CHALLENGED IN A WEB OF POWER

A STUDY OF A SMALL COHORT OF EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION PRACTITIONERS THROUGH THE LENS OF OUTDOOR LEARNING AND RISKY PLAY

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Abstract

There is a growing body of research that has provided evidence of the benefits of outdoor learning and risky play for children's development, yet within an Irish context there appears to be a gap in the provision of this type of play in the early childhood sector.

This study is about early childhood care and education practitioners and how they can reconcile the outdoor learning and risky play with the pressures to avoid, omit or obscure it in the current climate. It begins by positioning my role as critical educator and the context in which the early childhood care and education sector is developing.

The research draws from literature to demonstrate how the early childhood care and education practitioner is positioned to offer experiences to children on a daily basis. This qualitative study sets out to determine what is it that promotes or negates engagement in outdoor learning and risky play with children in early childhood care and education services. This study aims to enhance our knowledge of the early childhood care and education practitioner by exploring the experience of practice.

The findings suggest that from a pedagogical perspective, practitioners believe opportunities for outdoor learning and risky play is important for children's development. However, their ability to provide such experiences for children is very restricted. The research uncovers a web of power, the reality of living in a risk adverse society, governmental policies and the impact these have on the everyday experiences of young children in early childhood settings.

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Glossary of Terms

Aistear	The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework
BOBF	Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People
CAO	Central Applications Office
CCC	County Childcare Committee
CCP	Childcare Capital Programme
CFA	Child and Family Agency
CSO	Central Statistics Office
DES	Department of Education and Skills
DCYA	Department of Children and Youth Affairs
ECCE	Early Childhood Care and Education
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
ECI	Early Childhood Ireland
EOCP	Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme
EU	European Union
EYC	Early Years Capital
FETAC	Further Education and Training Awards Council
IHREC	Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission
HETAC	Higher Education and Training Awards Council
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum Assessment
NCIP	National Childcare Investment Programme
OECD	The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
QQI	Quality and Qualifications Ireland
Síolta	The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education
TUSLA	The Child and Family Agency
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
WBDP	The Workforce Background Discussion Paper

Definitions

Terminology and definitions change over time and currently in the Early Childhood Care and Education sector there are a variety of definitions used. For the purposes of this research e following definitions we apply:

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) - refers to the sector as a whole.

Early childhood practitioners - refers to those working with children in the sector.

Early childhood services - refers to services where children are cared for and educated, including the crèche, naíonraí and pre-school

Preamble

It was a beautiful day in May and the garden of the early childhood care and education centre was a hive of activity. The children were busy building the ramps. Two small green bikes were taken from the back of the shed. The green bikes are for the children learning to cycle without stabilizers and when learning to balance as they ride over the narrow planks.

The children were dragging, lifting and carrying hollow wooden block from the preschool room out to the garden. Others were building, measuring and testing the structures, assessing for safety and thrill...in equal measure! 'Me first', 'me first' the children were about to burst with excitement....they were going to cycle the small green bikes over the ramps. Between them they negotiated a rota.

A new member of staff was standing beside me and said, 'surely, you're not going to allow the children to go up those ramps on the bikes, they will kill themselves'. 'Oh not at all', I said, 'they know exactly what to do and how to keep themselves safe...watch'.

She watched in awe at how the children steadied the planks, tested them, and supported each other to get over the ramps on the bikes. The squeals of anxious laughter were palpable. No staff member interfered and the children had a ball.....

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Chapter One will provide an outline for this thesis. While it does not add to the existing body of knowledge, it does provide the aims of the research and the research question along with my rationale for this research. I will outline my ontological position and my role as an adult educator. An overview of the contextual framework will be provided. The structure of the thesis is presented introducing chapter titles and contents.

Research Aims

This thesis aims to explore the gap between the current literature from an international perspective and the actual practice of engaging children in outdoor learning and risky play in early childhood care and education settings within the Irish context. The focus of this research is to explore the role of the Early Childhood Care and Education practitioner (ECCE) through the lens of outdoor learning and risky play.

Research Question

How can the Early Childhood Care and Education practitioners reconcile outdoor learning and risky play with the pressures to avoid, omit or obscure it in the current climate?

My Research Rationale

My interest in outdoor learning and risky play is embedded in my early childhood experiences and this interest was further sparked by an extensive amount of international research and literature highlighting the benefits for children engaging in

outdoor learning and risky play. There appears to be a gap in the amount of outdoor learning and risky play young children are exposed to within an Irish context, despite the evidence of its benefits.

I hope that this research will uncover the multitude of reasons for this gap, offering ECCE practitioners and educators insight into the real issues which are pertinent.

Personal Position

I have worked for 20 years in various Early Years and Family Support Services in a variety of roles from an ECCE practitioner to project leader. Many of these services were located in relatively poor urban areas often described as socio-economically disadvantaged. I have had firsthand experience of the challenges faced by children and their families as they cope with economic and educational disadvantage, substance abuse and domestic violence. Throughout my time in practice, my motivation and my passion has been the care and welfare of children and by extension their families.

In 2012, I embarked on a career as an educator. This move to education was not entirely an unknown adventure as I had worked on a part time basis as an adult educator with adult learners in ECCE in a Vocational Educational Committee college in south Dublin. It was during this time that I felt my influence as an educator would have a broader impact on service provision by facilitating learners to raise their consciousness and improve their practice with children.

I am currently a fulltime lecturer in a higher institution located in suburban Dublin teaching on a BA in Early Childhood Care and Education. The college is located in an area considered to be socio-economically disadvantaged and its ethos is to have one third of its student population from the non traditional student cohort. There are a variety of supports in place to ensure this figure is maintained such as lower entry points to courses, additional CAO points for area of residence, etc. Having worked with families who felt that educational opportunities were only for the dominant class, this ethos was one of the reasons I was drawn to work here.

I felt that this institution was going to offer me an opportunity to engage with this non traditional student cohort where inclusion is a priority. In theory this supportive and inclusive ideology exists. However, as the pressure for numbers grows, the reality of this support to individual students comes under strain.

Herein lies the intersection of my passions - young children and ECCE practitioners - and as an educator, it is my belief I can have a positive impact on both.

My Ontological Position

Over my career I have found myself in many different roles and each of these roles have influenced how I view children, early childhood practitioners and learners. My ontological position was formed as a result of my varied experiences, firstly as an early years practitioner and adult learner, then as a tutor in a college of further education and followed by my current lecturing position in an Institute of Technology.

My ontological position is that of a critical researcher. A critical researcher 'assumes a learning role rather than a testing one' (cf.Agar, 1986, p12 in Ryan, 2015 p29). I also position myself as a realist, which supports the fact that I recognise that 'there is a reality that is separate from our descriptions of it' (Brynam, 2012 p29). I am acutely aware that 'we will only be able to understand –and so change- the social worlds if we identify the structures at work that generate those events and discourses' (Brynam, 2012, p29). Reflexivity is an essential aspect of research. As a researcher I need to 'recognise the complexity of the web of life and experience' (Ryan, 2015, p 31). My hope is that the knowledge gained from this research will contribute to the voice of the early years practitioner and offer insight to the institutions and the educators supporting them on their learning journey.

Paulo Freire

As a critical adult educator, much of my practice to date has been influenced and informed by the philosophies of Brazilian educationalist Paulo Freire. I hold Freire in

very high regard and his writings have contributed to who I am as an educator. His extensive use of masculine language cannot be ignored. When reading his work his androcentric perspective of the world is unsettling, it represents a blind spot in an insightful person. When I first read his work as I felt it was not relevant to me. I was encouraged to revisit Freire writings by bell hooks (1994). bell hooks (1994) helped me see beyond the use of Freire's language. While she recognised that his lack of gender awareness was a major flaw, she also saw the significance of his work and through this dialogue supported me to see his writing in a critical manner and not to dismiss it. I could see the value of this approach with my own research, by promoting the good in the midst of the negative. What became apparent as I re-engaged with his writings, in particular *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* was that despite the fact that I dismissed his ideas in theory, the philosophy and methodology of his teaching had in fact influenced me and his ideologies concurred with my ideas of how education should be and what it can achieve.

The Banking Concept of Education Versus Critical Education

Freire describes the '"banking" concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing and storing the deposits' (1993, p53).

I reject the banking method of education where 'education thus becomes an act of deposing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher the depositor' (Freire, 1993, p53), yet I sometimes find myself in that space doing exactly that. This is so challenging and frustrating for me because what I find most rewarding and energising about my role as a critical educator is when I get to pose problems or ideas, discuss and deconstruct these issues with fellow early childhood practitioners who challenge, inform and inspire how to think, engage and work with children. The aim of this dialogue and engagement endeavours to facilitate students to learn and become critical thinkers in a supportive and trusted environment. Like Freire, my belief is that 'knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the

worlds, and with each other' (1972, p53). However, this philosophy is currently under threat in an education system where tensions exist; the pressure on the higher education sector to prioritise numbers and to become more self sustaining, while on the other hand provide a positive learning experience so that learners are well equipped to perform the market place. As an educator in this environment there is considerable pressure to deliver modules in twelve weeks, to large numbers of traditional students (average number of students 60 per lecture with tutorials consisting of 20 students). As a critical educator, the practice of problem-posing education becomes extremely challenging with large class sizes and tight time frames. The opportunity to engage in liberating education is more achievable with the adult learners where the average class is twelve to fourteen learners. 'Banking education treats students as objects of assistance; problem posing education makes them critical thinkers' (Freire, 1993, p64).

I believe that in order to address the issues which are current in the ECCE sector; we do not need practitioners who learned the A-Z of child development without the ability to be able to critically reflect on themselves and the world within which they experience. Authentic reflection considers people in their relations with the world. Freire believes that it is 'through this simultaneously reflecting on themselves and the world, increase the scope of their perception, they begin to direct their observations toward previously inconspicuous phenomena' (1993, p63). Many academic, practitioners and teacher trainers recognise that really useful learning occurs when there is a small group which facilitates the opportunity for ongoing discussion where critical reflection is key to the dialogue (MacNaughton, 2005). MacNaughton suggests that this approach can build 'communities of learners' (MacNaughton, 2005, p 198) and it are through this community that social justice and equity can be promoted.

The impact of the large numbers and tight time frames makes it difficult to create a caring learning environment where meaningful and true dialogue is a possibility. Freire identifies the importance of 'care' when he speaks of teaching as an act of love (Freire, 1993). Freire highlights that dialogue cannot exist without love (1993). Dialogue, according to Freire, 'is the encounter between men, mediated by the world, in order to name the world' (1993, p69). This dialogue when entered into with faith in humankind

and modesty, according to Freire, is essential and supports individuals to name their world in a trusting environment so they can transform it.

As a critical educator, the tensions and conflict urges me to promote and provide an education, not so that ECCE practitioners can conform to the status quo but to engage with them and support them so they can be in a position to critically and creatively deal with their reality and discover how they can participate in the transformation of their world. Through this critical pedagogy, the ECCE practitioners can acquire the skills to take action on all aspects of their lives from the 'learning to perceive social, political and economic contradictions and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality' (Freire, 1970, p17). This should provide them with a confidence so they can challenge the dominant discourse, understand their world and really advocate for the rights of children. As critical educators, I believe we must reject the banking concept of education and instead promote authentic liberation. 'Liberation is a praxis: the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it' (Freire, 1993, p60). Early childhood practitioners need to become aware of the dominant voices in society and recognise how power can be exercised by powerful sections in that society. This raised consciousness can support the ECCE practitioner so be better positioned so that too can have their voices heard. Freire highlighted the political power of education and that formal education works for the 'domestication of learners' or for 'liberation' (Freire 1985, p. 131).

Conceptual Framework

Children's Rights

It is reasonable to believe that we have come a long way in our relationships with children, how we see them, how we engage with them and how we treat and care for them. Ireland signed up to the UNCRC in 1992.

This Convention details the special rights of children including the right to participate in a democracy in ways that reflect their age and maturity. The Convention affirms the primacy of the family and does not propose rights for children at the expense of others. It does, however, aim to enhance the position of children in society by drawing

attention to the particular nature of children's rights and society's obligations to children in this regard (Hayes, nd)

Since 1992 there has been an increase in policy development relating to children and childhood in Ireland with significant improvements in the Irish State's approach to the protection and promotion of the rights of the child.

> 'The State has acknowledged the need to place children's rights at the heart of Government, through the creation of a senior Cabinet position and accompanying Government department' (IHREC, 2015).

Changes to child and family law have had a positive impact on the lives of children and their families. However these reforms come in the wake of

> '...a legacy of failures on the part of the State to protect and vindicate the rights of children in its care, and children whose care the State entrusted to voluntary, religious and private institutions' (IHREC, 2015).

The Convention however is not imbedded into Irish law and there is 'no legal obligation on public bodies to comply with the Convention in the carrying out of their functions' (IHREC, 2015). This has resulted in a conflict between the Irish State position and that of the Convention across the disparate areas of law, policy and practice. Policy development for children should not be implemented due to obligation, rather constructed with a balance between rights and obligations. This is more likely to generate integrated responses that are sensitive to the individual needs and rights of children in the context of the capacity of the State to respond. The Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (2015) highlighted 'the need for the State to adopt a holistic cross-governmental approach to the rights of the child that is not only informed by the Convention, but is driven by it'.

From an international perspective the World Summit for Children (1990) adopted the following declaration 'There can be no task nobler than giving every child a better future' and with the acceptance of the UNCRC one would imagine that more than twenty years on the rights of the child would be secured. The actuality is not so as there is an enormous gap between the commitments and the reality. There are almost 60 million (Singh in Swadener *et al*, 2013) children who remain deprived of their fundamental right to education with many of these from marginalized and vulnerable groups.

> Instead of receiving education, which is their fundamental right, children in many countries are engaged in child labour at an early age or - worse still - are lured into becoming child soldiers (Singh in Swadener *et al*, 2013, xii).

The context in which this research is situated is within a society where there has been considerable progress towards respecting children and recognising that they are 'active' members in the society (Kanyal, 2014) but as yet not all of the rights outlined in the UNCRC have been implemented in an Irish context.

Risk and Parenting in Risk Society

Children have a right to play and it is deemed so critical to child development and their physical and mental health that it is included in Article 31 of the UNCRC (1989). Furthermore, it is my belief that children not only need to play but need to play outdoors where they can connect with nature, explore and develop a respect for the natural world. According to Louv, children are suffering from what he called 'nature deficit disorder' and that their 'diminished use of senses, attention difficulties, and higher rates of physical and emotional illness' as a result of not getting connected to nature (2005, p34). Children need to engage with activities that require a heightened awareness where they can make decisions and engage with risk and learn how to manage this. Children are competent and capable learners and need to get the opportunity to explore in the outdoors where the environment is challenging and exciting.

The dominant concept in the western world is that young children have a greater say in what they do and how they do it. Young children are listened to and taken seriously and increasingly there is a focus on children as active agents. 'Children are not simply beings, they are more significantly doing. They are actors, authors, authorities and agents' (Oswell, 2013, p3). Young children are exposed to amazing opportunities, access to books, the World Wide Web and travel as well as opportunities to engage in structured planned learning experiences like never before.

Another common discourse in Irish society is that parents need to monitor every move their children make which has led to the phenomenon known as 'intensive parenting,' in which a climate of 'inflated risk' leads parents to micromanage all

aspects of their children's lives in an effort to protect the child from adverse experiences. According to Furedi (2002, p. 11), parents suffer from obsessive fear over the safety of their children, which leads to excessive regulation, surveillance, and ever-increasing reliance on regimes of expertise and 'relentless advice' that undermine good sense and perpetuate parental and child insecurities.

Early Childhood Care and Education

From fledgling beginnings the growth of child care has stemmed primarily from a reliance of women minding children in their own home to contemporary practice located in privately owned crèches to provide care and education of young children. There has also been growth in public provision, however at a much slower rate and with less political motivation than that of the private sector. The introduction of the free preschool year 2009 and 2016 (ECCE scheme) are a significant move towards generic provision. However this funding capped at three hours per day for 38 weeks per year.

The early years profession is a fragmented, gendered workforce and is characterised by low wages and status (WBPD, 2010; OECD, 2006). The childcare and education sectors in Ireland are not viewed as equal and there are 'inequitable' division between sectors. The professional status of practitioners in predominately 'care' areas have a perceived lower status than 'teachers' in the educational arena. A poststructuralist inquiry highlights that the process of knowledge production is an exercise of power as certain voices and experiences are heard and privileged as 'knowledge' while other voices representing different worldviews and experiences are discounted and marginalised (Foucault, 1980).

Power

The ECCE practitioner experiences power in a multitude of ways. Drawing on Foucault's idea of power (1980), early childhood practitioners experience and actively participate in a multitude of intertwining power relationships between colleagues,

management and parents as well a plethora of regulatory bodies. 'Power must be analysed as something which circulates, or as something which only functions in the form of a chain.' (Foucault, 1980c, p 98). Foucault's interest in how institutions apply authority and influence individuals will be explored in the contest of ECCE.

Political Agenda

Political interest in early childhood care and education is a relatively recent development in Ireland (Gallagher, 2012). This emerging childcare and education sector is developing in a time where neoliberal policies are active and this agenda have added pressure to parents with little support available to support them as parents and also to engage in the labour market. According to Manfred *et al,* neoliberalism can be understood as 'three intertwined manifestations: 1) an ideology; 2) a mode of governance; 3) a policy package (2010, p11). In the childcare and education context, neoliberal policies are pushing towards a marketisation of the sector (Lloyd and Penn, 2010). 'Neoliberalism advocates a reduced role for the state and a heightened individualism in society' (Gallagher, 2012, p466).

Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is structured around key areas, namely, outdoor learning and risky play, risk and risk society, power, the perceptive of the early childhood position and the neoliberal policy agenda.

Chapter One

An outline of the purpose of this thesis is presented. The aims, the research question and my rational for the research were discussed. It provided an overview of my ontological position and my role as an adult educator. The contextual framework was furnished along with an outline of the thesis structure.

Chapter Two

The ECCE sector is a relatively new arena within Irish society. The growing demand for childcare provision has risen considerably since 1990. The focus of this growth has not always had the rights of children at the forefront but rather an aim to get women into the labour market. A summary of the development of the ECCE sector in the Irish context will be presented.

Chapter Three

An examination of the literature pertaining to this particular enquiry is examined in Chapter Three. The literature examined in the research looks at key contributors to the knowledge which exists in relation to the early childhood sector. It examines outdoor learning and risky play and aims to explore the role of society and parenting and how it influences the experiences of children. The research also looks at the web of power the early childhood practitioner find themselves at the centre of. It examines the nature of the care and education divide and the gendered employment that exists in the early childhood sector.

Chapter Four

The methodology is outlined in Chapter Four which includes details of personal positioning, methodological influences and methods used. The aim of the research is to explore the ECCE practitioner through the lens of outdoor learning and risky play. Qualitative research methods are used to describe the context of this study. The research method includes two interview strategies, one focus group with eleven participants and two semi-structured interviews. All participants are currently working as ECCE practitioners.

Chapter Five

This chapter includes is a thematic analysis of the primary research.

Chapter Six

The findings are then theorised in Chapter Six by situating them in the conceptual framework present in chapter three. The aim of this section is 'to make the familiar strange' by providing 'new and insightful lenses for viewing what your respondents tell you, or what is written in documents' (Ryan, 2015 p175). This will be followed by the conclusions drawn and recommendations for further research will be outlined.

Conclusion

This chapter outlined the purpose of this thesis. It identified the aims of the research and the research question along with my rational for this research. It offered the reader an insight to my ontological position and my role as an adult educator. An overview of the contextual framework was provided along with a structure outline of the thesis. Chapter Two will set the scene for ECCE in the Irish context and identify the political landscape in which it has developed. It will provide a perspective on the position the ECCE practitioner cares for and educates young children.

CHAPTER TWO

IRISH CONTEXT FOR EARLY CHILHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION

Introduction

Chapter Two will present the context in which ECCE has developed in Ireland. It will highlight the rapid growth in the sector and give insight to the political agenda in which it has developed.

The Irish Context

In order to discuss ECCE, it is important to set the scene in the Irish context. While many EU countries were active in addressing childcare concerns over the past 30 years, political interest in childcare has been a relatively recent development in Ireland. Prior to the 1990's the early childhood sector had been largely ignored and allowed to develop in an *ad hoc* and unregulated fashion. Ireland has traditionally endorsed a private responsibility model for childcare, where care was understood to be primarily located within the family unit. Childcare until the late 1990s operated within a 'nexus of Church-State-Family relations which reflected the dominant ideology of care' (Gallagher, 2012, p467). Since then many changes have occurred in Irish society and the growing demand for childcare provision has raised considerable concerns for the successive governments. Some of these changes had a significant impact on where children are cared for and has shifted children into the secondary units of care at a much younger age. The most significant changes were the rise in female employment and according to Folbre (2001) this resulted in a 'care crises'. This put considerable strain on working households to meet the demands of both the productive and reproductive spheres and forced governments to make childcare a public rather than a private issue (Brannen and Moss, 2003). In an Irish context there was a change of focus from the rights of the family to the rights of the child, largely informed by increased educational attainment, the UNCRC, Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People, 2014-2020 and National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making (2015). The

increase in women participating in the workforce led to an increased level of involvement in this sector from national government both in terms of policy development and funding initiatives (WBDP, 2009).

The way in which childcare is delivered in Ireland has changed considerably, moving from being a largely informal and unregulated to a more regulated and formalised provision. The Government put a range of initiatives in place in response to these changes. Urban (2008) notes increasing governmental attention to ECCE is driven by a need to increase female labour market participation and hence improve economic competitiveness. While the focus of childcare provision has moved from being a private issue in the home to outsourced care provision, this has not led to an investment in or increase in the public sector provision. Some progress has been made with the introduction of the universal free preschool year (ECCE scheme) in 2009 with a second year allocated funding from 2016. The policy interventions have focused on centre based care with a strong emphasis on the private sector rather than investment in public sector (Gallagher, 2014). They also established City and County Childcare Committees (CCC's) to promote training and quality awareness (WBDP, 2009, p6). Quality Childcare & Lifelong Learning Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development in the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector (2002) was rolled out to address the low levels of education of the employees in the sector.

The introduction of the free pre-school year in 2009 (ECCE scheme) was a 'significant' move towards "equality of opportunity for all young children in Ireland at the most important developmental stage of their lives" (Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, 2009, p4). The funding focused initially on capital investment but in more recent years the focus has shifted "to support the broader principles" of ECCE (WBDP, 2009, p6). The addition of the second ECCE scheme year is a welcome addition to children and their families.

The addition of this ECCE scheme has put a focus on staff training and education. The increasing demand on formal education to a least a QQI Level Five means people already employed in the ECCE sector are not meeting present day requirements which leave them in a very vulnerable position; they either get qualified to QQI Level Five or consider employment in other sectors. This push is further emphasised by the

capitation grant available from the government to staff that are in receipt of a HETAC Level Seven award with anecdotal evidence of staff concerns about this rising to HETAC Level Eight. This is a positive move from the perspective that higher quality care and education is reflected where more qualified staff are employed 'Settings that have staff with higher qualifications have higher quality scores and their children make more progress' (EPPE, 2012).

Lifelong Learning has developed in Ireland as a result of EU directives. *The White Paper*, *Learning for Life (2000)* placed an emphasis on citizenship, participation and community life. It defined adult education as 'aspects of further and third level education, continuing education and training, community education and other systematic learning by adults, both formal and informal' (DES, 2000 p.12). Lifelong Learning is understood and defined in this country as: '…All purposeful learning activity, whether formal or informal, undertaken on an ongoing basis with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competence' (NESC, 1999, p270, cited in Maunsell et al ,2008). Within the Irish context, the lifelong learning agenda has come to be based on three fundamental attributes:

- It is lifelong and therefore concerns everything from the cradle to the grave
- It is life-wide recognising that learning occurs in many different settings
- It focuses on learning rather than limits itself to education (White Paper, Learning for Life 2000).

The Quality Childcare & Lifelong Learning Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development in the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector (2002) emphasised the importance to build on the education, training and professional development of the existing ECCE sector in a way that maximises children's well-being, and the professional status and qualifications of the adults working with them. A *Workforce Development Plan for the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector* was published by DES (2010). This plan acknowledged that the 'skills and qualifications of adults working with young children is a critical factor in determining the quality of young children's ECCE experiences' (DES, 2010, p6). The overarching aim of the workforce development plan is to ensure that all staff engaged in the provision of ECCE are 'appropriately qualified for their role and responsibilities' (DES, 2010, p16). 'Qualification levels in early years services are low by international standards, which

reflects the lack of public investment and particularly the low wages (little more than the minimum wage) and poor working conditions in the sector' (Start Strong, 2015). Bretherton (2010) stated that the feminisation of childcare remains low-status work, performed almost entirely by those who have few other employment options. He further points out that in practice this means that there are almost no men in the sector and that the proportion of dominant class women that are fully involved in the care of children is reducing. Care has remained a devalued form of work, even as it moves from the hidden confines of the private sphere in the home to the private market sector. However it is necessary to note that this shift from private home based care to secondary provision of care has not resulted in increased public sector provision. Instead the private market sector remains a key source of care for many households.

The view from policy level has had a considerable impact on the status and the professionalism of ECCE practitioners. The lack of awareness to the education benefits of early years services with a history of the policy in the area defined as either childcare or primary school. As a result the professional status of practitioners in predominately 'care' areas have a perceived lower status than 'teachers' in the educational areas. The workforce is very fragmented and characterised by low wages and status (WBDP, 2009; OECD, 2006).

ECCE practitioners strive to be perceived as professionals and they are engaging in continuous training and education. It is evident from many authors cited in Kyndt, et al (2012) that employees as well as organisations and governments are recognising the need for and the value of lifelong learning. Burdett and Smith (2002) state that low-qualified employees are caught in a 'low-skilled trap' (Kyndt et al, 2012, p166). They state that a lower level of initial education goes hand in hand with less favourable starting points on the labour market, leaving them to be the staff that occupies the 'lower' positions in organisations with fewer career prospects and development possibilities. Many ECCE practitioners are currently participating in education because the minimum qualification requirement will be imposed by December 2016. Early Childhood Ireland suggests that 87% of staff in early years settings hold Level 5 Level Five or higher (ECI, 2015). This is a significant shift in the landscape, moving progressively towards a graduate workforce for those working in early years.

Ireland has experienced a booming economy followed by an economic crash and its fragile economic recovery has been characterised by rising employment. This has been tarnished however by increasing levels of poverty and disadvantage, predominantly affecting children, lone parents who are predominately women, young people and migrants (CSO 2015). The main reasons cited for the high poverty levels are the cost of housing, high levels of debt, and the high cost of childcare. Poverty levels among children have doubled since 2008 and recent OECD data show Ireland with the second highest level of low pay across (after America) (OECD 2013).

Conclusion

Chapter Two presented the context in which ECCE has developed in Ireland. It highlighted the significant aspects of the sector and provided the political context in which it has developed. Chapter Three will review the literature which is pertinent to the research topic.

CHAPTER THREE

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter seeks to review the literature that relates to the role of the ECCE practitioner. It will examine key contributors to the knowledge base that impacts early childhood practitioners. Ireland has not featured heavily in literature, however issues in Ireland can be compared to similar matters in other liberal welfare regimes. This research aims to explore the role of the ECCE practitioner through the lens of outdoor learning and risky play.

How can ECCE practitioners reconcile outdoor learning and risky play with the pressures to avoid, omit or obscure it in the current climate?

The research aims to investigate and gain further understanding of the following:

> What impact the practitioner's attitude has on the engagement of or lack of outdoor learning and risky play?
>
> What is promoting outdoor learning and risky play in early childhood care and education settings?
>
> What are the barriers or perceived barriers to outdoor learning and risky play with young children?

The literature review will provide an in-depth examination of selected literature on the topics relating to this research. The aim of the literature review will place the research question in context and support an understanding of the relevant theories and subjects. The review will define outdoor learning and risky play. It will explore the gender segregated work place and the divides between the role of the carer and educator of young children. It will promote greater understanding of the ECCE practitioner within the Irish context. The literature will explore some of the power relationships within the sector and some of the possible influences of these on children's engagement in outdoor learning and risky play. It will also identify aspects of 'adversity to risk' in contemporary society

Risky Play and Outdoor Learning

How and where children play has changed. Elkind, (2007, p37) in Guldberg (2009) claim 'that children have lost twelve hours of free time a week, including eight hours of unstructured play and outdoor activities'. This change in the nature of children's play is well documented(Tandon *et al*, 2012; Woolley and Lowe, 2013). Brussoni *et al*, 2012 claim that this reduction in outdoor play has in turn diminished children's opportunity to engage in risky play (Brussoni and Olsen, 2013). There is evidence to suggest that this shift from outdoor play environments to a predominantly sedentary screen-based lifestyle may have resulting in consequences children's health, including increasing mental illness (Gray, 2011) and rising obesity levels (WHO, 2012).

The World Health Organisation (2012) estimates that, globally, there are 42 million children under five who are overweight or obese. Recent data from the Growing Up in Ireland Study (DCYA, 2013a) indicates that one fifth of five-year-olds are overweight. Guldberg (2009, p27) argued that 'The scale of obesity among children has been wildly exaggerated' and reported that in fact the goal posts for how BMI is measured were changed in 1997 and that this change resulted in people previously being classed as normal to being classed as overweight. Research (Gray, 2011; Sandseter, 2011) indicate that outdoor and risky play are linked to positive mental health and emotional resilience. Henderson and Bialeschki (2010) argue that the lack of opportunities for play in the outdoors may impact on children's ability to deal with common stressors in life and suggest that this leads to an increase in emotional and psychological disorders.

According to the research (Trudeau and Shephard, 2008), regular exposure to natural outdoor environment can result in higher educational achievement. Moss identified four benefits to children's learning- these include cognitive impacts, affective impacts and interpersonal and social impacts, as well as physical and behavioural impacts (2012) when they engage in the outdoor natural environment.

Play is a way of 'doing things' (NCCA, 2009). Play can be categorised into three areas - physically active play, object play and pretend play. According to Aistear, The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (2009), play should be adventurous and risky. Play helps children to explore the unknown. The pretend element offers a safety net that

encourages children to take risks and risky play is subsumed physical play. 'Play has been described as the work of children which helps them develop intrinsic interests, learn how to make decisions, problem-solve, exert self-control, follow rules, regulate emotions, and develop and maintain peer relationships' (Brussoni et al 2012 p3). Risky play might be defined as play that provides opportunities for challenge, testing limits, exploring boundaries and learning about injury-risk (Little and Wyver, 2008) or as thrilling and challenging forms of play that involve a risk of physical injury (Sandseter, 2007). Risky play most often occurs in the outdoors and during children's free play.

> Risky play is categorised into six categories with a view to describing how children participate in this type of play:
>
> a) play in great heights b) play with high speed
>
> c) play with dangerous tools d) play near dangerous elements
>
> e) rough-and-tumble play f) play where children can disappear/get lost
>
> (Sandseter, 2009, p441)

'Play commentators tend to claim that eliminating risks deprives children of the opportunity to assess them efficiently, and so they are unequipped to deal with any situation they may encounter in later life' (Gleave 2008.p3). There is a growing awareness among practitioners that outdoor learning and risky play supports a child's development and is beneficial to their overall wellbeing. Many of the benefits include tackling the growing instances of obesity, skills development, child having agency in their learning and the promotion of holistic development. Fjortoft (2001, 2004) reports research from Scandinavia, which demonstrates that children who play in flexible, natural landscapes appear to be healthier, have improved motor fitness, balance and coordination, and demonstrate more creativity in their play. Young children's outdoor play and opportunities for risky play occurs in a number of different contexts; home, within their community and in ECCE settings.

Stephenson (2003) and Sanderson (2009b) both found that opportunities for risky play depended on teachers' attitudes; children got more experience in the outdoors when ECCE practitioners had an interest in physical play and enjoyed being outdoors themselves. The research discovered that the practitioners took a more flexible

approach to supervision, allowing children to find challenges and experience the perception of risk and that risky behaviour was not prevented for fear of minor injury. How risk is viewed by adults has a strong correlation to the engagement of risk taking in early years settings (Waters and Begley's, 2007). Tovey (2007) found that some practitioners expressed anxiety about the risk-taking behaviour of the children, identifying accountability and fear of litigation as the reason while others openly encouraged risky play.

Regulations may impact the ability of early years practitioners to offer challenging play experiences (Little *et al*, 2011). The law in Ireland provides for the regulation and inspection of pre-school childcare services. Under the Child Care Act 1991 as amended by the Child and Family Agency Act 2013 the Child and Family Agency (CFA) is charged with ensuring the health, safety and welfare of pre-school children attending services. Preschool-Regulations (DCYA, 2006) provide the primary source of regulation for the ECCE sector. These regulations focus primarily on health and safety rather than the developmental needs of the children despite the aim to address this through Regulation Five in 2011. Furthermore the inspections are carried out by Public Health Nurses with no qualification in ECCE. The Pre School Regulations sessional services are not required to have an outdoor play area. However the Regulations do require that full and part-time day care services have an outdoor space but only need to engage in the outdoors 'weather permitting' (DCYA, 2006).

Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (2009) support the opportunities for risk taking in early years environments; however The National Quality Framework, Siolta (2006) does not explicitly identify risky play but does state that play should be challenging and fun. The Pre School Regulations (2006) and Health, Safety and Welfare Act (2005) are often cited as a deterrent to the engagement of outdoor activities and risky play in early years services.

The focus of this literature has been on risky play in the context of ECCE settings however it is necessary to consider if the prevalence of outdoor learning and risky play is influenced or is as a consequence of a 'risk adverse' society (Gill, 2007). An understanding of children, their rights and implication in a risk society will be explored.

The Rights of the Child

Ireland is the first country in Europe to develop a National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making. The strategy builds on the developing infrastructure for children's participation established since the publication of the National Children's Strategy in 2000. The Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) was established with an aim to improve life in Ireland for children and young people. *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People*, 2014-2020, outlines the Government's agenda and priorities for children and young people under the age of 25. This offers a framework for the introduction and implementation of policy and services. The vision outlined in Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures (BOBF): states

> Our vision is for Ireland to be one of the best small countries in which to grow up and to raise a family and where the rights of all children and young people are respected, protected and fulfilled; where their voices are heard and where they are supported to realise their maximum potential now and in the future (DCYA, 2015, p2).

The strategy recognises the importance of children having a say in decisions that affect their lives. The strategy is guided and influenced by the UNCRC and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. The UNCRC is based on children's needs for a balance provision, protection and participation. The National Strategy on Children and Youth Participation in Decision-making identifies the following objectives and priority areas for action:

> 1. Children and young people will have a voice in decisions made in their local communities.
>
> 2. Children and young people will have a voice in decision-making in early education, schools and the wider formal and non-formal education systems.
>
> 3. Children and young people will have a voice in decisions that affect their health and well-being, including on the health and social services delivered to them.
>
> 4. Children and young people will have a voice in the Courts and legal system
>
> (DCYA, 2015, p3)

The Thirty-first Amendment of the Constitution (Children) Act 2015 was signed into Irish law in April 2015. This new amendment proposes that children's best interests will be of the utmost importance when critical decisions are being made about their protection, welfare and care and that these rights be enjoyed by children as children. This amendment also gives legal recognition to the best interests and views of children in court cases affecting their life.

Kay and Tisdall (2015) argue that children's rights should be critically considered with children's wellbeing. They suggested that children's rights actually did not necessarily improve children's lives but acknowledged that improving children's wellbeing was in fact more beneficial. Under rights theory, including the UNCRC, 'the rights to protection and safety, safeguarding the more vulnerable children, weigh more heavily than children's right to play'(2015, p8).

The rights of the child have focused on rights concerning provision and protection with less emphasis on participation rights. Síolta, The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education the Quality Framework identifies the rights of the child more in the context of the ECCE setting stating

> Ensuring that each child's rights are met requires that she/he is enabled to exercise choice and to use initiative as an active participant and partner in her/his own development and learning (CECDE, 2007, p2).

Participation rights means the child has more power and agency in their lives. Participation rights have been more contentious, mostly because of 'different constructions and understandings of childhood'(CECDE, 2007, p2). Current theories view of the child is contextualised.

> ...the child is not perceived as a constant, universal organism operating in a vacuum. Instead the mind is seen as inherently social, and so adult-child relations should be characterised by an interactionist approach (O'Dwyer, 2006 in CECD, 2007, p2).

There is a duty on ECCE practitioners and other professionals to ensure that children's rights are translated into every day practice with children. Children need to get opportunities

> ...to enable every child to exercise choice, and to use initiative as an active participant and partner in her/his own development. It means moving beyond simply safeguarding children's rights, to actively promoting them (CECDE,)

Childhood according to Lupton are socially constructed and that central to this construction is the imputation of 'specialness' to children and childhood (1999, p86). Children are constituted to be protected. There is a common discourse that they should be safeguarded from danger and protected (Brussoni, 2012) from anything which threatens children or childhood. Children are socialised through family, early childhood services, education and the state resulting in dependence on adults. Lupton argues that 'risk anxieties can help construct childhood and maintain its boundaries – the specific risks from which children must be protected serve to define the characteristics of childhood and the 'nature' of children themselves' (1999, p86-87).

We live in a heightened risk aware society. The word risk is a term that is changing all the time so therefore needs to be considered in relation to specific societies and eras. How we perceive risk is influenced by the ideas and values of our society or culture. 'All risk concepts are based on the distinctions between reality and possibility' (Furedi, 1997, P18).

Jackson and Scott identify that 'the anxieties specific to childhood are part of a general sense that the social world itself is becoming less stable and predictable' (Lupton 1999, p88). Threats to children's well being come from many angles, media, social media, stranger danger, accidents, paedophiles, breakdown in family relationships and much more. Risk may be produced as a social condition but there is an expectation that it is accessed and managed by individuals in society. Beck associates individualisation with the process of de-tradlationalisation which has produced a less predictable world in which we are faced with many options and no easy solutions (Lupton p89). Beck claims risk society begins where tradition ends; in all aspects of life, the traditional certainties which used to exist cannot be taken for granted (Beck cited by Lupton, 1999 .

The everyday world of childhood no longer seems safe and predictable as a result. Jackson and Scott argue that individualisation and de-traditionalisation when taken together produce a context which requires more parental investment in children in this unpredictable and less safe world. The social word of children is bounded by surveillance (Lupton, 1999 p92).

The perception of risk is a highly subjective process, how many possible hazards are identified and prioritised is influenced by a wide variety of social, cultural, and psychological factors (Slovic, 2000, in Jenkins, 2006). Risk can be classified into two categories: positive and negative. It can be seen as something to embrace and valued for its contribution to learning. 'Risk is required in order to make approximations to acquire new skills, knowledge and concepts' (Bialostok and Whitman 2012, p1). Risk can also be concerned with undesirable future outcomes and avoided at all costs.

Children are viewed as active agents in modern Irish society, however the extent to which they can participate is limiting

> ...their own everyday world takes place within constraints set by their subordinate location in relation to adults, where their own understanding of what it means to be a child has been shaped by their interaction with more powerful, adult, social actors with pre-existing, albeit re-negotiable, ideas about children and childhood (Jackson and Scott in Lupton, 1999, p91).

To gain a deeper knowledge about experiences at a micro level requires an understanding how cultural factors have on risk perceptions of individuals and how the adults who are parenting children in contemporary society.

Parenting in a 'Risk' Adverse Society

A social theory that helps make sense of the position of the individual in contemporary society is the concept of a 'risk society', developed by Ulrich Beck (Beck 1992). He claims that individuals in modern society are encouraged to manage their own risks and therefore become evaluators of their actions and choices and the impact of these on their individual lives.

The influence of society on parents has had a considerable impact on the opportunities for children's outdoor play. A significant factor likely to influence children's engagement in risky play is the attitudes of their parents. According to Sallis *et al* (2000) the attitude of parents plays a significant role in whether children get to engage in physical activity or not. Moloney (2010) concurs and identified parental attitudes as a major barrier to facilitating children's outdoor learning and risky play. It

is parental safety concerns which are restricting the scope of children's play (Little and Eager, 2010) as well as parental expectations. The current societal pressure, particularly in middle class families to maximize children's opportunities and engage in 'intensive parenting'. This style of parenting supports the idea that children should be protected from all possible risks, engaged in structured activities, attend the best schools and be transported everywhere by car (Brussoni, 2012,p 3138).

Hayes (2010) identified a number of ECCE settings are adhering to the early years environment as a preparation for school. This is a result of the market-led approach according to O'Connor and Angus (2012). They claim that early years practitioners are under pressure from parents to focus on academic learning. This 'schoolification' according to Waller *et al* (2010), may be perceived by parents that play is dispensable to early learning. This focus puts an emphasis on an indoor structured environment rather than the freedom of the outdoor environment.

Parent believe they have a responsibility to protect their children from risk, yet according to Kelley *et al* (1998) found they are also aware they need to encourage their children to experience 'appropriate' risk-taking to gain competence.

In this increasing risk-adverse society parents are more aware and more scared of risk and this can cause them to feel they need to have control over their children and their children's lives. This control may result in the children's opportunity to engage in any level of risk to be eliminated, yet we know that it is impossible to live our lives risk-free. 'Economic life today is clearly oriented towards the avoidance of risk' (Furedi, 1997, p2). Insurance companies, health services, personal security and many more are primarily built on the probability of a misfortune occurring and subsequently marketed to persuade individuals and societies that they are at risk. 'Unsettled by the perceived plethora of risks faced by their children, many parents are searching for ever more intrusive ways of monitoring their children's lives'(Guldberg, 2009, p43). Webcams in crèches, a recent phenomenon in Irish early years services was a selling point for some of the bigger businesses so that parents could watch their children's lives during the day while at work. In other words parents could survey and have closer supervision of their children and those who cared for them.

> Modern devices enable parents to see infants on video links; to track older children from a distance; monitor internet use secretly; read deleted text messages; listen in on mobile phone calls; find out if their teenagers are driving too fast; or even tell what their children have spent their school lunch money on.
>
> (Woods, 2007 in Guldberg, 2009 p44).

Foucault noted that government, through state paternalism, encourage its citizens not to engage in anything that might be risky and cause a negative health consequence and this 'obsession with reducing all risks of life simply produces individuals with a type of paranoia' (Oliver, 2010, p78). He goes on to say that taking this philosophy unquestionably may produce issues which result in citizens who conform to some 'centrally defined idea' and where 'people are as risk adverse as possible' (Oliver, 2010, p78). Oliver highlights some concern as he believes this will cause people not to function on a macro level and that societies need individuals and groups to take risks, such as start a new business.

To understand the power of governments and other individuals on the daily experiences children have in early years services it is necessary to understand the role of power in this context.

The Influence of Power in Early Childhood Care and Education

ECCE could be perceived to be embedded in a web of power. This section will look to Michel Foucault with the aim to gain an understanding of how power impacts every day practices within the early childhood setting. Foucault wrote extensively on power, and is considered one of the most influential social thinkers of the 20th century. His theories have contributed to how we think and make sense of the world. He believed that power was exercised for a number of reasons; he believed that it did not only exist from a top-down or bottom up approach but highlighted that power is exercised at all levels in all directions.

> Power must be analysed as something which circulates, or as something which only functions in the form of a chain. It is never localized here or there, never in anybody's hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth.

> Power is employed and exercised through a netlike organization (Foucault, 1980c, p. 98).

Foucault was interested in how institutions apply authority and influence individuals. He believed that it is necessary to examine the micro-power with the same attention as the macro-power in order to understand the complex nature of power. Foucault was critical of state power and large institutions as he believed they challenge individuals' autonomy. Power relations are changeable (Foucault 2003). The exercise of power is linked to all individuals and Foucault would argue that even people who are often referred to as powerless create power relations through their actions and thoughts (Foucault 2003). He identifies that 'power can be productive –producing forms of resistance to domination-and can be positive in producing new truths that that make domination and inequality reversible' (Alvesson, 2002 in Mac Naughton, 2005, p44).

Foucault presents the body as a 'passive entity' (Mc Nay, 1997, p12) and defines 'power exclusively in terms of its disciplinary effects on passive bodies' (Mc Nay, 1997, p40); this eradicates and negates other aspects of individuals' existence. This idea that an individual can be reduced to a docile body does not reflect women's experiences and how they have fought and won freedoms in modern society. Foucault's theory offers insight to feminists and through their analysis has buildt on the body of knowledge which 'presents a theory of power and its relation to the body which feminist have used to explain aspects of women's oppression' (Mc Nay 1997, p3).

Power is not only exercised by the state on individuals but in every interaction in every sphere of society (Mills, 2003). It is interesting to note that Foucault, according to Oliver, argued that the state had 'to ensure control of its citizens' (2010, p162). The ECCE practitioner experiences power in a multitude of ways. The exercise of power is not simply a relationship between "partners", individual or collective; it is a way in which some act on others (James, 2000, p340). Drawing on this Foucaultian idea of power early childhood practitioners experience and actively participate in multiple intertwining power relationships within the setting amongst colleagues, management and parents as well a plethora of regulatory bodies. Foucault (1980) claims there is not an objective 'truth' and that 'truths' are socially constructed. He identifies that the

most powerful in society have the greatest power and it is these views which have a dominant discourse, and therefore it is their version of the truth that prevails.

> The production of knowledge is always bound up with historical specific regimes of power, and therefore, every society produces its own truths which have a normalising and regulatory function (McNay, 1997, p24).

In order for real and meaningful change to happen in society the voice of the marginalised must be heard. MacNaughton (2005) draws on Foucault and suggests that early childhood practitioners need to

> ..tackle our will to truth within specific regimes of truth that govern us – we must play 'other trumps in the game of truth' (Foucault, 1998, p 15).

MacNay outlined what Foucault offered as the practice of 'free speech' which he called 'parrhesia' which offer alternative truths that are often 'denied official status' (MacNaughton, 2005, p 44).

ECCE services in Ireland have become a much regulated business, with inspections by TUSLA, DES and Pobal as well as been governed by health and safety regulations, fire regulations etc. 'Foucauldian notions of power and control to posit regulatory frameworks as tools of governmentally subjectification' (Fenech and Sumsion, 2007, p109). Early childhood services can be described as sites of disciplinary power (Foucault, 1977) with regulatory controls undertaken by disempowered early childhood teachers who are overwhelmed by increasing regulatory accountabilities. Critics such as Duncan (2004) would suggest that ECCE practitioners can become 'docile yet productive' under the weight of such regulatory accountability (Greishaber, 2002 cited in Fenech and Sumsion, 2007, p109). Duncan when reporting on the experience of ECCE practitioners of education reform saw the early childhood practitioner as being depicted as a victim of reforms that 'smother', 'overtake' and 'misplace' them, he also highlighted that the ECCE practitioner 'felt an acute sense of powerlessness'(2004, p160). Foucault argues that in modern societies, power is not something that is owned and used by particular individuals. Rather that it is dispersed throughout society: it is silent and pervasive, flowing through the network of social practices and relations (Foucault, 1977).

ECCE practitioners experience power from management and regulations with issues such as ratios, time and all the space available to offer children particular experiences. Foucault notes that the circulation of disciplinary power is supported by the 'distribution of individuals in a space' (1977, p 144), and their use of time and space is often regulated by means of timetables. The hierarchical observation can be experienced by both the owner/managers and the ECCE practitioners. Foucault noted that a 'relation of surveillance ...is inscribed at the heart of the practice of teaching' (1977, p195): teachers watch pupils but are also themselves observed by head teachers, inspectors and parents. He went on to suggest that the possibility of being seen is enough to ensure control and that individuals turn that 'gaze' onto themselves and regulate their own behaviour; this according to Foucault, is disciplinary power.

It is necessary to note that Foucault's 'examination of power is one-sided; power relations are only examined from the perspective of how they are installed in institutions and they are not considered from the point of view of those subject to power' (McNay, 1997, p39). To understand the position of the ECCE practitioner it is important to examine the extent to which 'care' and 'education' are divided in Irish society and explore the gendered nature of the sector.

'Care' and 'Education' Divide

In Ireland the care and education of young children is currently highly stratified. Yet, 'effective early years practice and pedagogy integrates education and care with learning development and experiences for children' (Hayes, 2013, p8). The Irish context includes a mix of publicly funded community-based and privately owned and managed settings with some contribution from the voluntary sector. Harvey (2007) stated that the logic of the market has been used in the redesign of the welfare provision which he claims is a characteristic of neoliberalism. The sector has a split system policy approach to ECCE. The market model approach is prevalent for the care of children while education of children is considered the role of the DES. This divide has hindered the development of the early years profession. The fragmented approach in terms of care and education has had an impact on training and staffing

with inequitable divisions between the sectors (Oberhuemer, 2005). The ECCE workforce represents a diverse group that differs considerably in their initial training and education, qualifications, employment situations and status with 30% of the workforce in 2006 having no official training in the areas of childcare and education (OECD 2006; DES 2007). This is currently changing with an estimated 99% of ECCE staff engaging in training according to early childhood Ireland's latest figures.

This traditional view of women supports the view that the care of children should be provided in the home by the mother and that the Department of Education and Skill is responsible for their education. ECCE is a low status, poorly paid sector, staffed mostly by women with limited training. This situation is further perpetuated by the limitations of the Childcare (Pre-Schools Services) Regulations, 2006.

'Early Childhood Care and Education is located within a feminist paradigm, where the traditional construct is that of physical care undertaken by women without training (Jalongo et al. 2004; OECD 2006; Lobman et al. 2007). Indeed, Jalongo et al. (2004, 146) suggest that the care of young children has been treated as a 'natural outgrowth of maternal instincts, a role for which the rewards are intrinsic rather than material' (cited in Maloney 2010, p 173).

In the Scandinavian model of childcare this split system is not evident and there is one core profession with a general qualification that works with children up to compulsory school age (Oberhuemer, 2005). Traditionally a lack of awareness and attention to the educational benefits of ECCE services outside of the primary school system at policy level has impacted on the status and professionalism of many early childhood practitioners. There is a shift in the recognition of the educational benefits of the ECCE. In 2015 the DES employed inspectors to inspect the ECCE services which currently offer the free preschool year with a focus of this inspection on education. This inspectorate team is staffed by ECCE professionals with considerable experience in the field of early childhood care and education. This is a cause for great celebration on one hand, as this is the first time that ECCE practitioners are seen as professionals in the DES and wider Government departments. However, on the other hand, it is necessary to continue to support the idea that 'care' cannot be taken out of 'education'. Hayes concurred with this stating that 'caring is educational; education is

caring and both are effective when responsive to the child' (Hayes, 2007, p7) and care should not be devalued further. The emphasis on care has been devalued in how the European Commission refers to ECCE with education now featured before care and has becoming defined as early childhood education and care. A result of the professional status of practitioners in predominately 'care' areas have a perceived lower status than 'teachers' in the educational areas (WBDP, 2009; OECD, 2006). Despite the strive to bridge the gap from an Irish context, with the introduction of Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework to provide an umbrella guideline for all children between 0-6 years the traditional bifurcation of care and education remains.

Gendered Employment

The socio-economic position of women in western societies and the situation for women in Ireland has changed very significantly since the 1970's. The size of families has reduced, women's educational attainment levels have increased and many women are in paid employment (Barker et al 2009). Women continue to be relatively subordinate even though they are a rising social group, despite the fact that there have been blocks to their ascent, particularly for certain classes of women. Women's issues have not featured highly on the political agenda in Ireland with women's rights been restricted with their constitutional rights during the rejection of the abortion referenda in 1983, 1992 and 2002 and during the divorce referenda in 1986 (Barker et al 2009). Divorce was finally signed into Irish law in 1996.

In Ireland, despite strong legislative framework for equality and non-discrimination, women make up the majority of those on low pay. Despite considerable improvement for women, The Irish Constitution continues to designate a narrow socio-economic role for women, one that is primarily in the home with Article 41 stating:

> The state recognises the Family as a natural primary and fundamental unit group of Society, and as a moral institution possessing inalienable and imprescriptibly rights, antecedent and superior to all positive law.

The Constitution in Article 42.2 outlines the view form a legal context of women having a family; it states:

> The state shall, therefore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home.

Ireland is ranked as having one of the highest percentages of low paid jobs in the developed world (OECD 2013). The plight of low paid employment being linked to poor working conditions with low or zero hour contracts in the care sector as well as retail and hospitality sectors has been highlighted by Barry (2015, p16). He claims that there is 'growing concern that casualisation of working conditions and low pay have become endemic for women working in care, hospitality and retails jobs – a consequence of austerity policies and employer-centred flexibility on the labour market'(2015, p16). Part time employment appears to be highly gendered constituting 35% of women's employment compared to 13.8% of men's employment reported in 2014. This level of part time employment is largely because women continue to the primary carers and the childcare sector has received little public support (Barry, 2015, p16).

To understand the underlying or overreaching agendas which have positioned ECCE requires an examination of the political programme within which it has developed.

Political Agenda

The growing demand for childcare provision over the past two decades has raised considerable concerns for the governments of liberal welfare regimes (Loyd and Penn, 2010; 2013). The government put a range of initiatives in place in response to these changes. While the focus of childcare provision has moved from being a private issue to a public one, this has not led to an investment in or increase in public sector provision. The policy interventions have focused on centre - based care with a strong emphasis on the private sector rather than investment in public sector (Gallagher, 2014). Interventions such as The Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (2000-2006) and, the National Childcare Investment Programme (2006-2010) created over 40,000 childcare places (WBDP, 2009), the Childcare Capital Programme (2012) and the EYC 2014 were some of the measures put in place. These interventions were focused mainly on the private sector to increase childcare place. It is necessary to note that there has been some investment in the public and voluntary providers but these

are mostly positioned in socially disadvantaged areas through programmes such as Early Start and voluntary services offered by organisations such as Barnardos.

In Ireland the primary policy focus has been on creating childcare spaces; it has neither supported the quality of early years provision and pedagogy nor has it addressed issues of access, affordability and sustainability (Hayes, 2010). This is a cause for concern as the quality and reliability of early years services can have a profound impact on children, families, and the broader social and political context (Brauner et al, 2004 cited in Hayes, 2010, p67)

Concerns about how childcare is developing have been raised in relation to high cost of childcare for parents as well as patchy provision. The low value assigned to care giving in this sector of employment is characterised by low wages and poor working conditions is a concern for those employed in the sector.

The fact that there is a growing reliance on the private sector for childcare places raises concerns about the viability and sustainability of marketised forms of childcare (Lloyd and Penn, 2010). Neoliberal policies are pushing towards a marketisation of care however Penn has noted that the position of childcare academics and advocates in the UK is that 'they believe that early childhood could or should be an exception to the trend towards privatisation'(2007, p193). Irish society would benefit if policy development for children were to move from the current welfare-based model towards a rights-based model. From an educational stance, this approach according to Singh would

> Enable us to understand better the 'best interest' of the child and its multiple implications- to protect and promote the right to education of every child as a inalienable right;....with child-friendly pedagogical approach; and to nurture in them moral and ethical values and a love of learning. It also implies a school environment that is respectful of human rights and is conductive to preparing children for the responsibilities of freedom (Swadener *et al*, 2013, p xii).

Singh goes on to say that both children and society benefit from the right to education, stating that 'the best interest of the child is also the best interest of a society, and its future' (Swadener, 2013, p xii).

Conclusion

This Literature Review has identified some of the issues, challenges and insights surrounding the engagement of outdoor learning and risky play in ECCE settings. The literature outlined the role of the ECCE practitioner which is intrinsically positioned in a risk adverse society, where parents and the political agenda play a central role apparent throughout the research. From the literature reviewed it is apparent that children's opportunity to engage in risky play is dependent on a wide variety of factors from the macro to the micro level.

ECCE is a rapidly changing and expanding sector within the Irish context. The aim of this research is to explore the role of the ECCE practitioner through the lens of outdoor learning and risky play. Engaging in this Literature Review has facilitated a deeper insight to some of the issues experienced by ECCE practitioners. It is predicted that during the research process other literature will be examined.

Chapter Four provides an viewpoint on how this research was carried out, with am of understanding the challenges facing ECCE practitioners engaging in outdoor learning and risky play with children.

CHAPTER FOUR

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This study investigates the lived experiences of early years practitioners through the lens of outdoor learning and risky play with young children in early years services. It will examine:

H*ow ECCE practitioners reconcile outdoor learning and risky play with the pressures to avoid, omit or obscure it in the current climate*?

This chapter contains the research questions to be studied. It explains the methodological approach taken, the philosophical reasons behind this approach and how the research was carried out.

Locating Myself in the Research

Over my career I have found myself in many different roles and each of these roles have influenced how I view children, early childhood practitioners and learners. My ontological position was formed as a result of my varied experiences, firstly as an early years practitioner, an adult learner, a tutor in an adult education centre and currently as a lecturer on an BA programme for ECCE in a third level institution facilitating both traditional students and adult learners. A critical researcher, according to cf.Agar (1986), 'assumes a learning role rather than a testing one' (Walsh & Ryan 2015 p29). I also position myself as a realist, which supports the fact that I recognise that 'there is a reality that is separate from our descriptions of it' (Brynam, 2012 p29). I am acutely aware that 'we will only be able to understand –and so change - the social worlds if we identify the structures at work that generate those events and discourses' (Brynam 2012 p29). My hope is that the knowledge gained from this research will contribute to the voice of the early years practitioner and offer insight to the institutions and educators supporting them on their learning journey.

Reflexivity is an essential aspect of research. A researcher needs to 'recognise the complexity of the web of life and experience' (Ryan, 2015, p 31). Following the completion of the first focus group, the focal point of my enquiry changed direction somewhat and in response to the findings and the researcher responded by examining existing literature which together provided direction for the subsequent interviews.

My particular interest is how adults engage with children and what influences them in their work with children. My research is going to examine how early years practitioners facilitate, advocate or encourage children's experiences through the lens of outdoor learning and risky play.

Research Question

How early childhood care and education practitioners can reconcile outdoor learning and risky play with the pressures to avoid, omit or obscure it in the current climate?

The focus of this research is to explore the role of the ECCE practitioner through the lens of outdoor learning and risky play. In keeping with the aim and being informed by the information in the Literature Review, the following research questions were developed:

> What impact has the practitioner's attitude has on the engagement of or lack of outdoor learning and risky play?
>
> What is promoting outdoor learning and risky play in early childhood care and education settings?
>
> What are the barriers or perceived barriers to outdoor learning and risky play with young children?

There was a considerable difficulty in the sample group chosen as the Ethics Committee had a difficulty with the fact that the researcher was an insider researcher who was an educator with the group of participants identified as suitable for the purpose of this research. I had to go to considerable lengths to satisfy the committee

that the research was not linked to the subject directly and that student performance and assessment was not directly linked to a research project by the researcher. I felt disempowered due to a lack of trust by the institutions that, as a researcher, I would act in an ethical manner. Foucault points out that we must not deal with ethics as simply obeying the governing moral code but engage with a continual reflexive appraisal of the moral norms required by an ethics committee but also of our own ethical obligations and values (Hammersley and Traianou, 2013). On completion of the focus group and engagement with the group of learners the difficulty to get clearance from the ethics committee was accepted. The experience put a spotlight on the power relationship which exists between learners and educators, particularly when their final marks are in the hands of the lecturer.

Methodology

According to Ryan "Methodology refers to a 'perspective' or broad theoretically informed approach to research" (2015, p117).

Mason contends that your methodological strategy is

> ...the logic by which you go about answering your research questions...it is the logic which underpins the way you design your research project as a potential answer to your research questions, as well as the day-to-day decisions about most if not all aspects of the research.
>
> (Mason, 2002, p31)

Epistemological Position

The philosophies involved in research, termed paradigms, are 'the basis on which we build our verifiable truth' (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994, p4). The methodology approach used for this research is a qualitative approach influenced mainly by social constructivism and feminist paradigms. Walter argues that methodology is a frame of reference for the research which is influenced by the 'paradigm in which our theoretical perspective is placed and developed' (2006, p.35). The social constructivist

methodology can be associated with critical paradigms (Alvesson, 2009). The social constructivist allows the researcher to explore the world of the participants from their view point while the feminist builds on and from women's experience. 'Feminist research goals foster empowerment and emancipation for women and other marginalized groups, and feminist researchers often apply their findings in the service of promoting social change and social justice for women'(Hesse-Biber, 2006, p 4).

Insider Researcher

As a staff member of an institution and lecturer of this group of participants I consider myself to be an insider researcher. There are advantages and disadvantages to being an insider researcher. 'Hawkins (1990) suggests that a participant-observer who continues to perform his or her normal role within an institution will have more impact on the research than an outsider consultant, whereas Hockey (1993, p. 204) maintains that insiders are able 'to blend into situations, making them less likely to alter the research setting' (cited in Mercer, 2007, p 6). Issues to consider as an insider researcher are ones of familiarity; an insider researcher may have a good understanding of the setting and the context and be in an advantageous position to examine particular avenues of enquiry and assess the implications. It is worth considering whether or not this heightened familiarity could lead to a greater verisimilitude. The insider may also be so familiar that they do not ask the obvious question, assumptions may not be challenged and shared experiences not shared. As an insider researcher, access and potential for a good rapport is more likely. However this may also lead to the participants having more time and information to form preconceptions about their researcher and the research (Mercer, 2007).

In choosing the approach for this research, consideration was given to the type of research questions to be used, the purpose of these questions and the 'in-depth' requirements for the resulting data.

Qualitative Research

The researcher aims to investigate, through the medium of focus groups, the views and experiences of ECCE practitioners about outdoor learning and risky play with young children in ECCE services. Drawing on the experiences of a group of students engaging in study for a BA in Early Childhood Care and Education may provide significant knowledge and insight into the role of the early childhood practitioner in facilitating and advocating for outdoor learning and risky play as well provide an insight into the barriers of such activities in early childhood services.

Quantitative research has 'been largely underpinned by positivist principles' (Ryan, 2015, p31). Quantitative research is dependent on laws of probability to gather general information from a certain group of people and from these, present hypotheses from which generalities are identified. Quantitative research can be informative; the use of what research method to use is generally related to the 'question one wants answered' (Ryan, 2015, p31). '...the choice between quantitative and qualitative methods cannot be made in the abstract, but must be related to the particular research problem and research object' (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2009, p4).

Qualitative research is 'the way in which people being studied understands and interpret their social reality is one of the central motifs of qualitative research' (Bryman, 1988, p.8). It is an interpretative philosophy - the belief that knowledge is socially constructed by people within the research process. This research question explored the view of practitioners in ECCE sector through their perspectives, understandings and experiences in relation to outdoor learning and risky play with children in ECCE settings. The researcher needed to ensure that those who participated in the focus groups represented the various perspectives on the topic the research wished to explore and understand. By choosing qualitative interviewing in focus group format, 'participants are able to bring to the fore issues in relation to a topic that they deem to be important and significant' (Bryman, 2012, p.503). The focus group 'allows the researcher to develop an understanding about why people feel the way they do' (Bryman, 2012, p.503) and may also be helpful in gaining a wide variety of views to gain a deeper understanding of complex topics. Bringing these ECCE practitioners together for a focus group 'reflect the process through which meaning is

constructed in everyday life...' (Brynam, 2012, p504). They discussed what mattered most to them and identified their views. Valuable insights into the feelings, experiences and beliefs were gathered during these focus groups. A flexible approach was taken on what questions to ask, as these had a major impact on the quality and subjectivity of the data collected.

Following preliminary analysis I subsequently decided to engage more experienced practitioners who already hold a degree in ECCE. It was considered this more in-depth data would support the research to get more useful insight into the area of study. One to one semi-structured interviews with two ECCE practitioners provided this data. The semi-structured interviewing has become a popular way of gathering data within a feminist research framework (Bryman, 2012). Byrne suggests that, 'qualitative interviewing has been particular attractive to researchers who want to explore voices and experiences which they believe have been ignored, misrepresented or suppressed in the past (2004, p182 in Silverman, 2006, p114). 'Interviews do not tell us directly about people's 'experiences' but instead offer indirect 'representations' of those experiences' (Silverman, 2006, p117) Interviews were very important in allowing the 'contextualization of experience' (Rose, 2001) and take a closer look at the complexity of the role of the ECCE practitioner. The interviews through open ended questions provided a space for the ECCE practitioners to share their experiences and gather rich data which reflects their understanding of their role. Byrne suggests 'what an interview produces is a particular *representation* or *account* of an individual's views or opinions' (2004, p182 in Silverman, 2006, p117). The use of both samples has enabled the needs of the research to be realised.

Focus Group Considerations

Prior to the focus group the researcher engaged in light conversation and guided the group through some warm up games. The games were loosely related to the topic of the research, the purpose was twofold. The first game was lively and fun and was an embodied experience with the aim of reducing any anxiety about engagement in the

focus group. The second game was more focused on inspiring the participants to think about their early experiences in outdoor learning and risky play.

The focus group was welcomed, the goals of the research outlined and the reasons why the session would be recorded. The researcher also outlined some of the guidelines around the conventions of focus group participation for example one person speaking at a time and that data would be treated with confidence and anonymized. In the focus group care was taken to ensure interaction by facilitating group discussion through the open ended questions related to the topic under exploration. Participants were invited to share their experiences, feelings and concerns related to the particular topic, and have a 'conversation with a purpose' as outlined by Mason (Mason, 2002, p66). Sensitivity to the participant's needs and rights, particularly as some were currently participating in training with the researcher, was required.

The focus group was structured to include semi - structured questions posed to the participants with the researcher adjusting and responding to specific points as required. The researcher had hoped the participants would engage more in discussion however this may have been due to the fact that the moderator was in fact quite nervous and anxious and focused more on the planned questions. The focus group is 'heavily dependent on peoples capacities to verbalise, interact, conceptualise and remember'(Mason, 2002, p68).

Cohort

In qualitative research the concept of sampling generally revolves around purposive sampling. This type of sampling is to do with the selection of units which may be people, organisations, documents, departments, etc. with direct reference to the research question (Brynam, 2012). For the purpose of this research the research participants sought were a group of ECCE practitioners. 'Sampling is a procedure for generalizing about a population...without researching every unit ... in that population' (Hart, 2005, p338). It is necessary to consider elements such as time, cost, distance, access and the availability of potential participants when selecting the research

population. According to Bell (2010), researchers are dependent on the goodwill and availability of the potential group. The researcher focused on a group of ECCE practitioner, currently engaging in study for a BA in ECCE. A consideration when selecting participants is to decide whether to choose people who do not know each other or use natural groupings (Bryman, 2012). The researcher chose a group of students on the same course which can be identified as a convenience sampling strategy. This strategy was adopted and individuals for study were selected because they were available to the researcher. The problem with this type of sampling can be that it is impossible to generalise the findings due to the fact that the researcher does not know what population this sample is representative of (Bryman, 2012). They are almost certainly not representative of the ECCE sector as a whole due to their engagement in a degree programme. However, the researcher believes that the group could 'purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon of the study' (Creswell, 2007, p125). The participants for the one-to-one semi-structured interviews were purposeful as the researcher was interested in gathering data from experienced practitioners who hold a BA in ECCE to explore if similar issues emerged. In purposive sampling 'the principle of selection relies on the researcher's judgement as to the typicality or interest of research participants or existing data' (Walsh & Ryan, 2015, p132).

Ethical considerations

The researcher was conscious of protecting the participants who engaged in this enquiry and therefore the research was conducted in an ethically defensible manner. Ethical principles as outlined in four main areas by Diener and Crandall (1978) are whether there is harm to participants, a lack of informed consent, invasion of privacy and /or deception involved.

Efforts were made to respect participants' anonymity. The researcher received permission from the institution to allow the work based - students to participate in this research. Participants could withdraw from the research at any point and there was no penalty or reason required for withdrawing. The researcher was aware that the

students may have felt a conscious or unconscious obligation to participate in the study due to the lecturer/student relationship. The researcher acknowledged and discussed the issue of power with the participants prior to participation. As a result of this 'power' relationship, there was a strong realisation that the rights of participants in this research depended 'more on the moral sense of the researcher and their ability to make reasoned decisions' rather than on the completion of consent forms (Murphy & Dingwall, 2001, p342). The participation and responses are voluntary and will not impact future interactions with the students in any form. The participants were furnished with information about the research in writing in advance of the informed consent form. The participants were informed about their rights, written consent for participation was requested, understanding of information checked and opportunities given to ask questions and discuss the research. Participants' actual names were protected. The data collected was analysed by the researcher alone. All documentation and recorded footage of the focus group was held by this researcher, stored in a secure location and will be destroyed following completion of the research. There were no risks to participants arising from involvement in this study. Following the initial focus group, participants were offered an opportunity to read the transcript and with an option to withdraw any statements made during the focus group. The ethical considerations continue throughout the process of the research. The researcher is also conscious that the learning gained from this research needs to be shared with the participants and beyond in an ethically sound manner.

The outcomes of this research will identify, inform, and promote the role of the ECCE professionals to advocate for and facilitate outdoor learning and risky play with young children. This may result in ECCE practitioners understanding their potential position in relation to facilitating with and advocating for and on behalf of children in other areas of importance for children's well being and development.

Analysis of Data

There is considerable diversity in qualitative research and analysis 'which offers researchers a variety of methods and approaches to address the many and diverse social phenomena' (Sarantakos, 2013, p366). Data was collected and recorded and

transcribed for examination. The researcher followed a flexible model of data analysis. Following the collection of the primary research the transcripts were analysed based on a thematic system of coding. This was then used to guide the semi – structured interviews. According to Sarantakos (2013), analysis during and after the data collection is regularly used in qualitative research.

Conclusion

This chapter contains the researcher's epistemological position, the choice of method and questions to be studied. It highlighted the qualitative methodology and demonstrated the reflexive nature of the researcher and the challenges encountered. Chapter Five will provide a thematic analysis of the findings.

CHAPTER FIVE

THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

Introduction

This chapter seeks to find out how ECCE practitioners are engaging with young children in outdoor learning and risky play in early years settings. This section will present a thematic analysis of the findings gained from a focus group and semi - structured interviews. The focus group was held in Dublin in a setting familiar to the participants. The participants were a group of adult learners who are studying for a BA in ECCE on a part- time basis. The interviews were held in a location familiar to participants, one in Dublin and one in Kildare.

When led by the purpose of particular study, focus groups can bring richness to social research. They create a more interactive encounter than one-to-one interviews. Brynam emphasised this by stating that 'focus groups have considerable potential for research questions in which the process through which considerable meaning is jointly constructed is likely to be of particular interest'(2012, p516).

Following on from unexpected results from the focus group, the researcher felt the need to explore with more experienced practitioners who hold a degree in early childhood to get an insight into their view of the topic and to explore if the same issues were evident. Semi-structured interviews were chosen so as to allow the interviewees freedom to describe their experiences. Noaks and Wincup (2004) note that 'in order to achieve 'rich data', the keynote is 'active listening' in which the interviewer 'allows the interviewee the freedom to talk and ascribe meanings' while bearing in mind the broader aims of the project'(Silverman, 2006, p110).

Preparation for the Focus Group

The aim of the focus group was to gather information from the participants. The focus of my enquiry through this method was to listen for the most prominent themes,

indentified by the energy and passion the individuals demonstrated on topics as the discussion unfolded.

The first step I took was to meet with the participants and I introduced the topic and gave them a sense of my research with a considerable time allocation for questions and discussion. Dissemination of consent forms was a part of this session with an open invitation to anyone who wished to be involved to come along to the focus group session. Eleven participants arrived for the focus group.

In order to ensure identities remain anonymous, it is not possible to introduce each member of the group. To give an idea of the participants, all were working in the early childhood sector, some run their own childcare business, some work in privately run all day services (further differentiation is made by services owned by an individual who works in the service and chain services), some in sessional services while others are in community services in receipt of funding through government initiatives and Atlantic Philanthropies initiatives. All the services where the participants were employed offered the ECCE scheme.

Participants were also working in a variety of services identified by the curriculum offered such as HighScope, Montessori, Emergent Curriculum and Play based services. The participants in semi structured interviews are more experienced ECCE practitioners, both holding a BA in ECCE. One interviewee works in a community service in an area considered to be socially disadvantaged and the other works in a private setting in a rural town.

All participants were women and collectively have a considerable number of years' experience working with children.

Findings have been thematically analysed using codes. The themes and subthemes are a product of reading and rereading and playing and replaying of the focus group session. Bryman (2012) identifies a theme as

> A category identified by the analyst through his/her data;
> That relates to his/her research focus:
> That builds in codes identified in transcripts and/or field notes;

> And that provides the researcher with the basis for a theoretical understanding of his or her data that can make a theoretical contribution to the literature relating to the research focus (p580)

Using code to interpret findings can help to ensure weighted significance is given to what is intended by the participants. As the researcher can interpret much meaning from his or her own experience/ideas, it is important that the researcher recognises there may be a mismatch between what they hear and what was intended. During the initial coding of my findings I felt it necessary to go back to the participants to ensure they were happy with the themes which were emerging. The group consented and were in fact quite clear that they wanted their voices heard in relation to the themes identified.

> The identification of a theme emerges from the coding and 'it requires the researcher to reflect on the initial codes that have been generated and to gain a sense of the continuities and linkages between them' (Brynam, 2012, p580).

Practitioners' Attitude

Participants were asked if they felt it was important for children to be in the outdoors and invited them to discuss what influenced their practice in relation to outdoor learning and risky play.

There was an overwhelmingly positive response for all the participants with Participant 1 saying

> '*Yeah, a hundred percent*'

about the need for children to go outside to play. Participant 3's view was

> *I find that if you give them plenty of outdoor time, it helps them to regulate themselves,...it helps them to settle themselves down but if they don't that time out, and if you've particular rainy days...I just put their coats on and send them out. I go with them because it's just too hard*.

Participant 4 recognised that children playing outdoors supported children's development

I think it helps them build up their risk assessment and push their own boundaries. So when they're outside and they might be going down the slide to try out different ways on the slide, on their bum.

This discussion was followed up by further enquiry about what formed their attitude to playing outside. There was mixed reaction to this discussion. Some of the participants felt that their attitude was related back to their experience working with children

...years ago I would have been more, what should I say, safety conscious...have them wrapped...it is experience, I do give them more freedom...(P2)

while others felt it was their own early experiences which influenced them

...from our growing up (P5). *I think that's why I've an open view as well*... (P6)

....I'd be real kind of lackadaisical, whereas I was a calamity as a child and my parents let me absolutely break everything and it was grand...you know, like, so it's all about learning and giving them experiences and taking chances.

Other participants felt it related to their education

'*education*' (P7) ... '*I never knew what risky play was, how important it was or the benefits of it. So it is about re-educating yourself and it's different times now*'(P5).

Some believed their attitude was influenced by regulation and legislation. One of the participants that participated in the interviews said:

...like the preschool regulations and the health and safety regulations have an impact on how I think about outdoor learning and risky play because they are constantly been spoken about in our service...the manger is obsessed, but you know I think it's a mixture of my own childhood experiences and my education as an early childhood practitioner that really influences me.

Participants 2 and 11 also felt that regulations and policies at work had influenced them and how they think and feel about outdoor learning and risky play. During the discussion participants discussed the attitude of the staff in services as a contributing factor in the provision of outdoor learning and risky play. Another participant said:

I think it all depends on the practitioner in the room, because I am in the job for two months and literally the children did not go outside for a month and a half (8).

Participant 10 noted that she had purchased tools such as hammers and saws and she quoted her staff as saying

> '*no, no, I can't be watching, what if someone slaps someone across the head with a hammer,*'

and the participant went on to describe her response *to the staff member*

> *I'm kinda trying to explain to them look at you're obviously going to show them how to use the tools and you're going to be watching and observing, but straightaway, the defence was up and that was that, so I have to do something around that*.

One participant stated that she would find it difficult to be responsible for children playing with real tools:

> *Like, I'd find it really difficult to sit there and watch a three year old with a hammer or a saw. I'd be really like, oh, no, no way.*

This conversation went on for some time where participants identified that children will make dangerous type play with objects like sticks and that the role of the adult is to support the children to engage with these items safely.

A participant in one of the one-to-one interviews identified that children in the area she works in are often exposed to considerable risks and hazards in their locality and supports the notion that children will gain skills in dealing with risk if they get the opportunity in a hazard- free environment. She said that the staff in her service are totally against the service introducing risk into the service as they feel the children have enough of it in their environment.

> *The rest of the staff does not agree with me even though I have brought some articles to back up my argument they won't listen. The manager you know is not interested as she is too afraid...too afraid of being sued I suppose*.

During the interview with Interviewee 2 she said that the children in her group get to choose what they want to do and whether they want to do it inside or outside, but if the staff decide they don't want to go out, the child's choice is not deemed to be important. The manager is not an outdoor type of person and does not see it as important so she does not promote it.

It is really hard to implement it (Int 2).

Barriers

There appeared to be general ideas as to what the barriers are to outdoor learning and risky play in early years settings. Participants in the focus group overwhelmingly felt that parents attitude was the most pertinent barrier while regulation and legalisation, scheduling, management and to a lesser extent early years practitioners were identified as significant barriers to participation of outdoor activity with young children. Interviewee 2 also felt that parents were a significant barrier to children getting outside. The following extract is an example of the discussion in the focus group as well as extracts from the interviews.

During one of the interviews it was identified that the service was more focused on the children having 'academic' type skills rather than learning experiences.

> *...some classes would be like that ...they kinda do the work sheet thing or colouring book stuff ....its very hard*, *...some students are trying to get the perfect pictures they would be nearly holding the children's hands in order to get the perfect picture, rather than encouraging the children's work.*

The interviewee said some of the staff had a greater interest in children learning how to form letters and produce drawings to show parents. The interviewee described these as

> '*parent pleasers'* (Int 2).

Parental Attitude

All participants both from the focus group and the interviews felt that parental attitude had a considerable impact on the experiences children get in the outdoors on a daily basis. One Participant (11) said:

> *I have an awful lot of parents from different nationalities who do not want their kids going out at all until summertime. So, that's affecting us because we can't move children into other rooms because it's affecting our ratios. So, if we can't*

> *go out, due to, say due to six parents, we can't go outside at all, because there's no facilities to move those children into another room with another practitioner* (P11).

Other participants concurred with this with the majority having experienced the same challenges in relation to ratios. The group agreed that if the parents' wishes were that their child was not going outside, then the rest of the children did not get to go outside if the ratios were not correct. The issue about the parents controlling or trying to control what the children wear was also highlighted:

> *And when they're going outside, they're so wrapped up, there's layers and layers....they literally can't move... And then they want to strip off and then you have the thing of "I want to take off this." And you're like, but Mum said he must wear his hat and he must wear his scarf and God knows what else he has to wear as well. And then he's stripping off, out in the garden, and then I'm chasing him then (Laughter) to try to get it on before half twelve, the scarf on, the hat on, so I'm covered.*

This led to the discussion about how parents exercise their power through the manner in which they address the issue.

> *When you have parents collecting them at half twelve saying "oh, she cold, she's wet" you know. I made it very clear in September that we will be going out...they didn't provide the equipment.*

One of the participants that also engaged in the interview said that some of her parents were actually delighted that the children got outside to play in the service because the local environment is not safe for children to go out to play.

> *You know, one mammy said to me "she is afraid of her life about traffic, syringes in the grass and that she can't leave the child out of her sight for fear someone will take her".*

The impact of parental attitude was also highlighted by other members of the focus group, where it was identified that parents comment on and are fearful of children's engagement in more risky activities.

> *You know, they get very panicky just walking in the gate and seeing the child there, and they think, they think, you're nearly doing wrong by letting them be up there. You know that kind of way, 'cause, they're more afraid that they're going to fall off. Then, the only thing, they might be sitting on it singing a song, you know, that kind of way.*

The group went on to tell other stories emphasising parents' fear of children engaging in more physical activities:

> *Like, I had one father – his child jumped off the climbing frame thing. Now it was about that height (a meter aprox) to jump from there to the floor and he nearly, he was like: 'Ahh'! He said: Oh, no, I couldn't mind kids, me heart would be gone if I they were doing that.*

The discussion veered towards this attitude translating into ECCE practitioners having to do what the parents say because of the fear that parents will take their children out of the service. One participant said:

> *Private Centres have to make sure that they have enough children in the Crèche, who are going to pay fees to keep them going. If the parents are going to say: "Look I'm going to take him out, if you're going to bring him outside."*

Followed by another participant stating

> *...the parents who are paying a certain amount of money, they expect a certain standard, and they also expect; "I am paying your wages and I don't care what you're saying. I don't want my child to go outside".*

One of the participants that engaged in the interviews felt that parental attitude was a significant barrier while also recognising that it was her role to educate parents about the benefits of the outdoor environment. She talked about the image of the children as a reason why they would not like the children to be out playing. She went on to say that the parents like to go to the shopping centre after school and want the children looking 'perfect'.

> *The influence of parents That is a big factor, the clothes, or just health and the parents don't seem to know the benefits and the kids would be sick less…the cold and the clothes as well some of the children come in with pretty stuff on.*

The interview participant said she is always trying to encourage the parents to send the children in old clothes but that even this is a challenge as image is important in the area she is working in.

Legalisation and Regulation

During the focus group participants referred to legalisation and regulation. Some elements of the discussion identified legalisation and regulation as a barrier to

participation in outdoor experiences for children in their services yet the overall concerns was that these were less of a barrier than how they are perceived. They described situations such as ...

> *We had one (an inspection) recently in, at the October mid-term, and they never asked anything, never asked anything. She just walked outside, had a little look around and came back in and that was it. She never asked anything about the outdoors.*

Another said that during a Tusla inspection the inspector asked why the children were not outside

> *The Preschool Inspector said to her: "You are supposed to bring the children outside", and she said: "Well, it's raining, I don't…" She said: "It's raining – you're supposed to bring them out every day. You have your Outdoor Policy, you have your timetable to go on. So, why did you not bring your children outside"?*

An interview participant explained that both management and the management committee were obsessed with the regulations and the inspector.

> *The management committee are also on high alert about the inspectors, their focus in my opinion is not on the quality of the care for the children but how well we measure on the inspections...it's so frustrating*

The discussion then led on to going out of the service to access local parks to facilitate outdoor opportunities. Ratios as outlined by the preschool regulations were identified as a barrier. The members identified that they would like it if all the children in the service could get outside together but many stated that their outdoor area was too small. The opportunity to go to local facilities is dependent on children not been in.

> *We are across the road from one of them (park) and the Botanic Gardens down the road. But we're depending on kids to not be in – to be out sick so our ratios of one to three per child will allow you to actually go out*...

What was a real bone of contention for this participant was that when the children go to the local school the teachers are not so restricted.

> *If they go to school and one teacher will walk past our crèche, with thirty children to*
>
> *the Botanic Gardens-like that's crazy-the September later.*

The issue about permission was also discussed. Getting permission from parents (as this is a requirement of the regulations) to take the children outside the parameter of the service. There was a conversation about how permission was sought with most of the services getting this permission at time of registration.

We have it build into our, our Admission and Registration Form for local trips, so that is the local park, the local library... we know which children are let, and most of them are let go. There's very few that wouldn't be. The participants then went on to talk about accident report forms (also a regulation requirement). While participants recognised the need for accident report forms for more serious injury, they describe them as not necessarily efficient due to the nature of the forms having to be filled out even though the incident may have been minor and a normal childhood developmentally-appropriate type accident. This raised concern about the level of paperwork involved. The participants identified contradicting views among parents with some wanting to know every little bump while others seeing it as unnecessary. Participant 2 said

> *Most of our parents think it ridiculous. Seriously, do I have to sign this?*

While another participant said that she feels it is dependent on the parents.

> *It depends on the parents that way – for the tiniest little scratch, they want it to be written down (11).*

Another participant talked about the fact that the number of accident reports from each room is monitored and if there are too many reports from one room the staff are challenged by management and told to be more vigilant.

> *... need to be more vigilant and you need to shadow.*

There is no consideration for the fact that the incidents are minor and more than likely developmentally appropriate.

Service Provision

The question was in relation to whether their service promoted children being outside. Issues were raised about the influence of owners and management and the facilities

offered for outdoor area. A strong theme which emerged was a feeling of paralysis within the group preventing them from engaging in outdoor activities.

> *I think they like to think it but they actually don't, because they don't provide the opportunity. It's a set time for each room and if the weather's bad and you can't get out, you know, especially, particularly, the ones, like, the babies that are crawling around, like you know, that's very hard (P3).*

*A*nother participant said the following about the service she works in

> ...*We're a full day service and we're time restricted as well. Our garden area would be tiny. It can depend, because there's a chain of centres within my organisation, so some Centres would have bigger gardens than others. But my setting has, I think, has a very small garden that you would only be able to bring eight to ten preschoolers, to allow them to have enough space to not run into each other and to fully get used to the area (P9).*

Participant 4 had a similar experience:

> *It's very similar to my Service as well. We'd love to let the other children go out. But say the toddler's room, there's just no enough space to let them play together. Do you know that way, so we're time restricted to when they get to go outside to play.*

During the interview the interviewees got spoke about the schedule of their day. Because they are play- based, they have the freedom to alter the routine and be outside; however this freedom does not appear to translate into action. Both participants felt the management had big impact on the experience children received in relation to outdoor learning and risky play. Interviewee 2 identified a very large outdoor space but said the use of this was left to each individual group leader with little support from the service and management to do anything with the area for children's exploration. During the conversation one of the interviewee participants said they had lots of space and freedom to go outside but there was a lack of interest and motivation

> ...y*ou know when management are not really interested in the children going outside and exploring, the staff ride on that and use it for their own benefit..... During the winter it's mostly just my group of children that go outside.*

The discussion then went onto the provision of equipment in services for risky play in the outdoors. Differences of opinion occurred with a theme emerging about privately-run chain services versus other services. One participant felt that there was a difference between privately- run services and community-based services while

another participant talked about bringing the equipment from indoors to the garden so that children could engage with the equipment in a different way.

> *Like they build obstacle courses themselves using things, turning things upside down, you know, moving things around so that they are different. So that they are challenging themselves, and they do it nearly by themselves, we don't have to encourage it any more.*

Participants 8 and 2 were in agreement:

> *There is a difference between a Community Centre and a private Centre. A big difference.*

Participant 3 identified this as a measure of the quality of a service

> *But, it's the difference of having a good quality Service and one that isn't working that way. We are not encouraged to bring outdoor, indoor activities outside, and yet, they wanted to build an outdoor kitchen, but they didn't want them to the, gave them the pots and pans, but they didn't want them to use, to cut the grass or do anything like that or find a bit of mud and a bit of water to make the anything in the kitchen, so what's the purpose of it. It was there for display – it was there for display, look at our outdoor area and you know.*

This discussion seemed to resonate with many of the participants with similar ideas about what management and owners expect being dependent on whether the service is privately- or community- based. Participant 8 felt the profit-driven services were less concerned about the quality of care.

> *Lots of Crèches are private, and most of the owners are looking for more money. So, if you bring your stuff from inside, outside, they tell you: "Oh, don't do that, it's going to get wrecked and I have to buy new one, and it's expensive and we have to save money here and there, and ….. just crazy, you know. You shouldn't be in child care for money, you should be in it because you want to work with the children, and you want to provide the best for them.*

Another participant said

> *We wouldn't be allowed bring our sandboxes outside like, in the summer because the sand would get on the ground and you couldn't get it up, because it's a certain kind of like Astro turf kinda ground and it doesn't look right, it looks messy, so it ruins the garden if we have sand outside...It's not even the management in the Centre. It's Head Office, it's the higher people saying:"Well, we have to pay for the ground to be cleaned; we have to pay extra money.*

The participant felt powerless in the situation with Participant 4 saying:

It's beyond our control. Like, if management are telling us not to bring it outside…we can't.

Participant 1 also felt that more community based services would be beneficial stating:

But if we had more community based, and we have significant more investment in the sector, so we'll have more community based than private based – then I think the attitude will shift.

Two participants felt that the blame for any incident occurring in the early years service was down to the manager despite the fact that one of them was a manger who was also responsible for a group of children.

But, then at the end of the day, if anything happens, they'll be questioning me: Why did I not stop that before it literally happened... it's always the manager's to blame so, of course at the end of the day, you are a little bit scared of it's always the manager's to blame so, of course at the end of the day, you are a little bit scared of , oh Jesus I won't let them do that, because, then, she's going to give out to me again and it's going to be all my fault again.

When asked do they think the management is afraid of the participants responded with

That she's going to probably have to go to court or anything like that

and Participant 11 saying *claims* and participant 7 identifying it as a issues of reputation.

*Her reputations as well, like the reputation of the Crèche***.**

On the other hand, where services supported outdoor time and risky play as important for children participants felt they had an opportunity to support children's interests and alter the daily routine, purchase equipment for the benefit of the children. Participant 1 said*:*

In my setting, we view outside time as important as dinner time as small group time. Even though the ECCE children have a significant time in the setting, if they're outside, and we realise that they're really enjoying that time, then we'll let them continue to be outside.

Participant 6 identified with this and said

Yeah, my Centre would be like that as well and we would mix the age groups. The only thing really that would get in the way of say, the toddlers being

outside, would be literally ok dinner time, sleep time and that's it really like, you know.

Conclusion

There is significant evidence in these findings to suggest that the majority of these ECCE practitioners were interested in engaging with children in the outdoors with some more interested in the concept of risk play than others. It also became evident that there are considerable restraints and restrictions both from management and parents on the engagement in outdoor learning and risky play. One of the interviewees felt quite strongly that the attitude of staff and management was the most pertinent barrier. There is an indication from the focus group and the interviews that not everyone in the ECCE setting had a voice. Regulation featured in the discussion with a sense that neoliberal discourse within the sector was having an impact on everyday experience for young children. Chapter six will aim to give meaning by theorising the findings to explore what is really happening in relation to outdoor learning and risky play in ECCE settings

CHAPTER SIX

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

This chapter aims to theorise the findings. Following this discussion the findings, conclusions and recommendations will be presented.

Discussion

The aim of this discussion is to theorise the findings, to find out:

How can ECCE practitioner reconcile outdoor learning and risky play with the pressures to avoid, omit or obscure it in the current climate?

To discover what is really happening in relation to outdoor learning and risky play in ECCE settings. This involves 'giving meaning and intent to action, and ....reading meaning and intent in the action of others' (Schratz &Walker, 1995, p125 in Ryan, A.B. 2015 p180). The process of engaging in the primary research, listening to and writing up the data was of great importance to me. The more I engaged with the material in a variety of ways the more clarity and insight was gained. To analyse all data which emerged is beyond the scope of this thesis. The following aspects are in this researcher's opinion the dominant themes that emerged during the analysis process and the most closely related to the aims of this investigation.

The initial concept of this research was to identify what was promoting outdoor learning and risky play with young children and what the barriers were to engagement in the ECCE setting. What emerged however was that this thesis is really about power, from the ethical approval issues right through to the everyday experiences of young children in early years services. Participants, all of whom are early childcare and education practitioners, told their version of how they engage with outdoor learning and risky play, or not. Through discussion, they explored some of the barriers and promoters of their engagement with children in the outdoors. It was through this

process that power emerged as the most significant barrier to the everyday experiences of children in early childhood settings.

Following detailed examination of the findings and further elaboration on them in light of the literature, the interpretation of what I believe are the imperceptible implications for the everyday experience of children in early years settings became the priority for this discussion. The themes identified in the previous chapter will be further categorised and reviewed to understand how children's every day experiences are influenced by the macro systems which surround them. It is impossible to separate the themes discussed in the analysis of the findings and narrowly define them, however the discussion should be broader and should highlight the challenges faced by ECCE practitioner. The participants drew attention in their discussions to the following three contextual factors that influenced their engagement in outdoor learning and risky play: power, risk and risk society as well as political agendas. The data also presented some unexpected findings which were uncovered during the examination process namely the child's voice and the image of the child. This discussion will analyse the findings and aim to identify what is really happening in relation to the ECCE practitioner and outdoor learning and risky.

Power

The research findings portrayed by the participants positioned the ECCE practitioners in the centre of power relationships which concurs with Foucault's (1980) idea of power and how it permeates in all directions. The outcome of this myriad of power relations may be that early childhood practitioners experience management, parents and regulations as constraints to their engagement in outdoor learning and risky play. Specifically the findings showed that the 'gaze' of parents was having a 'disciplinary effect' on the ECCE practitioner as a 'passive body' (Fouclault, in McNay, 1997). The following short extract from a participant highlights the 'acute sense of powerlessness' (Duncon, 2004, p106).

...the parents who are paying a certain amount of money, they expect a certain standard, and they also expect; "I am paying your wages and I don't care what you're saying. I don't want my child to go outside".

The early childhood practitioner appeared to lack agency and confidence and/or will to argue the benefits of outdoor learning and risky play. This could be related to the fact that 'care' work is devalued which is emphasised by the gendered nature of the sector and the poor working conditions and low pay (WBDP, 2009), resulting in inability due to constrains which are all influenced by the lack of status and power to promote the benefits of outdoor experiences for children.

Many of the practitioners were very restricted and controlled by the time tabling and scheduling of children's opportunities to go outside. Power according to Foucault is also exercised through 'distribution of individuals in space' (Foucault, 1977, p144) and how the space was used. My findings, in part, can support the assertion that this predicament was primarily located in privately-owned full day services which can be linked to the policy agenda of the market form of childcare (Lloyds and Penn, 2010) and the lack of focus on the issues of quality of early years provision as well as neglecting of the issues of access, affordability and sustainability outlined by Hayes (2010).

Interestingly, the data suggests that the actual regulations were less of a constraint than outlined in the literature reviewed but what was perceived to be a barrier to participants' practice within the service was management's(at all levels) emphasis on regulations. Drawing on the data one can infer that management used the regulations 'to ensure control' within the services to influence individual practice. Foucault's 'analytics of power (1980, p98)', may be taken as part of the chain of power relations that affect how early childhood practitioner engage in practice. One can identify that the management has the most power in the relationship and it is their version of the truth that prevails. What was apparent from the data was that in theory the participants were interested in exploring the outdoor environment with the children but they did not, as Foucault stated 'tackle our will to truth' (MacNaughton, 2005, p15), within this environment. Foucault suggested that early childhood practitioners

are active in the creation of that power relationship through their way of thinking and their actions. In his view the early childhood practitioner could be depicted as a 'docile' subject or 'passive bodies' (Mc Nay, 1997).

Power was a dominant finding but the implication for how an ECCE practitioner can engage in risky play in the risk adverse society was also identified as a challenge.

Risk and Parenting in a Risk Society

As discussed in the literature review, risky play can be defined as 'thrilling and exciting forms of play that involve risk of physical injury '(Sanderson, 2007 p248). It also identified some of the benefits of risky play for children, with Gleave (2008) suggesting that the opportunity to engage in risky play supports them to develop skills to deal with situations later in life. It was obvious from the data that the participants in the research recognised the benefits for children of opportunities to explore the outdoor environment with varying commitments to the engagement of risky play. A pattern emerged, both in the data gathered and the existing literature, that how risk is viewed by adults has a strong correlation to the engagement of risk taking in early years setting (Waters and Begley, 2007) and there was a recognition that fear of litigation (Tovey, 2007) was also a barrier. What also became apparent in the data was that just getting outside with the children in some of the services was the challenge, with the idea of children engaging in risky play a long way down the priority list. The attitude of the manager of the service in relation to risky play appeared to be prominent in the actual experience of the children's engagement in outdoor learning and risky play.

Moloney (2010) explored the attitude of parents in the literature which has a direct correlation to the findings from the research data. The findings indicate that parents' attitude were a major barrier to children's engagement in outdoor learning and risky play. As previously highlighted by Little and Eager (2010), parental safety concerns were restricting the scope of children's play and societal pressures to protect children and to engage children in structured activities (Brussioni, 2012). Guldberg (2009) identified that parents are anxious about the risks faced by their children and seek ways to monitor their children. Identified in the findings was that this 'gaze' was

exercised through the early childhood practitioner as one way in which parents aim to control this fear.

The Political Agenda

The data suggests that the manner in which the ECCE sector is developing is having an impact on the everyday experiences of children encounter in early childhood settings. The participants highlighted the implications of the tight timetabling for outdoor experiences, the size of the outdoor areas, the limitations of how they can use the space and the lack of focus on quality of experiences for children. Hayes (2010) recognised that the political agenda has not supported the quality of early childhood provision and pedagogy and neither is it addressing access, affordability and sustainability. Gallagher (2012) identified that there was an emphasis on investment into the private sector with less interventions in the public sector. Participants identified a difference in quality in the private and community sector and recognised disparity in the pressures management work under. The data suggests that the privately owned services were more restricting than community -based services and this had a direct impact on children experiences on a daily basis due to the for profit focus in many private settings. Brauner et al (2004) stated that there is a concern if the political agenda is not focused on quality. They state that the quality of early years services can have a profound effect on children, their families and the broader social and political context.

The Unexpected

Through analysis of the data two other findings emerged. The first one was that the voice of the child in the ECCE environment did not feature heavily in the data. The other finding was that the 'image' of the child was raised by one of the interviewee as a barrier to participation outdoor learning and risky play.

Drawing from the data, it could be inferred that the quality of children's day to day lives is not necessarily improved by the introduction of rights at national or

international level. One focus group participant specifically stated the right of the child to choose and that as a practitioner she was obliged to go with the decision the child made in relation to their play. In a one to one interview the participant stated that in her service the child sometimes gets the choice to go outside to play but the actual decision lies with the staff; the child's choice is overturned. There was dearth in the data in relation to the children having choice or voice, the focus of the discussion being mainly on management, parents and regulations. It may be the case that there was no direct question in relation to children having a voice during the interviews or the data could, in part, imply that children have little participation rights within the ECCE setting. The BOBF states that:

> *Children and young people will have a voice in decision-making in early education, schools and the wider formal and non-formal education systems* (BOFO, 2014-2020)*.*

This has a strong correlation with what Kay and Tisdall argued, under rights theory, 'the rights to protection and safety, safeguarding the more vulnerable children, weigh more heavily than children's right to play' (2015, p8). While researching the topic of Children's Rights, there was an extensive amount of literature about Children's Rights from a policy perspective. However the literature available about how these rights translate into practice was insufficient, particularly from an Irish perspective.

The finding in relation to the 'image' of the child when one participant particularly talked about the clothes and image rating as one of the major barriers raises cause for concern. To examine this in detail was beyond the capacity of this research however following a brief scope there appeared to be little research available on this particular topic.

What Is Really Happening?

It is clear that the ECCE practitioners participating were willing to engage in outdoor learning and risky play and indentified the benefits of such engagement for young children. When the findings were analysed through a critical lens the following issues were uncovered.

The daily experiences of children in ECCE settings are directly related to the experiences that the ECCE practitioner offers to young children. However, the ECCE practitioners are significantly affected by the macro influences of power relationships, societal pressures and political agendas.

This study was about the ECCE practitioner through the lens of outdoor learning and risky play. However, one could identify that the ECCE practitioner is positioned in a web of power at a micro level in which the ECCE practitioner can be limited in their pursuit to provide any learning opportunities for children in the ECCE setting.

The ECCE practitioner can be viewed as having a sense of powerlessness in the context of the ECCE environment. In order for the ECCE practitioner to be liberated from the constraints of power they need to be in a position to critically and creatively challenge the status quo. This will support them to promote children's rights to experience risk and play in the outdoors. There are many ways which this can become a reality, according to Mac Naughton one of the most effective ways to do this is through 'a community of learners'(2005, p198).

The child's voice did not feature heavily in the discussions, as stated above, this may be because this was not necessarily a part of the direct enquiry but is something which needs serious consideration. Ireland, in theory, have moved away from the notion that children are 'seen and not heard' however in ECCE services this may be the reality for them.

Recommendations for Further Research

To gain a deeper understanding of the ECCE sector, research with the children and their parents would be necessary. To engage in such research with parents and children would provide the triangulation to offer significant insight to the body of knowledge and provide really useful information for educators and all stakeholders engaging with children on a daily basis.

To acquire more in depth knowledge of ECCE training and education institutions, a piece of research would indicate if educators are willing to engaging in critical pedagogy as a tool for the education of the ECCE learner.

The development of a handbook on Children's every day rights for ECCE practitioners which would benefit all stake holders in the implementation of the UNCRC and the National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making.

Conclusion

The research set out to investigate;

How can the ECCE practitioners reconcile outdoor learning and risky play with the pressures to avoid, omit or obscure it in the current climate?

In Chapter One, an outline of the purpose of this thesis is presented. The aims, the research question and my rational for the research were discussed. It provided an overview of my ontological position and my role as an adult educator. The contextual framework was furnished along with an outline of the thesis structure. In Chapter Two a summary of the Irish context for the ECCE sector was presented with a view of the policy agenda in which this growth has occurred. Chapter Three examined the literature pertaining to this particular enquiry. The methodology was outlined in Chapter Four, it included details of personal positioning, methodological influences and methods used. Chapter Five presented a thematic analysis of the primary research. These findings were then theorised in chapter six by situating them in the conceptual framework present in Chapter Three. The aim of this section was 'to make the familiar strange' by providing 'new and insightful lenses for viewing what your respondents tell you, or what is written in documents' (Ryan, 2015, p175). This Chapter included conclusions drawn from the research and the theory discussed in the literature review and made recommendations for further research.

Outdoor learning and risky play are an essential element of childhood. Research shows that it supports children's holistic development. *How can ECCE practitioner reconcile outdoor learning and risky play with the pressures to avoid, omit or obscure it in the*

current climate certainly appears to be a challenge. The ECCE practitioner is constrained from many angles in their desire to offer children outdoor learning and risky play opportunities. It is clear that the ECCE practitioner needs to have the confidence and authority to promote outdoor learning and risky play, as well as other activities which are beneficial to young children. In light of the findings from this study, I really believe that engagement in critical education is one way; the ECCE practitioner can be empowered.

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Appendix 1 Information for Participants

Research Information

Provisional title:
An exploratory study to investigate what influences early childhood care and education practitioner's engagement in outdoor learning and risky play with young children.

What is the research about?

The focus of my enquiry is to examine what influences early years practitioner's attitude in relation to outdoor learning and risky play with young children? The research aims to make a contribution towards the research from an Irish perspective on the issue of outdoor learning and risky play with young children in early childhood settings. The research may provide some insight into ways in which outdoor learning and risky play can be promoted in early childhood care and education settings.

The objectives of the research is to explore:

- The imact the practitioner's attitude has on the engagement of outdoor learning and risky play with young children.
- What is promoting outdoor learning and risky play in early childhood settings?
- What are the barriers or perceived barriers to outdoor learning and risky play with young children?

Information about the researcher.

Mary Roche, a student of National University of Ireland (NUI) Maynooth, will be carrying out the research as part of a Master's Degree in Adult and Community Education. Research supervisor is Dr Brid Connolly, Department of Adult and Community Education, NUI Maynooth, Co Kildare. Mary Roche is a member of the Teaching Council of Ireland and is a trained Forest School Leader.

What does the research involve?

The research will involve participats engaging in two semi-structured focus groups, one prior to the module commencing and one after the module is completed.

Obligation to participate?

I would be most grateful of your participation in this study however you are under no obligation to do so. If you do take part in this research you are free to withdraw at any

time without explanation. Your decision to take part to not will not impact any future interactions with the researcher.

Ethical issues

As the partipants of the research are students of ITB, the relationship between the researcher and the participants will be addressed. The researcher will endevor to assure the students that this power will be addressed in the following ways.

- Consent will be sought from each participant (see attached consent form).
- The researcher will also make it clear to the participants both in writing (see attached) and verbally that the research participation is voluntary and they can withdraw from the reseach at anytime without explination.
- The students engagement with the research is completly seperate from the module and its assessments.
- The researcher will mark and give feedback to the students participating in the module prior to the second focus group.
- The researcher will outline the following to address personal bias to the participants in a meeting prior to the focus group:
    - The researcher has requested and gained agreement with a fellow lecturer, Margaret O Donoghue, to second mark the participating students assignemetns.
    - The researcher will request the external examiner to sample check the assignemnts submitted by participating participants.

What will happen to the information?

All information will be kept confidential and anonymous. None of your responses will be attributed to you and data will be held securely. The researcher will ensure that all personal data of participants is collected and stored in a manner consistent with the Data Protection (Amended) Act 2003. The information gained will be used to inform the researcher and form the primary research section of the study and will not be used beyond the life of this research without further consent

What will happen with the findings?

The findings from the research will inform part of my Master's research fieldwork with potential to be used in conference presentations and/or published after completion. No personal data will be published.

Contact details for further information.

If you have any further questions in relation to this research, please do not hesitate to contact the researcher:

Researcher	Gatekeeper
Mary Roche	Joanne Mc Hale
Ph:	Ph:
Email: e	Email:

(Information deleted for confidentiality purposes)

Informed Consent Form

An exploratory study to investigate what influences early childhood care and education practitioner's engagement with outdoor learning and risky play with young children.

Thank you for your interest in this research. Before you agree to take part, as a researcher I must explain the study to you. This information is on an attached sheet, please read this information prior to completing this consent form.

If you have any questions or queries please ask the researcher prior to providing your consent. You will be provided with a copy of this signed consent form and the information sheet for your information.

	Yes	No
I have read the information sheet and understand what is involved in this research.		
I understand that I can withdraw from this study at any time by notifying the researcher.		
I consent to the processing of information for the purposes of this research study.		
I understand that my responses will be recorded and consent for their use as part of the study.		
I understand that my responses, participation and/or withdrawal will not impact any future interactions with the researcher.		
I understand that the information will be treated in the strictest confidence and handled in accordance Irish Data Protection (Amendment) Act 2003.		
I understand that the findings of this study may be published as part of a Master's Thesis and on completion may be used in conference presentations and published papers. Confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained ensuring that participants will not be identifiable from any publications. I understand that I can request a copy of the findings from the researcher.		
I agree that once the information I have provided has been written up I will have the opportunity to read and withdraw anything which I am not entirely happy with.		
I agree to be contacted in the future by the researcher if she would like me to participate in follow-up studies.		
I agree that the research project named above has been explained to me to my satisfaction and I agree to take part in this study.		

Name: _____ Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix 2 Focus group and one-to-one interview questions

Questions for Focus Group

Question 1

In what way do you feel that outdoor learning and/or risk-taking is important for children's development?

Question 2

In what way do you feel that children's opportunities to be outdoors is supported in your service?

Are you happy with the amount of time the children are playing outside?

Question 3

What do you understand by the term risky play?

Do you think that in general people are afraid to take risks?

Think back to your childhood, did you take risks?

Question 4

In what way, if any, do you participate in risky play with children in your service?

If yes can you tell me more about that?

Question 5

Can you identify what has influenced your attitude in relation to outdoor learning and/or risky play?

Question 6

What do you believe is promoting outdoor learning and/or risky play in early years settings?

Do you think that Aistear the early years curriculum framework or Siolta the quality framework supports this type of engagement with risky play in the outdoors.

Question 7

Do you know what(if) the preschool inspector looked for in relation to outdoor learning and risky play?

Can you tell me about accident forms....how are these managed in your service?

Question 8

In your opinion what are the barriers to participation in outdoor learning and risky play in early years services?

Question 9

Have any ideas how outdoor learning and risky play can be encouraged and promoted in early years services?

Question 10

Have you anything you would like to say in relation to outdoor learning and risky play?

Guide for one to one interviews

The interviews were very informal; however the following was a guide to keep the discussion focused.

Tell me about your academic qualifications and number of years you have been working with children.

Describe your setting, curriculum, community private etc.

Do you get to take children outdoors?

Do the children get to engage in risky play?

What are the barriers to engagement in the outdoors with children?

What is promoting outdoor learning and risky play?

Do you want to tell me anything else in relation to outdoor learning and risky play?

Appendix 3 Information about the BA in Early Childhood Care and Education

BA in Early Childhood Care and Education

On this course, students work with theory, the psychology of learning, and its practical application through play, art, drama, PE and music as they learn to make a difference in the years that count by understanding children, how they learn and how society shapes them.

There is a range of employment opportunities in early years settings such as crèches, nurseries, playgroups, pre-schools, primary schools and breakfast/homework clubs. Graduates could also practice in more specialist areas such as special needs services or early intervention projects and may be employed in the public, private or voluntary sectors or may go on to establish their own businesses. The degree provides a solid foundation for further study.

The programme combines theory with hands-on experience and practical skills. Students experience the variety of the early years sector through placements in two distinct settings providing the opportunity to link classroom learning with work based practice. Students are supervised throughout placement by an experienced early years practitioner as well as being given ongoing support from an allocated college academic supervisor.

Appendix 4 Types of Early Childhood Care and Education services featured in the research

Sessional pre-school Service

Means a pre-school service offering a planned programme to pre-school children for a total of not more than 3.5 hours per session. Services covered by the above definition may include, playgroups, crèches, Montesorri pre-schools, naíonraí , HighScope pre-schools, Montessori pre-schools, Emergent Curriculum pre-schools and Play based pre-schools services

Part-Time Day Care Service

A pre-school service offering a structured day care service for pre-school children for a total of not more than 3.5 hours and less than 5 hours per day and which may include a sessional pre-school service for pre-school children not attending the full day care service. The service must provide the same physical environment, including rest, play and sanitary facilities, as for full day care. Services covered by the above definition may include playgroups, crèches, playgroups, crèches, naíonraí, HighScope pre-schools, Montessori pre-schools, Emergent Curriculum pre-schools and Play based pre-schools services.

Full Day Care Service

A pre-school service offering a structured day care service for pre-school children for more than 5 hours per day and which may include a sessional pre-school service for pre-school children not attending the full day care service. Services such as those currently described as day nurseries and crèches are included in this definition. Where a full day care service also caters for children who do not attend on a full day basis, the adult/child ratio and group size for sessional services should apply.

(Tusla, 2016)

Note: These services can be:

- Privately owned one off service where the owner works with the children on a daily basis.
- Privately owned services which are a part of a chain of services, generally owned by business individuals with no background in the sector.
- Community based services which are in receipt of funding and are non profit making.

All services discussed in the research were enrolled for the ECCE scheme.