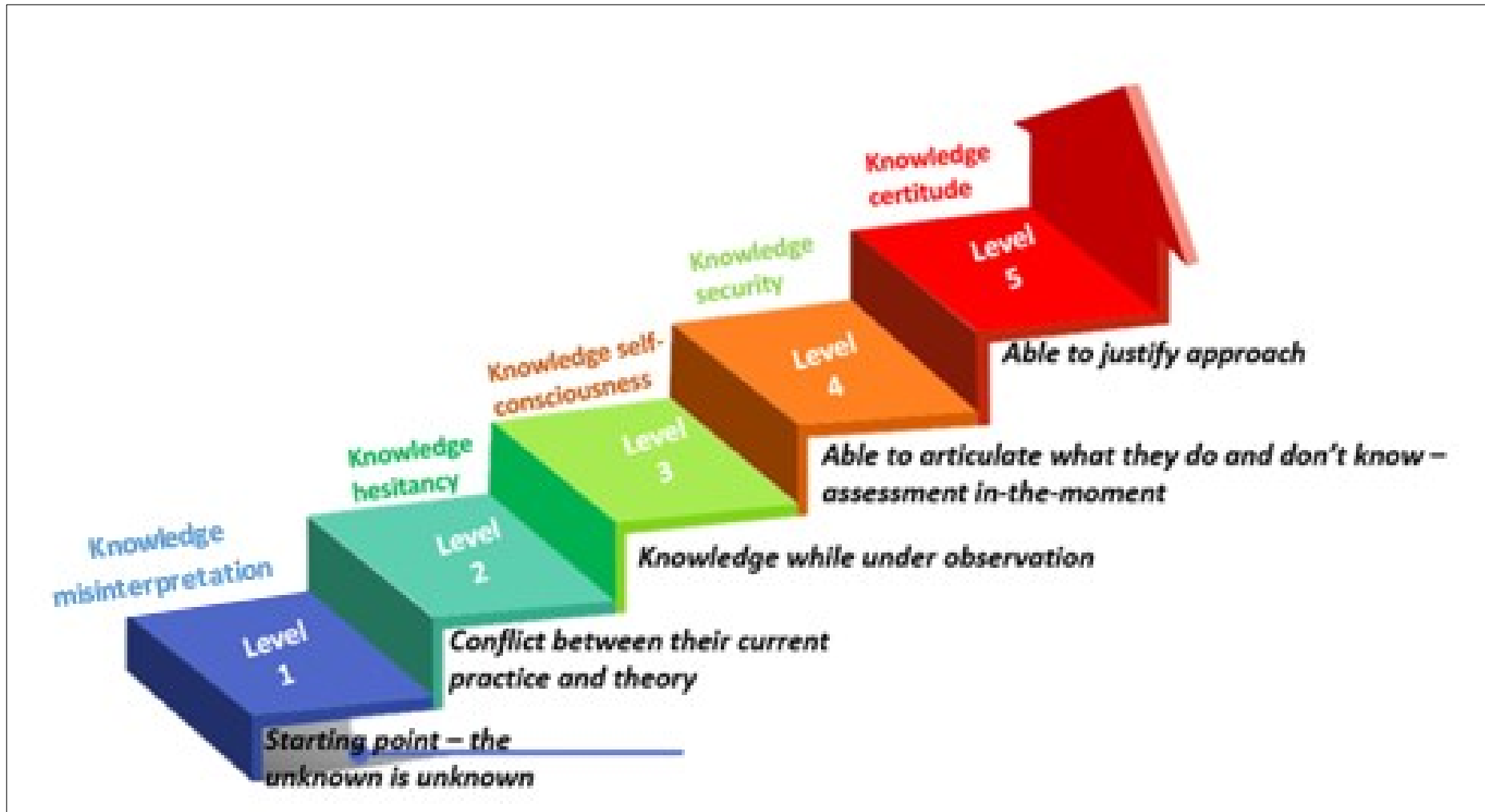


Figure 6.2: Knowledge stairs developed by the researcher

They were in a state of disequilibrium (Piaget, 1936) as the new knowledge was making them question their current practices.

Their demeanour appeared uneasy and uncomfortable and, as recorded in section 5.3.2, that self-consciousness eased as they became used to being observed. **Level 4, knowledge security**, became apparent as the new knowledge began to influence their practices and a confidence in their ability to articulate what they now know and do not know. Knowledge security became particularly apparent as they began to informally assess the children's PA skills in-the-moment, and act on their findings. The final level, **level 5**, I observed at the end of the programme. **Knowledge certitude** was evident as they justified their approach to literacy learning to the parents when they were questioned about it.

This knowledge staircase, developed by the researcher, depicts clearly the learning curve for the participants in this programme. Each step of the stairs demonstrates a more complex level of learning and understanding. Because of how the programme was delivered, and the new knowledge attained, this programme improved the confidence and pedagogical practices of the educators in EL, leading to knowledge certitude, and improved self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977). Therefore, I contend that this framework could be used by others either in the delivery of a PA programme, or other relevant practice-based programmes.

6.3.3 A coaching model

The coaching definition adopted for this research deems it to be a process of providing educators with the “tools, knowledge and opportunities” required to develop themselves and become a more effective educator (Rogers *et al.*, 2020). This job-embedded professional development and learning programme was provided in a supportive manner, whereby the researcher assisted with the introduction of new knowledge and skills into their practice (Twigg *et al.*, 2013; Sawyer and Stuke, 2019). Figure 6.3 demonstrates how the process of coaching encompasses observation, modelling and feedback, all reinforced and enhanced through a process of dialogue and reflection in a community of practice.

The model presented here, developed by the researcher, seeks to illustrate the dynamic nature of the coaching process that was engaged with and influenced this research study. Educators in this study described these elements, which worked in concert with each other, as being most helpful in developing their knowledge and pedagogical competencies. This dynamic process is by no means linear as sometimes dialogue and feedback preceded modelling or *vice versa*, while dialogue and reflection were ongoing throughout the process rather than in any particular order.

Throughout the programme the educators were persistently highlighting how observation days with coaching that included modelling and feedback impacted greatly on their learning. **Observing** educators in their natural surroundings provided opportunities to see current practices and observe changes as the programme progressed (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Seeing the choices made and how different situations are reacted to provides insights into practice that otherwise might not be known or discussed.

Opportunities to **model** strategies also arose throughout each observation and according to Cumming and Wong (2012) is considered an effective way to support learning for educators. This occurred if the researcher observed a situation whereby a modelling opportunity might enhance the learning for educators. After each observation specific **feedback** based on what was noted through the observation focussed on the strengths observed in addition to areas for improvement. Giving specific feedback that is accepted and understood is key to the feedback being beneficial and potential change in practice (Keiler *et al.*, 2020). As is good practice with feedback, it should be timely and descriptive (Jug *et al.*, 2019).

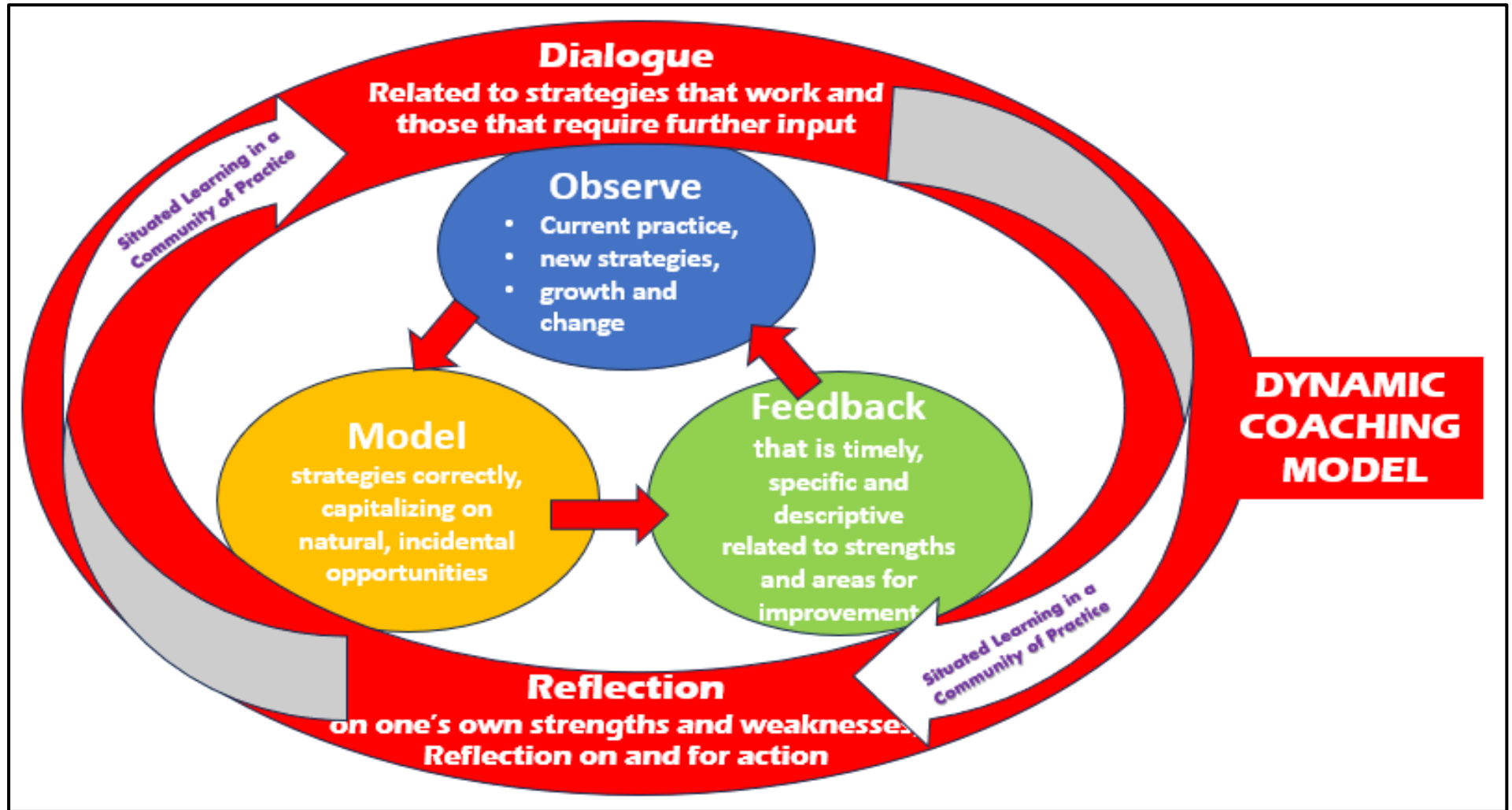


Figure 6.3: Dynamic coaching model

Reflections and *dialogue* subsequent to these coaching sessions led to the development of an in-situ CoP where issues relating to the implementation of strategies across the setting, in addition to potential solutions, were discussed. This study posits the educators benefited from the on-site support of the researcher as an MKO (Vygotsky, 1978) and stimulated greater engagement with the new practices. In addition, the CoP (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 2009) that evolved throughout the study supported an increase in knowledge and the development of a shared practice within the setting context, leading to more sustained practice and enhanced self-efficacy.

The coaching elements of modelling, reflection and feedback supported and reinforced an increased pedagogical competence, beginning with observation and fortified by reflective dialogue in a community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991). This model, developed by the researcher and based on the model used in this research, contributes to knowledge from a theoretical perspective as it acknowledges different theories within a framework that has been utilised to enhance learning and transform practice.

6.3.4 A PA programme for the Irish ECCE context

Developing the programme to address the continuum in a sequential manner was important. However, within each session elements identified that needed further input were also included. Currently the only PA programmes available here in Ireland for this younger age group are off-the-shelf didactic programmes. These programmes provide activities but leave the educators without any understanding of why they are doing them. However, this professional development and learning programme delivered content that informed the educators of the EL and PA continuums while also offering strategies for implementation. Observation that included modelling and feedback with discussion groups completed the package that brought about a significant and sustained change in practice. As a result of this study, a professional development and learning PA programme has been developed, suitable for the Irish context, and can be altered as required to meet the needs of individual educator groups and settings. Adjustments were made within this programme when it was identified both through the observation sessions and the feedback sessions, that more input was

required on specific strategies. However, it would also need to be further reconfigured to take on board the learning from the study. Key to this programme is the underpinning content knowledge providing an understanding to the educators of why they need to engage in specific tasks to support the children's skill development at this particular stage of their lives. When combined with a coaching input, this model has proven to be an effective means of both transmitting new knowledge and transforming practices in the research setting.

6.3.5 Contribution to policy

While there are many international research studies on implementing a PA intervention for ECEC educators (Piastra *et al.*, 2012, 2020; Cunningham *et al.*, 2015; Snyder, Hemmeter and Fox, 2015; Skibbe *et al.*, 2016), there are none available in the Irish context. Of significance internationally is the age range of children in those studies, who are generally three years and over. However, the children who attend the ECCE programme in Ireland are aged from two years and eight months. Children can begin in the Irish primary school system at four years of age and PA skill development has always fallen under the remit of Junior Infants curriculum in primary school. However, since the introduction of the second free ECCE year, children tend to be one year older beginning primary school, with the proportion of four year olds in junior infants falling from 46.5% in 2001 to 16.5% in 2021 (DE, 2022). Therefore, the responsibility for supporting the development of PA skills needs to begin in ECCE settings. The programme developed for this study, once reconfigured to take on board the learning from the study, could be used for this purpose.

The next section looks to the recommendations arising out of this study.

6.4 Recommendations for policy, practice and research

The recommendations highlighted in this section arise from the findings of this study. These recommendations are introduced under three headings; policy, practice and research. I will first address recommendations for policy.

6.4.1 Recommendations for policy

This research raises five implications for national policy. As children in Ireland are now older beginning primary school because of the ECCE scheme, responsibility for ensuring children begin to develop PA skills needs to fall into the remit of the ECCE settings. However, to do this successfully the educators need to be educated in PA instruction as it is crucial that educators understand the importance of the EL continuum and the PA continuum that lies within that. Based on this, I recommend:

1. If not already in place, both EL in general and PA information specifically, should be delivered in a literacy module that would be included in all ITE programmes from QQI level 5 to level 8.
2. To consolidate this learning, and ensure that the content is fully understood, Literacy Coaches should be introduced through the already existing Better Start teams. These coaches would provide on-site support and coaching to educators.
3. Effective professional development and learning that meets the needs of the educators should be provided by the DE/DCEDIY on an ongoing basis to keep the educators upskilled. If the state is serious about impacting the literacy levels of children, qualifications in early literacy should be mandated as a requirement, as was recommended in the NLNS (DES, 2011).
4. PA should be named within the updated *Aistear* Framework (under development) and the many skills required to achieve PA outlined within the *guidance for good practice* section. Likewise, in the forthcoming *Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy*, (under development) ECEC should be identified as the starting point for focusing on PA skills, rather than Junior Infants.
5. Within the new Primary Language Curriculum (NCCA, 2019), the EL and PA objectives need to also be linked to the ECEC sector to promote continuity of practice.

6.4.2 Recommendations for practice

Based on my findings, the following five recommendations arise for practice within ECEC settings.

1. Upskilling in EL and PA should be a regular requirement to practise within settings. This would support those already educated in PA to renew their knowledge and skills and would also introduce new staff members to PA practices in the setting. All educators would then be sufficiently skilled to informally assess the children at the beginning of each academic year, and ensure appropriate strategies are in place to support the development of PA skills.
2. Time within the daily routine and resources within the setting should be provided to support the implementation of the different PA strategies.
3. Coaching support within settings that includes modelling and feedback, should be sought, preferably through Better Start.
4. Time should be set aside to discuss children's EL and PA progress and identify strategies that are working/not working.
5. Letter to Families: To build good connections with homes, settings should seek the support of families and introduce them to the PA activities being focused on in the setting. A short, either one or two page document, either handed out or delivered digitally, could be used.

6.4.3 Recommendations for future research

This section of the chapter highlights three possible areas for future research that I have identified as a result of this research study.

Clearly there are definite gaps existing in the research literature in the area of PA for ECEC educators in Ireland. Findings in this research indicate the educators in this study were not confident in their own knowledge level of language development and initially felt inadequately equipped to support the children's developing PA skills. Scarparolo and Hammond (2018) identify the educator's own knowledge in the structure of language and phonology as being a determining factor in children's success at acquiring basic reading skills. Internationally, this is recognised as being a

particular area of weakness with educators (Moats, 2014; Cunningham and O'Donnell, 2015).

I recommend that a large-scale study be conducted in Ireland to ascertain if the international norm regarding EL and PA knowledge persists in our ECEC sector. This would further inform the development of both policy and PA programmes in Ireland.

Secondly, the PACG for Level 7 and 8 simply require providers of programmes to “generate an appropriate curriculum that stimulates and promotes positive learning dispositions, emergent literacy, maths and science skills” (DES, 2019, p.17). This provides no guidance as to the extent of what emergent literacy skills should be provided in an ECCE setting.

Research is required on the specific content covered by all ITE Early Childhood programmes, from QQI L5 up to QQI L8, on EL in general and PA in particular. This project would then inform policy.

Finally, PA has been identified as a key skill that contributes to early literacy success (Snow, Burns and Griffin, 1998; Whitehurst and Lonigan, 1998; Cunningham *et al.*, 2004; National Early Literacy Panel, 2008; Cunningham and O'Donnell, 2015).

A longitudinal research project could be conducted that provides a professional development and learning programme on PA skills, such as this programme, in early childhood settings in a particular geographical area. These children could then be followed into primary school to assess their ability to engage with the early reading stages of the upper end of the EL continuum.

6.5 Conclusion

Learning to read is an essential skill that begins from an oral foundation and PA has been clearly demonstrated down through the years to be critical for early literacy development. Yet it has been identified that many educators are not themselves proficient in PA skills to enable them to effectively support the children to achieve

vital skills that will help them become good readers later on (Breadmore *et al.*, 2019). The development of this professional development and learning programme was underpinned by my own values in education which were formed through my own time as an adult learner, working directly with young children. Sharing knowledge and learning from each other's successes and challenges, enabled these educators to work as a team, co-constructing strategies that worked for them in their own situation.

It is almost three decades since Moats recognised that “lower level language mastery is as essential for the literacy teacher as anatomy is for the physician” (1994, p.99). ECEC in Ireland has made rapid progress since then with qualification levels of educators increasing all the time, as evidenced by the participants in this study. Through the development of a PA programme, this study has contributed to the knowledge of the participants in this setting and can potentially, inform national policy and practice. I aspire to this study contributing to better PA skills for educators and children into the future.

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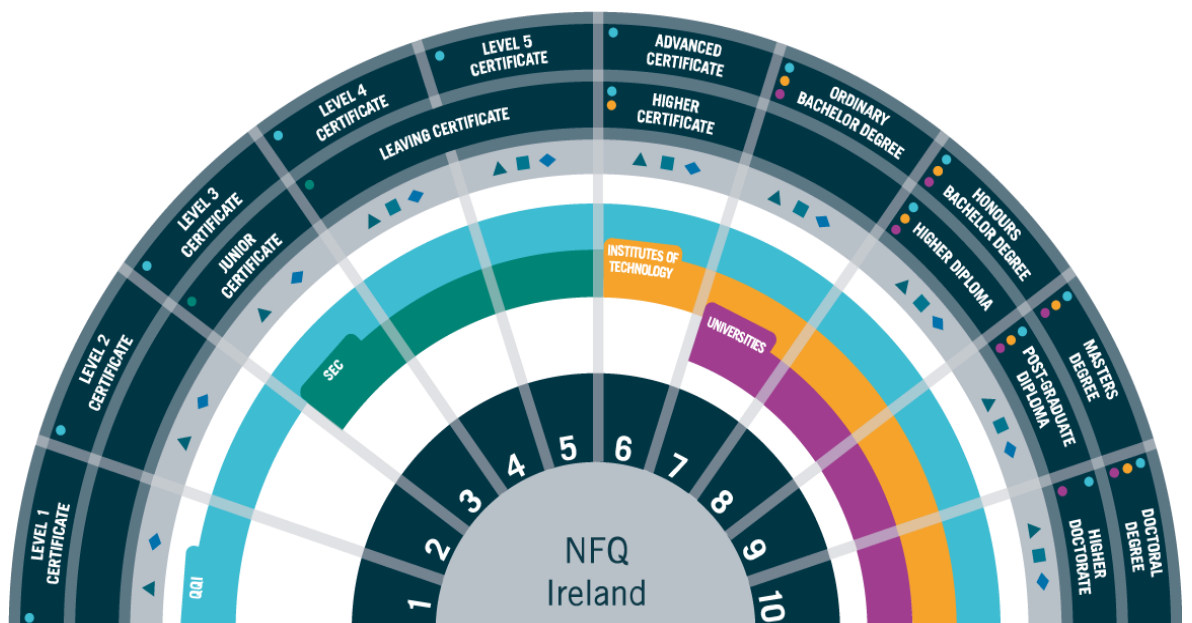
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APPENDICES

Appendix A

National Qualifications Framework
The vocational awards of Levels 5 (ECEC educator) and Level 6 (room leader) are currently the minimum required qualifications within an ECEC setting.



Appendix B

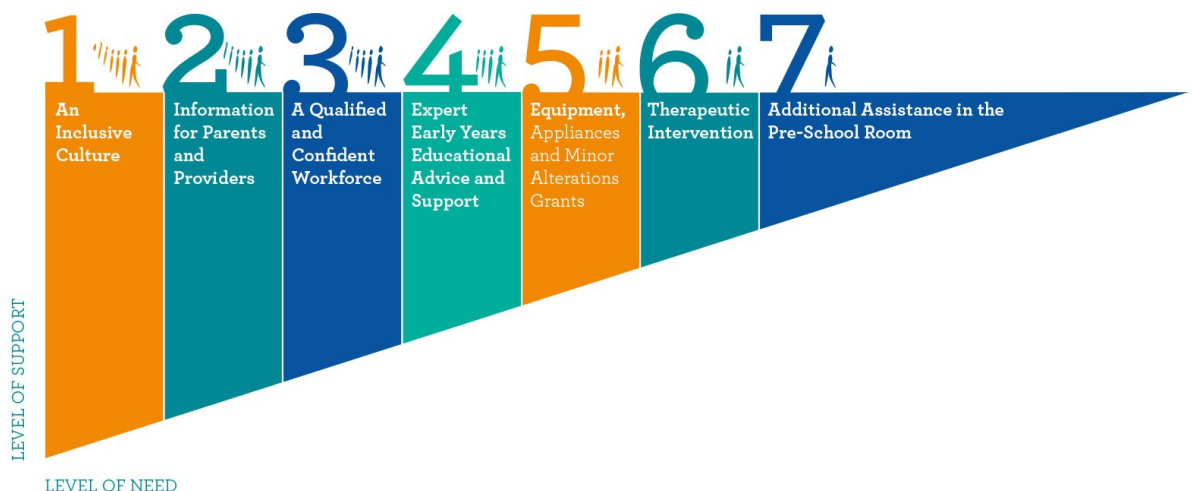
AIM

Background to AIM

- The Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) was launched in June 2016 to enable the full inclusion and meaningful participation of children with disabilities in the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme. AIM is a child-centred model, involving seven levels of progressive support, moving from the universal to the targeted, based on the strengths and needs of the child and the early years setting

AIM supports are divided into two categories:

- Universal Supports (Levels 1-3) benefit the whole pre-school environment through empowering pre-school providers to create a more inclusive culture in their settings.
- Targeted Supports (Levels 4-7) cater to a wide range of abilities and are focused on the needs of the child and do not need a diagnosis of disability.



Appendix C

Key milestones and significant developments that impacted the evolution of the ECEC sector in Ireland over the past 100 years (from Hayes & Walsh (Eds.), 2022).

100 years (1922 – 2022)	
1922	Henrietta Street Crèche is established -
1937	Constitution of Ireland (Bunreacht na hÉireann) 1937 is adopted
1948	Revised Programme for Infants is published
1965	Investment in Education report is published
1966	Organization Mondiale pour l'Éducation Prescolaire (OMEP) (Ireland) is established
1969	Irish Preschool Playgroups Association (IPPA) is founded Rutland Street Project is established
1970	Health Act 1970 establishes Health Boards
1971	Primary School Curriculum 1971 is published
1972	Ireland joins the European Economic Community (EEC)
1978	Task Force on Child Care Services report is published
1983	Working Party on Childcare Facilities for Working Parents report is published Childminding Ireland is founded
1985	Inter- departmental Working Party on Women's Affairs and Family Law Reform report is published
1988	National Children's Nurseries Association (NCNA) is established
1989	The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is published (Ireland ratifies the UNCRC in 1992) Barnardos is established as an independent organization in Ireland
1990	Child Care Act 1991 is introduced
1991	Irish Steiner Kindergarten Association is established
1992	Early Start pilot project commences
1993	White Paper on Education, Charting our Education Future, is published
1994	Child Care (Preschool Services) Regulations 1996 are introduced
1995	Preschool inspections commence
1996	National Forum on Early Childhood Education is held in Dublin Castle
1997	White Paper on Early Childhood Education, Ready to Learn, is published National Childcare Strategy is published Primary School Curriculum 1999 is published
1998	National Children's Strategy, Our Children, Their Lives is published Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP) 2000– 2006 commences

1999	Centre for Early Childhood Care and Education (CECDE) is established National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) is established on a statutory basis Child Care Act 2001 is introduced National Children's Office is established
2000	Ombudsman for Children Act 2002 is introduced Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development published
2001	National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) is established
2002	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development Ombudsman for Children office is established Towards a Framework for Early Learning: A Consultative Document (NCCA)
2003	National Economic and Social Forum (NESF) report on ECEC is published Health Service Executive (HSE) is established, replacing earlier Health Boards Office of Minister for Children is established
2004	Child Care (Preschool Services) Regulations 2006 are published National Childcare Investment Programme (NCIP) commences Early Childcare Supplement is introduced Síolta, The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education is published
2008	CECDE ceases to operate Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs is established (replacing the Office of Minister for Children)
2009	Aistear, The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework is published
2010	ECCE/ Free Preschool Year scheme is introduced
2011	Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) is established IPPA and NCNA merge into Early Childhood Ireland (ECI)
2012	Children's rights referendum passed amending Article 42 of the Constitution
2013	Right from the Start is published
2014	Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, is established Better Start National Early Years Quality Development agency is established
2015	Children First Act 2015 is introduced Article 42A on children's rights is included in the Constitution Aistear Síolta Practice Guide is published
2016	Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016 are introduced ECCE scheme extended to two years ECCE scheme introduces higher capitation for room leaders with degree level qualifications Minimum qualifications introduced for ECEC professionals DES Early Years Education Inspections commence National Síolta Aistear Initiative commences

	<p>Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) is introduced</p> <p>Primary Language Curriculum/ Curaclam Teanga na Bunscoile introduced to infant classes</p>
2018	<p>First 5, A Whole of Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019– 2028 is published</p> <p>Childcare Support Act 2018 (underpinning the National Childcare Scheme) is introduced</p>
2019	<p>National Childcare Scheme announced, replacing the Affordable Childcare Scheme</p> <p>Professional Award Criteria and Guidelines for Initial Professional Education (Level 7 and Level 8) Degree Programmes for the Early Learning and Care (ELC) Sector in Ireland are published</p> <p>Steering Group appointed to develop a Workforce Development Plan</p> <p>Expert Working Group appointed to develop a new Funding Model for Early Learning and Care and School Age Childcare</p>
2020	<p>Establishment of the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY), replacing the DCYA</p> <p>Draft Primary Curriculum Framework is published for consultation</p>
2021	<p>Nurturing Skills: The Workforce Plan for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare 2022–2028 is published.</p> <p>Partnership for the Public Good: A New Funding Model for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare is published.</p>
2022	<p>Together for Better, a new core funding model for the early childhood sector</p> <p>The first Employment Regulation Order (ERO) (Employment Regulation Order (Early Year’s Service Joint Labour Committee), 2022) for the Early years and School Age Care sector is accepted by Minister of State for Business, Employment and Retail, setting a minimum wage scale across the sector, funded primarily by the core funding.</p>

Appendix D

Information Sheet for Owners of the Early Years' Setting

Purpose of the study:

My research is exploring the impact of a professional learning programme, which includes coaching and mentoring, on the confidence and competence of Early Years Educators in phonological and phonemic awareness (PA) knowledge and skills as perceived by the educators.

Who am I?

- My name is Annette Kearns.
- I am a lecturer in the Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education in Maynooth University (MU)
- I have 15 years' experience of running my own preschool in Kilbride and many more years working and researching with young children and families with Meath Co Childcare Committee, Early Childhood Ireland and Maynooth University.
- I will have full Garda vetting and comply with the policies and procedures of the pre-school.
- I am undertaking this research as part of a Doctorate in Education.

What will the study involve?

First, I will need to speak with the educators, the parents, and the children to explain to them about the research and get their consent to take part. Then I will issue a questionnaire that will let me know what understanding the educators currently have about early literacy development. I will use this information as my starting point for the workshops.

I will carry out three workshops with the educators and following each workshop I will visit them on-site to observe their early literacy practices with the children and take opportunities to model and coach good early literacy practices. A short focus group after each observation day will provide an opportunity for the educators to both ask me any questions or seek clarity on any issue and also inform the plans for the next workshop. I will be requesting the educators to give me permission to audio record the on-site sessions to accurately capture the things both the educators and the children say. I will not use either the educators or the children's names in my research. I would also like the educators to keep a reflective journal and record details and examples of their progress throughout the research period.

In June, before the summer holidays, I will return to the setting and observe practices once again. On this occasion I will use my observation notes for one-to-one mentoring sessions with the educators.

After this, I will hold a focus group with the educators to discuss the overall learning from the programme and any increase in confidence and competence as perceived by them.

Who has approved this study?

This study has been reviewed and received ethical approval from Maynooth University Research Ethics committee. You may have a copy of this approval if you ask for it.

Do you have to take part?

No, you do not have to take part in this research. However, I hope that you will agree to hear about the research project.

Participation is voluntary, which means you don't have to take part or you can stop taking part at any time

without saying why. You can also withdraw permission to use your data at any time, up until it has been anonymised.

I do not think there is any **risk** to you in taking part in this research. However, you can talk to me (Annette Kearns, annette.kearns@mu.ie) at any time if you have questions or concerns.

Please note, I will have full garda vetting and will comply with the policies and procedures of the pre-school.

What information will be collected? If you, the owners of the setting, grant permission I will invite all educators in the setting to agree to work with me to:

1. advise me on our planned research and later, on my findings.
2. discuss with me the initial and ongoing plans for the workshops
3. complete a pre-intervention questionnaire
4. take part in the workshops
5. agree to be observed in their classroom and take part in both the coaching and mentoring sessions
6. keep a reflective journal on your learning throughout the programme
7. partake in an audio-recorded focus group after each on-site coaching session and at the end of the programme relating to their knowledge and skills and any perceived increase in confidence and competence, in early literacy development
8. complete a post-intervention questionnaire

Will your participation in the study be kept confidential?

Yes. All the information provided in this study will be kept strictly confidential. However, *'It must be recognised that, in some circumstances, confidentiality of research data and records may be overridden by courts in the event of litigation or in the course of investigation by lawful authority. In such circumstances the University will take all reasonable steps within law to ensure that confidentiality is maintained to the greatest possible extent.'*

Neither the participant nor setting names will not appear in any documentation. All data will be anonymised on transcription.

Personal data in the form of staff email addresses (and/or phone numbers, as preferred) will be needed to keep in contact regarding the progress of the research.

What will happen to the information which you give?

On completion of the research, the data will be retained on the MU server. After ten years, all data will be destroyed. Electronic data will be overwritten by the lead researcher. Information gathered from the research study may be used for ten years in future research about this project, for example, conferences and journal publications.

What will happen to the results?

The research will be written up and presented as a thesis for a Doctorate in Education. A copy of the research findings will be made available to you if you ask for it. Anonymised data from the research study may be used as part of future research related to this project, for example, conferences and journal publications.

What are the possible disadvantages of taking part?

I don't see any risks for you in taking part.

What if there is a problem?

Should you have any questions or concerns. You can talk to the Annette Kearns (annette.kearns@mu.ie) at any time.

If you have concerns about this project and wish to contact an independent person, please contact:

Maynooth University Research Ethics Committee, John Hume Building, North Campus, Maynooth. Tel. 01 7086682. Email: research.development@mu.ie.

If you agree to take part in the study, please complete and sign the consent form overleaf.

Appendix E

An excerpt from the Final Focus group

Bold print is the voice of the researcher

And what we were just talking about there, was now we know it's not rocket science. But because of our lack of knowledge around it, we wouldn't have held on to an emphasis on it, we wouldn't have always retained it within our practice. It was something that happened, but we didn't have a focus on it. Whereas now we know how to have a focus on it without it being a lesson that it's part of our practice. So it's that....

Yeah like you say it doesn't have to be structured like, even walking to the bathroom with you singing songs, getting them to finish the ends. And just it can be implemented anywhere at any time, it doesn't have to be when we are sitting down, when they are doing their work, when the worksheets...like you imagined it would have been.

Did you tell Annette about the day you have the kids in the afternoon?

Oh stop do you remember that. We were doing rhymes, we were just messing, having the craic and we were like... I fell in the pond and the duck went 'quack' I heard the duck, and then one of them went.... and the duck said *uck.... ...and we were like, ok ok yeah, we moved along, didn't focus on it. We were giggling away but you said you have to accept any rhyming words....

But they got the concept.

Yeah...

And I hope you put that in the learning journal?

Yes I did because you had told us about accepting any word!

Yes that is what I said to you at the beginning that when children become competent in this they play with language, and it doesn't...and they will always go for the words they know they are not supposed to say. Because you have to accept it! so you'll get the poo, you'll get the boob, you'll get the willy and all of it.

Yes...but we were like...kept going, it was fun...said without thinking.

Well they were rhyming you see...they were playing with language.

Yes and I suppose it becomes natural.

But even listening to them now, you can even...between...themselves they are even doing things without us leading it.

And that's when they are becoming competent. Once they are competent you hear that language play with them and then you know that they are ready to move to the next step. Now that's not to say that you can't be doing that all the way along. But the chances of them having a greater understanding of it all, when they have these other concepts onboard is much greater. And I'm telling you children when you start now at the beginning of next year with and children who come back and you get further along with these children. They will be primed, they will be going into school ready to begin to develop phonemic awareness skills that will help them begin to read. And it will make such a difference to their lives that they are not struggling as much with all those concepts. Ok, so the big question and I'll ask you this individually, do you feel more confident and competent?

Yes.

Tell me a little more.

Just saying there when that parent questioned probably going back a few months ago, it would have made me think twice. Whereas when she said it, I was like oh no well I can answer that for you...before you might second guess. I really feel like if someone questioned me about it now I'd be able to say why we are doing it and the importance of doing it. But like I think it just goes back to even CPD and stuff, this stuff you should...I done this in college but sure whatever 3 years ago.

But you did what I said which was the first thing, I did the workshop with you, we had a discussion , you had ...it was workshop, so I gave you the content, the workshop in the class, we came up with strategies and you went out the door and you thought no more about it. That's why I incorporated the whole modelling piece into this programme.

Yes I think that modelling is definitely where my confidence came from, and on it the couple of occasions that it did happen I think it was just once like that, say if it was altogether for whatever reason, it would have been like ok grand, and then it wouldn't...there wouldn't have...you would have walked out the door and not done it again, I think . So I think those few times definitely I gained more understanding in competence and then...

And then because you have been conscious of it, then it comes natural.

And then you see like that day you are like this is working so that gives you confidence too, even though it didn't feel like on the outset you might go oh my god, how am I doing to do this...

But it even brings in a bit of fun within the staff. As in we are having fun with it, they are having fun with it, we have interactions together. And even the more you can see, we are laughing doing these things going around the building with them. Because some of they are coming out and saying mental stuff altogether, that isn't a rhyme, but you are laughing even at what they are saying.

But they are playing with language.

But between us, it does bring a good bit of craic within us as well which is nice.

Like someone doing a rhyme and then someone will throw in a word.

It's playful and fun.

And Lena what about you, you said you hadn't encountered this before, so for you right from the very outset this was new to you. So has your confidence and competence do you think increased and why?

Yes, even I'm thinking back to the first meeting I had with you, I was sitting there thinking how am I going to do this? I couldn't understand any of it. And then it was just even the modelling really helped me and seen it happen, I was so conscious of it and I was nearly too conscious that I was overthinking it and I couldn't think of anything that rhymed and I couldn't think of any alliteration because I was just overthinking it. Whereas I began to then feel more comfortable about it and now I just do it without even thinking.

And I think we probably all...like one person being competent in it made us...

Yes it was seeing it....

It wasn't even saying just on the first time definitely just yourself because none of us really know what to be doing. But as the time went on, I knew say from being upstairs and maybe Tina said something or someone else was upstairs or I was down here. I'd be like ok that's...I can use that as well. It's like all of us doing it together...built that confidence.

So that community of practice helped.

I think so yeah.

Ok so do you think that everybody doing it together and everybody on the same page helped you. How did you utilise that community of practice then, did you discuss it at your staff meetings, was it all just on the side, was it both?

Yes I think it was more so on the side. Because we didn't really make it a very formal type of discussion if that makes sense. Say if when we were in the library the other day we were like oh my god, so that's when that brought up the discussion or say that day at the school tour, or you know you'd be like, they are after doing this or whatever or that day when that child said that. So it's kind of more informal as passing chat. Which I actually think sometimes is better than having it very structured and discussed as a topic, because it creates the space for it to be every day then.

And did that community of practice then add to your confidence and competence?

Yes definitely.

Yeah.

Definitely.

Because you feel like you are doing it as a team.

It was fun as well, if someone else is having fun with it you are confident in doing it like at the beginning I don't whether you remember we were saying, I'd always do rhymes with the kids having snacks and their lunches prior to any of this, that's just something I do for a laugh with them. But now when you say the importance of it, I felt I wasn't doing it as often...well it became am I doing this...and then I was just like oh here, just let's back to having the laugh, let it be natural, let it all flow.

That's what it is, it's making it like creating a natural space for it. So I think when we were all doing that and say if I felt more confident because someone else was doing it too and making the effort.

And you are being silly and you just dropping it down and being silly, like seeing you do it, yellow mellow, you now do this...and you are just like...let's have fun with them. And you can see it's created that for them, there's no big pressure on it, it's all natural it's all flowing.

When it is natural then you are not really missing out on as many opportunities because you are not doing it as like a lesson or as a small group whatever you are doing it all the time.

Yes and I suppose that's the whole point of this, is that you do it over a 3 hour period not over 10 minutes session.

So say when we are upstairs particularly the drinks go on top of the fridge, but the children leave them beside the sink. And one of the days someone said, put your drink beside the sink. And we were like... oh there it is! There it is! So when it was naturally happening and you are not putting pressure on it, it just does occur, and you can point it out to the children.

It's fun it becomes fun.

Yes it does.

And because even then because when you start kind of saying the drinks in the sink and they were all laughing and loving it.

But their confidence .

And then you can joke along with that and you can do things like you know those things that we would say like oh you are a poet and you don't know it! your words rhyme all the time. And all of those things and you make a big joke about it. But you are adding to their rhyming knowledge.

Now this only happened today, so we were going home and the kids upstairs were screaming down that it was raining. And one of the kids goes to me, I want to live in Spain, and I was like... it would be great if we lived in Spain. But then all of a sudden he was like you have to go on a plane to go to Spain. And then it went, you know the

way I said, the rain in Spain stays mainly on the plain. And I just said that as a joke we were walking down. And he literally says it back, the rain in Spain stays in mainly on the plain. And I'm like how did you get that so quick! But I don't know whether that is part of it though.... I think the rhyme helps them to remember.

I agree!

He said like you said it to me. And I'm like I literally just said it to you now.

Rhyming helps us to remember. Because if you know what the expectation of the sound is you can get it. So all of you have felt more confident and competent. And it is that is supported by your community of practice within the group here.

Yes.

Going forward then and I haven't got this question written down because it's just coming to mind, is there any other area of your work that you think would benefit from the same type of input where you have a workshop and you have the coaching with modelling and feedback? I'm wondering would you find it beneficial to have another coaching modelling session in September to start you off again with the new year? Or, do you think it's sufficiently embedded in your practice for you to come back and just start it, because that's what I want.

I'd say come back and start it, do another session with us.

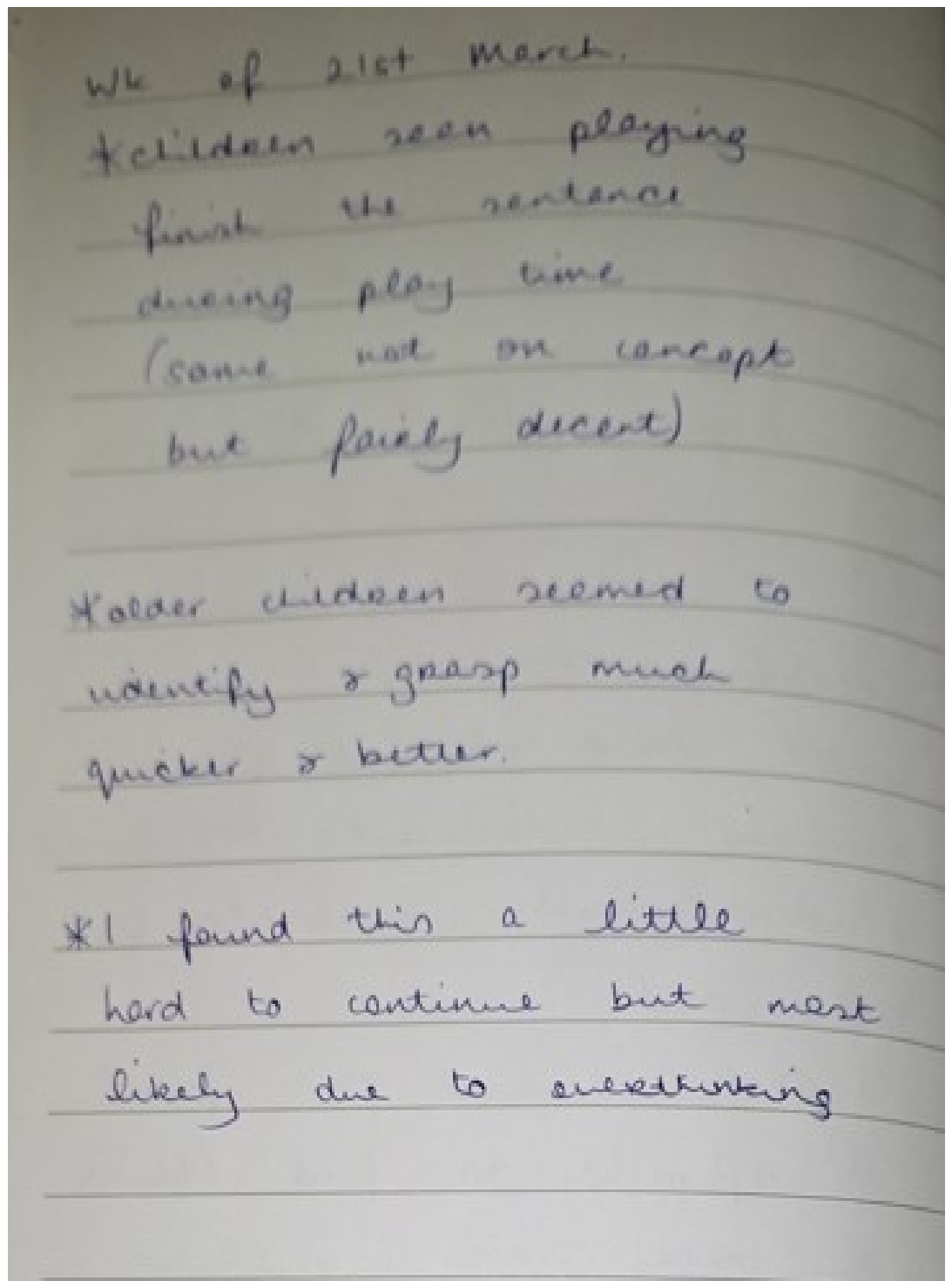
Yeah.

I think so yeah.

And I think if even only one person was able to come back and start it, we'd all be able to get back into it then.

Yes I think we'd be, I don't know...I think if someone new was to begin, I think you'd be confident to discuss it with them and say this is what we did and the reason for it and just have again...just have the fun again with it. And I think it would just kick off naturally again.

Some excerpts from the reflective journals



Wk of 21st March.

*children seen playing

finish the sentence

during play time

(some not on concept

but fairly decent)

*older children seemed to

identify & grasp much

quicker & better.

*I found this a little

hard to continue but most

likely due to overthinking

We of 9th May

I asked children to copy sounds they heard. Particularly sounds we heard inside & outside. ESOL sounds

I used blocks to do sentence segmentation. (Building a sentence with each word) also tried using rhyming sounds.

I saw some children enjoyed using beads on a necklace to build sentences. Children if interested & picked up other things in class to build sentences

We were having snack &
and ~~was~~ was ~~wrapping~~ wrapping,
rhyming songs with
the children names and
things around the
room. One child joined in
and innocently used
the word "fuck" to rhyme.
The child and other
children didn't even
react or notice but
we found it hilarious.

Appendix F

Semi-structured Focus Group Questions

1. Did you enjoy the programme?
 - a. What did you like about it?
 - b. What challenged you?
2. Which particular elements of the programme did you prefer?
 - a. Workshop?
 - b. Observation with coaching that included modelling and feedback.
 - c. Discussions after each workshop?
 - d. Reflective discussions and journals?
3. Regarding the pace of the inputs, did you feel it was timed correctly?
4. Was there anything that you found difficult to understand?
 - a. If so, what would have helped you to better understand?
5. Do you feel the programme has made a difference to your practice?
 - a. How?
6. Do you feel the programme has added to your professionalism as an ECEC educator?
 - a. How?
7. Was there anything about this programme that you found different from others you have done?
 - a. If so, what made it different?
 - b. Did it make it more or less effective for you?
8. What would you change about the programme, if anything?

Appendix G

Pre/Post Intervention Questionnaire

1 How long have you worked in early years education?

- Under 1 year
- 2 - 5 years
- 6 - 10 years
- 11 - 15 years
- 15 + years

2 Indicate your level of qualification on the Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) framework in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)

- Level 5
- Level 6
- Level 7
- Level 8
- Level 9
- Level 10

3 Do you consider working with children to develop early language and literacy skills to be...

	Very important	Important	Somewhat important	Not important	Not part of the role of the EY educator
Click one					

4 How often do you spend time on the following activities? Please tick the frequency that applies.

	Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Never
Nursery rhymes				
Action songs				
Songs				
Word games				
Story reading				
Poetry reading				
Learning phonics				

5

Within that frequency, how much actual time is spent on each activity?

	Less than 5 mins	6 - 10 mins	11 - 20 mins	21 - 30 mins	30 mins +
Nursery rhymes					
Action songs					
Songs					
Word games					
Story reading					
Poetry reading					
Learning phonics					

6

Please tick all that apply. I can help the children to develop literacy skills through..

- Talking to them
- Listening to them

- Reading to them
- Helping them trace Letters
- Teaching phonics
- Other

a If you selected Other, please specify:

7 Please tick all that apply. Phonological awareness is...

- Learning the alphabet
- Learning to recognise the names of the letters of the alphabet
- Being able to hear the individual sounds in words
- Being able to manipulate the individual sounds in words
- Matching the letters of the alphabet with their corresponding sounds
- Learning the meaning of words

8 Please tick all that apply. Phonics is

- Learning the alphabet
- Learning to recognise the names of the letters of the alphabet
- Being able to hear the individual sounds in words
- Being able to manipulate the individual sounds in words
- Matching the letters of the alphabet with their corresponding sounds
- Learning the meaning of words

9 How knowledgeable to you feel in the area of early literacy development?

- Very knowledgeable
- Knowledgeable
- Somewhat knowledgeable

- Not knowledgeable

10

How confident are you in your ability to teach the following:

	Excellent	Good	Fair	Poor
Rhyming				
Rhyme recognition				
Rhyme production				
Alliteration				
Segmenting				
Onset and rime				

Are there any other comments you would like to add?

p. 2 Final page

**Many thanks for taking the time to complete this survey. It will add greatly to my research and help to establish an effective starting point for our workshops.
Annette**

Appendix H

A selection of the resources to support implementation strategies provided at Workshops



Appendix I

Parent/Carer Information Sheet and Consent Form

Who am I?

- My name is Annette Kearns.
- I am a lecturer in the Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education in Maynooth University (MU)
- I have 15 years' experience of running my own preschool in Kilbride and many more years working and researching with young children and families with Meath Co Childcare Committee, Early Childhood Ireland and Maynooth University.
- I will have full Garda vetting and comply with the policies and procedures of the pre-school.
- I am undertaking this research as part of a Doctorate in Education.

Purpose of the study:

In my research I will be providing a series of workshops for the educators in your child's setting that will support their teaching of early literacy skills. I will also come on-site during pre-school sessions during which time I will model good strategies as well as coaching and mentoring the educators to increase their skill level in this area.

What will the study involve?

I will provide three workshops on early literacy development with the educators in ***** and following each workshop I will visit them on-site to observe their early literacy practices with the children. I will be audio recording the conversations between the educators and the children. I will not be using either the educators' or the children's names in my research.

Who has approved this study?

This study has been reviewed and received ethical approval from MU Research Ethics committee. Please ask for a copy of this approval if you wish to see it.

Why are you being informed and asked to consent?

Because my research will involve me being present in the classroom and observing and recording what the children will be saying to the educators, it is important you understand why I am there and what I will be doing. I will explain to the children about the research, and I will ask for their assent to be recorded. As their parent/carer I also need your consent for their conversations to be recorded.

What information will be collected?

I will be audio recording conversations that take place between the educators and the children. While I will be on-site and taking written notes, it is difficult to hear everything that is going on in a busy playroom so audio recording will ensure that conversations will not be missed. My focus will be to note any opportunities taken and opportunities missed regarding early literacy skill development. I will not be taking any photographs or video recordings throughout the research project. All information

gathered will be stored safely on password-protected computers for ten years and then destroyed.

Information gathered from the research study may be used in future research about this project, for example, conferences and journal publications.

What will happen to the information collected? All information gathered will be anonymised as it is being transcribed from the audio tapes and will be kept at MU in such a way that it will not be possible to identify any of the educators or children. On completion of the research, the data will be retained on the MU server. After ten years, all data will be destroyed. Electronic data will be reformatted or overwritten by the researcher.

What will happen to the results? The research will be written up as a thesis and submitted for a Doctor of Education. A copy of the research findings will be made available to the setting.

What are the possible disadvantages for your child? I don't see any risks for your child.

What if there is a problem?

If you have concerns about this project and wish to find out more about it from an independent person, you should contact me (annette.kearns@mu.ie) and I will direct you to someone who can help with your concern.

What about COVID-19 Protocols?

With regards to COVID-19 I will follow all protocols required by the setting.

In addition to this, during my observations I will sit at the edge of the room. I will always wear a mask and will provide my own hand sanitiser which I will use before and after touching any of the materials/resources in the playrooms, should the need arise through modelling.

For any focus group discussions that take place, I will always remain the required distance from the educators.

Thank you for taking the time to read this.

Parents/Carers Consent Form

I..... agree to allow my child
_____ participate in the research study titled *the impact of a professional learning programme, which includes coaching and mentoring, on the confidence and competence of Early Years Educators in phonological and phonemic awareness (PA) knowledge and skills as perceived by the educator.*

Please tick each statement below:

The purpose and nature of the study has been explained to me verbally and in writing. I've been able to ask questions and am happy that they have been answered.

I am participating voluntarily and know that my child may withdraw from it at any time without comment.

I understand that I can withdraw permission to use the conversations collected from my child _____ at any time until the data is anonymised. I understand this will happen on an ongoing basis after each on-site visit until July 2022.

It has been explained to me how the data will be managed and that I may access a copy of the transcript of my child's audio recordings on request until the data is anonymised.

I understand that my child's anonymised data will be stored securely in a password-protected computer for 10 years and then it will be destroyed.

I understand the limits of confidentiality as described in the information sheet.

I understand that my child's data, in an anonymous format, may be used in further research projects and any subsequent publications if I give permission below:

I agree for my child's data to be used for further research projects.

OR

I do not agree for my data to be used for further research projects.

Signed..... Date.....

Parent/Carers Name in block capitals

Child's name in block capitals _____

I the undersigned have taken the time to fully explain to the above participant the nature and purpose of this study in a manner that they could understand. I have explained the

risks involved as well as the possible benefits. I have invited them to ask questions on any aspect of the study that concerned them.

Signed.....

Date.....

Researcher Name in block capitals

If during your participation in this study you feel the information and guidelines that you were given have been neglected or disregarded in any way, or if you are unhappy about the process, please contact the Secretary of the Maynooth University Ethics Committee at research.ethics@mu.ie or +353 (0)1 708 6019

*Please be assured that your concerns will be dealt with in a sensitive manner.
For your information the Data Controller for this research project is Maynooth University, Maynooth, Co. Kildare. Maynooth University Data Protection officer is Ann McKeon in Humanity house, room 17, who can be contacted at ann.mckeon@mu.ie. Maynooth University Data Privacy policies can be found at <https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/data-protection>.*

Appendix J

Educators' Information Sheet and Consent Form

Purpose of the study:

My research is exploring the perceived impact of a professional learning programme, which includes coaching and mentoring, on the confidence and competence of Early Years Educators in phonological and phonemic awareness (PA) knowledge and skills as perceived by the educators.

Who am I?

- My name is Annette Kearns.
- I am a lecturer in the Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education in Maynooth University (MU)
- I have 15 years' experience of running my own preschool in Kilbride and many more years working and researching with young children and families with Meath Co Childcare Committee, Early Childhood Ireland, and Maynooth University.
- I will have full Garda vetting and comply with the policies and procedures of the pre-school.
- I am undertaking this research as part of a Doctorate in Education.

What will the study involve?

First, I will issue a questionnaire that will let me know what understanding you currently have about early literacy development. I will use this information as my starting point for the workshops.

I will carry out three workshops with you, the educators, and following each workshop I will visit you on-site to observe your early literacy practices with the children.

During this time, I will take opportunities, in the moment, to model and coach good early literacy practices. A short de-briefing focus group after each observation day will provide an opportunity for you to both ask me any questions or seek clarity on any issue. This discussion will also inform the plans for the next workshop.

I would like your permission to both audio record the on-site observation sessions and take field notes to accurately capture the things both you and the children say. I will not use either your name or the children's names in my research. I would also like you to keep a reflective journal and record details and examples of their progress throughout the research period when I am not around. I will give you a framework that will help you to keep the journal.

In June, before the summer holidays, I will return to the setting and observe practices once again. On this occasion I will use my observation notes for one-to-one mentoring sessions with you.

After this, I will hold a focus group, which I would like to audio record, with all the educators to discuss the overall learning from the programme and any perceived increase in confidence and competence. I will then re-issue the questionnaire which will give the educators an opportunity to demonstrate learning and add any further comments.

Who has approved this study?

This study has been reviewed and received ethical approval from Maynooth University Research Ethics committee. You may have a copy of this approval if you ask for it.

Do you have to take part?

No, you do not have to take part in this research. However, I hope that you will agree to hear about the research project.

Participation is voluntary, which means you don't have to take part or you can stop taking part at any time without saying why. You can also withdraw permission to use your data at any time, up until it has been anonymised.

What will you be asked to do?

If permission is granted by the co-owners, I will invite all educators in the setting to agree to work with me to:

1. advise me on our planned research and later, on my findings.
2. discuss with me the initial and ongoing plans for the workshops
3. complete a pre-intervention questionnaire
4. take part in 3 workshops, each approximately of 1-hour duration
5. agree to be observed in your classroom and take part in both the coaching and mentoring sessions
6. wear a recording device to audio record your interactions throughout the session
7. keep a reflective journal on your learning throughout the programme
8. take part in an audio-recorded focus group after each on-site coaching session
9. complete a post-intervention questionnaire

10. at the end of the programme take part in a focus group to discuss any increase in PPA knowledge and skills; your preferred/most effective elements of the PD programme and share reflections from your journal, if you so wish.

Will your participation in the study be kept confidential?

Yes. All the information provided in this study will be kept strictly confidential. However, *‘It must be recognised that, in some circumstances, confidentiality of research data and records may be overridden by courts in the event of litigation or in the course of investigation by lawful authority. In such circumstances the University will take all reasonable steps within law to ensure that confidentiality is maintained to the greatest possible extent.’*

Neither the participant nor setting names will appear in any documentation. All data will be anonymised on transcription.

What will happen to the information which you give?

All data collected throughout the observations and focus group discussions will be anonymised on transcription. This transcription will occur 2 – 3 weeks after collection.

Personal data in the form of staff email addresses (and/or phone numbers, as preferred) will be needed to keep in contact regarding the progress of the research.

On completion of the research, the data will be retained in my MU One Drive account. After ten years, all data will be destroyed. Electronic data will be overwritten.

What will happen to the results?

The research will be written up and presented as a thesis for a Doctorate in Education. A copy of the research findings will be made available to you if you ask for it. Anonymised data from the research study may be used as part of future research related to this project, for example, conferences and journal publications.

What are the possible disadvantages of taking part?

I don't see any risks for you in taking part. However, should you have any questions not answered here you can contact me Annette Kearns or either of your co-owners.

What if there is a problem?

Should you have any questions or concerns, you can talk to the researcher Annette Kearns (annette.kearns@mu.ie) at any time. You may contact my supervisor (Thomas Walsh, thomas.walsh@mu.ie) if you feel the research has not been carried out as described above.

If you feel you need external support as a result of being observed and assessed, The Samaritans are available at 116123, which is free from any phone at any time.

What about COVID-19 Protocols?

With regards to COVID-19 I will follow all protocols required by the setting.

In addition to this, during my observations I will sit at the edge of the room. I will always wear a mask and will provide my own hand sanitiser which I will use before and after touching any of the materials/resources in the playrooms, should the need arise through modelling.

For any focus group discussions that take place, I will always remain the required distance from the educators.

For your information the Data Controller for this research project is Maynooth University, Maynooth, Co. Kildare. Maynooth University Data Protection officer is Ann McKeon in Humanity house, room 17, who can be contacted at ann.mckeon@mu.ie. Maynooth University Data Privacy policies can be found at <https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/data-protection>.

Thank you for taking the time to read this

Educators' Consent Form

I..... agree to participate in the research study titled *the impact of a professional learning programme, which includes coaching and mentoring, on the confidence and competence of Early Years Educators in phonological and phonemic awareness (PA) knowledge and skills as perceived by the educator.*

Please tick each statement below:

The purpose and nature of the study has been explained to me verbally and in writing. I've been able to ask questions and am happy that they have been answered.

I am participating voluntarily and know that I may withdraw from it at any time without comment.

I give permission for the classroom observations and the focus groups of which I am a part to be audio-recorded by the researcher.

I understand that I can withdraw permission to use the data at any time until the data is anonymised. I understand this will happen on an ongoing basis after each on-site visit until July 2022.

I understand that my email address, or my mobile phone number if I prefer, will be needed to keep in contact about the research progress.

It has been explained to me how my data will be managed and that I may access a copy of the transcript of my own audio recordings on request until the data is anonymised.

I understand that my anonymised data will be stored securely in a password-protected computer for 10 years and then it will be destroyed.

I understand the limits of confidentiality as described in the information sheet.

I understand that my data, in an anonymous format, may be used in further research projects and any subsequent publications if I give permission below:

I agree for my data to be used for further research projects.

OR

I do not agree for my data to be used for further research projects.

Signed..... Date.....

Participant Name in block capitals

I the undersigned have taken the time to fully explain to the above participant the nature and purpose of this study in a manner that they could understand. I have explained the risks involved as well as the possible benefits. I have invited them to ask questions on any aspect of the study that concerned them.

Signed.....

Date.....

Researcher Name in block capitals










If during your participation in this study you feel the information and guidelines that you were given have been neglected or disregarded in any way, or if you are unhappy about the process, please contact the Secretary of the Maynooth University Ethics Committee at research.ethics@mu.ie or +353 (0)1 708 6019

Please be assured that your concerns will be dealt with in a sensitive manner.

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Appendix K

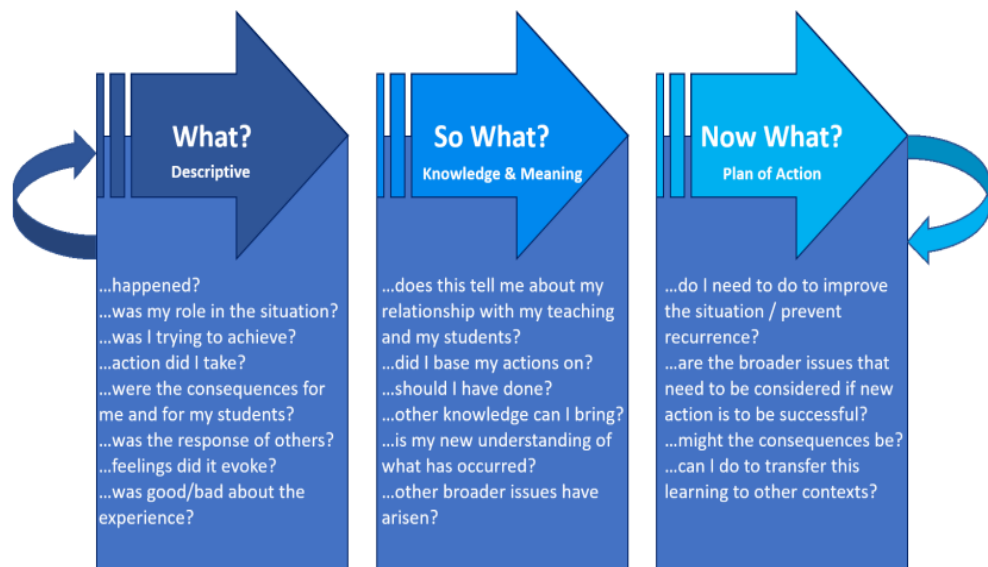
Child Information Sheet and Assent form

	<p>I am a researcher. Researchers try to find things out. In my research I am trying to help your teachers to help you to be a good reader when you go to school</p>
	<p>I would like sit and watch your teachers playing and talking with you and I would like to record you and your teacher talking and write notes about it. I would also like to write down some of the things both you and your teacher say to each other. Is it ok if I record and write down some of the things you say? I will never use your name.</p>
	<p>Here is some information about how the research project will work.</p>
	<p>The research will start after Christmas time in pre-school and it will finish up before the summer holidays.</p>
	<p>3 times during the year I will visit your preschool and write down some notes about what you and your teachers are saying. Sometimes I will join in the conversation with you, and we can have a chat. Before the summer holidays I will come back again for a final visit. I will listen to you and your teachers talking and write down notes, but I won't join in the conversation this time.</p>
	<p>I will talk to your parent/carer to tell them why I will be in the preschool writing down notes.</p>
	<p>I will keep the information for a long long time in case I write other stories about the project. After this I will safely get rid of the information.</p>
	<p>If you have any questions about this research project, please ask your parents/carers to contact me, Annette Kearns,  annette.kearns@mu.ie</p>
<p>LET ME KNOW YOU UNDERSTAND WHAT I HAVE TOLD YOU AND THAT YOU DON'T MIND ME LISTENING AND WRITING DOWN YOUR WORDS BY PUTTING A SIMLEY STICKY ON THIS PAGE.</p>	

Appendix L

Reflective Framework

Rolfe, Freshwater, & Jasper 'What' Model (2001) Rolfe, Freshwater, & Jasper (2001) propose the 'What' model, an iterative process consisting of three simple questions, but which require comprehensive reflective answers:



Template to support your reflections

WHAT? SO WHAT? NOW WHAT?

WHAT?

Describe the event.
What did you notice?
What elements stood out?



SO WHAT?

Identify Implications.
Make sense of the facts.
How did they affect your team?



NOW WHAT?

Define a course of action.
What's possible?
What actions make sense?

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Appendix M

Phonological Awareness

Parent's Handout - Activities to do at home

Phonological awareness is an awareness of sounds in spoken words. Children need to be able to hear the sounds in words if they are to eventually learn to read.

You know your child has developed phonological awareness when they are able to rhyme (hat/cat/mat), matching initial word sounds (betty bought a bit of butter) and when they are able to count out the number of words in a sentence and syllables in a word (croak – o – dile).

Over the next few months your child will be doing lots of activities in preschool to promote these skills. You can help out by doing some of the following activities at home which focus on rhyming, alliteration and segmenting.

Here are a few examples of some games you can play at home.

RHYMING

Rhyming is when the end sound of words sound the same e.g. hat, cat, mat, sat, pat

Activities to do at home

To The Tune Of 'If You're Happy In Your Nappy....'

Did you ever see a (bear) in a (chair)? Did you ever see a (bear) in a (chair)?

No, I never saw a bear, I never saw a bear, No, I never saw a (bear) in a (chair).

If the children are having difficulty supplying a rhyme for the first word in the pair, you can use rhyming pictures to help them. For example, with the first song, you might have pictures of a chair, ball, and book available, and the child would choose the picture that rhymes with "bear." (***You can make up further verses using rhyming words!***)

Erase a rhyme is a great game to play with your child.

This website <https://jessicameeacham.com/erase-a-rhymes/> has lots of familiar nursery rhymes – but they are recited in a different way so that your child can either erase or draw the picture.

Erase a rhyme: First draw out a picture for the chosen nursery rhyme. Then reciting the rhyme as provided get the child to guess the missing rhyming word and erase it until the rhyme is finished and the picture is gone! This can also be played in the reverse order by drawing the picture rhyming sentence by rhyming sentence.

Take opportunities whenever they arise to rhyme words so the children get used to hearing the sounds.

e.g. **When putting the children to bed – up to bed sleepy head**
Getting up in the morning – rise and shine it's breakfast time

Make up words that rhyme and the children will enjoy the foolishness and join in the game!

ALLITERATION

Alliteration is when the beginning sound of the word is the same e.g. Peter Piper Paints

Practice saying these with your child – I bet you have lots and lots of fun!!

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Six slippery snails, slid slowly seaward.• A skunk sat on a stump. The stump thought the skunk stunk. The skunk thought the stump stunk . What stunk the skunk or the stump?• An ape attacked the apple	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Daddy draws doors.• Friendly Fleas and Fire Flies• Fuzzy Wuzzy was a bear, Fuzzy Wuzzy had no hair, FuzzyWuzzy wasn't very fuzzy... was he???• I scream, you scream, we all scream for ice cream!
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SEGMENTING

Segmenting is when you break something up into parts e.g. a sentence into words (e.g. I / can / throw / a / ball) or a word into syllables (e.g. play-ing foot-ball).

Say a short sentence and clap your hands/build a block tower/throw a ball for each word

e.g. I love swimming (3 claps/blocks/ball throws).

Once the children have an understanding of 'words in a sentence' you can move on to breaking down words into syllables e.g.

1 syllable words: cat/dog/arm/leg;

2-syllable words: roc-ket/spi-der/but-ter/pa-per/bat-man

3-syllable words: fan-tas-tic/dom-in-o/co-co-nut/di-no-saur/croc-o-dile

I really appreciate your support with this work. If you have any further questions, don't hesitate to contact me.

Annette J. Kearns, Froebel Dept., Maynooth University. Annette.kearns@mu.ie