

Marino Institute of Education

**A case study exploration of the connection between child observation and curriculum
planning for individual children's interests and learning progression in Early Years
settings**

Thesis

By

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Declaration

I hereby declare that this dissertation is a presentation of my original research work. When contributions of others are involved, every effort is made to indicate this clearly. This work has not been submitted previously to this educational institution or any other. This work was carried out under the guidance of Dr. Siobhán Cahillane-McGovern at the Marino Institute of Education, Dublin. I agree that the library may lend or copy this dissertation on request and may deposit it in Trinity College's open access institutional repository, subject to Irish Copyright Legislation and Trinity College Library conditions of use and acknowledgement.

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Abstract

Recent policy developments in the Irish Early Years sector include a requirement to implement the national quality and curricular frameworks, *Síolta* and *Aistear* and to adhere to the guidance set out in the recently introduced Early Years Education focused Inspections, carried out by the Department of Education and Skills. These developments have shone a lens on the quality of Early Years provision and have implications for child observation, assessment and curriculum planning practices in Early Years settings.

The aim of this study is to explore the extent to which child observation is used to inform curriculum planning for individual children's interests and learning progression. A case study methodology is employed using a variety of sub-methods including documentary analysis, one to one interviews and focus group interviews with practitioners working in six Early Years settings. The findings of this study reveal the opportunities and challenges for child observation, assessment and curriculum planning practices as identified by these practitioners within a range of Early Years settings and makes recommendations for further research and for actions at policy and practice levels.

Acknowledgment

I would like to express my appreciation to the children and parents who consented to share information for the purposes of this research project. In addition the engagement and participation of Early Years practitioners has given a valuable insight into child observation and planning practices in Early Years settings and has the potential to positively influence policy development for the Early Years sector. Despite very heavy workloads practitioners offered up their valuable time to meet with me which is truly appreciated.

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List of Acronyms

CECDE	Centre for Early Childhood Care and Education
COR	Child Observation Record
DCYA	Department of Children and Youth Affairs
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools
DES	Department of Education and Skills
ECCE	Early Childhood Care and Education
ECE	Early Childhood Education
ECERS	Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale
EPPE	The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education project
EYEI	Early Years Education focused Inspection
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NSAI	National Síolta Aistear Initiative

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Chapter 1

Introduction

This chapter will outline the relevance of this study, with a particular focus on the Irish context in light of recent policy developments. It also describes the focus and objectives of the study and provides an overview of how the dissertation is structured.

Relevance of and context for the study

Research and Literature: Research such as the EPPE (Effective Provision for Pre-School Education) study (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart, 2004) demonstrate that attendance at high quality Early Year's settings has an unquestioned impact on children's learning and development. Effective structures, methods and practices of observation, assessment and planning for individual children are identified as integral elements of high quality early years provision (Bruce et al., 2015; Alasuutari, et al 2014; Carter & Nutbrown, 2014; Aistear 2009; Síolta 2006; OECD, 2006) and assessment is described as part of daily practice in striving for quality (Drummond, Rouse & Pugh, 1992). Tickell (2011, p. 30) states "*observational assessment is integral to effective early year's provision*". Wall (2006) suggests a clear understanding of the purpose of observational assessment should be a guiding principle for all Early Year's practitioners.

The Role of the Early Years Practitioners: is explored in depth in this study and its significance is highlighted in relevant research such as the EPPE study as Siraj-Blatchford (2009) suggests the role of an effective pedagogue is to provide challenging and achievable early learning experiences. The role of the practitioner is also emphasised by Tickell (2011)

who suggests learning environments within which practitioners have a deep understanding of children and can tailor teaching and provision in a way that supports learning and development of individual children are most effective. The EPPE study (2004) strongly acknowledges the capacity of practitioners to assess formatively and plan for individual children's learning needs and interests as an indicator of quality.

Assessment to inform individualised planning. Chen & McNamee (2007) propose that learning how to assess individual children and using these results to inform curriculum planning and teaching, whilst important is challenging for educators. Dubiel (2014) agrees that specific and individual assessment can inform effective provision. According to Fisher (2013) differentiation is critical in connecting experiences to the developmental and learning needs of individual children. Hayes (2012) suggests a need for practitioners to reconsider practice and take account of the rich and diverse nature of each child within the planning process, a point supported by McLachlan, Flear and Edwards (2013) who advise the teacher's role is to build on individual children's strengths and interests to provide relevant and meaningful curriculum opportunities. Fisher (2013) suggests a value in acknowledging the wealth of skills, knowledge and understanding children bring with them in order to build on each child's existing competences and plan for their future learning in a more tailor made way.

Limited research on this topic. There appears to be a limited body of research into the assessment practices of early year's practitioners working with preschool children (Brown & Rolfe, 2005) which contributes to the relevance of this study. Hedges, Cullen & Jordan (2011) point out that although interest based curricula and pedagogy are policy recommendations, existing research has rarely investigated teachers' knowledge and decision making in creating curriculum from these interests. The study of Pedagogical Effectiveness in Early Learning (PEEL) carried out by Moyles, Adams & Musgrove (2002) identified that in

many early years settings the links between planning, assessment, recording and the use of records to inform planning and assessment of progression appeared not to be well understood or well used and recommended that training in this area was a high need. Continuing professional development including training, mentoring and coaching supports for the Early Year's sector is currently under scrutiny at policy level (DES; DCYA, 2018) in the context of the upcoming Early Years Strategy and review of the National Síolta Aistear Initiative and the findings of this research may offer an opportunity to inform future planning.

Assessment and planning in the Irish Context:

There are increasing expectations on settings to implement effective child observation, assessment and curriculum planning practices. This increased accountability on settings, whilst intending to enhance the quality of Early Childhood Education provision, also increases the governance and regulation of the sector.

The national quality and curricular frameworks. There are increasing expectations for early year's settings to implement high quality assessment and planning practices to adhere to national funding and policy requirements. Contractual obligations for settings receiving government funding to deliver the ECCE¹ scheme directly relate to the area of observation, assessment and individual planning. These obligations primarily focus on the implementation of both National Frameworks-Síolta the national quality framework for early childhood education and Aistear the early childhood curriculum framework. Both frameworks set standards and provide guidance in relation to child assessment and curriculum planning policy and practice. Síolta Standard 7 focuses on curriculum and advises that planning for curriculum implementation should be based on the child's individual profile

¹ Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme, a government funded initiative which provides two years of free pre-school provision prior to formal primary education

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which is established through systematic observation and assessment for learning. The Aistear toolkit and practice guide provide a number of resources to aid early year's practitioners in planning, documenting and assessing to support children's learning and development with a focus on individual needs and dispositions. Both national frameworks are underpinned by a strong evidence base and highlight rationale for effective assessment and planning, for example the Síolta research digests (CECDE, 2007) and research papers commissioned in the development of Aistear (Dunphy, 2008; French; 2007; Kernan, 2007). However, to date supports to the sector to implement Síolta and Aistear have been extremely limited demonstrated through a survey conducted by DES in 2015 indicating that the level of preparedness in implementing Síolta and Aistear was a major concern and a significant gap identified by practitioners.

Requirements of DES inspectorate. Another significant development is the introduction of Early Years Education Focused Inspections (EYEI) conducted by the Department of Education and Skills (DES) since 2015. These inspections focus on the educational elements of early year's provision which include a focus on assessment, curriculum planning and documentation. Area 2 (see appendix 1) of the DES inspection tool relates to "*the quality of processes to support children's learning and development*", (DES, 2016, p. 8) examining how information about the child's development informs the next steps in learning and to what extent these plans for learning are closely aligned to children's interests and developing capabilities. A recent review of the first year of EYEI indicates challenges for practitioners in how assessment for learning is employed to inform the next steps in children's learning. Wortham & Hardin (2015) suggest new trends in curriculum and instruction have implications for assessment, which is the case for settings as a result of EYEI as settings need to meet these requirements. EYEI reports are published and highlight

strengths and deficiencies, perhaps leading to increased motivation to address these areas of practice.

Focus and objectives of the study

The aim of this research study is to explore how child observation methods are used in Early Years settings to inform curriculum planning for individual children's interests and learning progression. The study aims to address the following research questions:

- What, if any, child observation, assessment and curriculum planning systems and practices are in place and what factors influence these?
- Are there connections between child observation and curriculum planning for individual children's interests and learning progression?

The study will adopt a case study approach, consisting of six individual cases using sub-methods of documentary analysis, 1:1 interviews and focus groups with practitioners in key roles in early year's settings.

Structure of the dissertation

Chapter One, the introductory chapter provides the rationale for this study and sets the context, with a particular focus on the Irish policy context. The focus and objectives of the study are set out and the structure for the dissertation is provided, with a brief overview of each chapter outlined.

In Chapter Two, the research literature relevant to this study is reviewed and examined to establish the study's position in the current early education policy and practice context. The main themes emerging from the literature are explored and discussed.

The research design and methodology employed for this study is examined in Chapter Three and the philosophical underpinnings for the study discussed. Information on and a rationale for each of the specific methodologies employed is provided. A description of the study sample is outlined and validity and reliability of the study is discussed. The ethical considerations are detailed and implications discussed. The processes involved in collecting and analysing the primary data are described. The chapter concludes by outlining the particular limitations of this research study. Connections to relevant literature are made throughout this chapter.

Chapter Four presents the findings of the research and considers what these results might indicate. The main findings emerging from the coding and analysis of the qualitative data are presented thematically.

In Chapter Five a discussion of the findings is framed within the context of the research questions. Key discussion points are explored based on emerging themes from the findings and in light of the research and literature examined in chapter two.

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Chapter Six is the final chapter of this dissertation and presents a summary of the main conclusions drawn from the findings of the study. Finally, implications of the research and recommendations for future research, policy and practice are suggested.

Chapter Two

Review of Literature

This chapter reviews and examines literature of particular relevance to this research study, identifying and outlining the main themes. The introductory section highlights the connections between child observation, assessment and curriculum planning processes and effective Early Years curricula and pedagogy. The international and Irish policy context is then outlined. Following this the purpose of assessment is examined, including a review of definitions and forms of assessment. Child observation as an assessment method to support curriculum planning is explored next. Finally, an in depth view of the role of the Early Years practitioner and influences on practice is reviewed.

Effective curricula and pedagogy

Effective Curricula. A number of key features of an effective early year's curriculum have been identified by Klein & Knitzer (2006) and include the need to be fluid and responsive and offer research informed, contextualised and meaningful learning experiences for children. According to Hayes (2010; 2007) the evidence suggests activity based rather than academic models are more effective. These models emphasise the affective dimensions of learning and those cognitive skills associated with the planning and organisation of knowledge and positively influences children's later academic development in terms of content knowledge and literacy and numeracy skills. Hayes (2007) does acknowledge that these affective dimensions such as aspirations, motivation, social skills, confidence and learner identity are more difficult to measure or evaluate.

Effective Pedagogy. Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden & Bell (2002) found effective Early Years pedagogy was characterised by a number of factors including:

- a balance of child and adult initiated activities;
- shared and sustained thinking;
- adults' knowledge of child development and curriculum;
- children being supported to represent their understanding in different ways;
- skilful assessment of children's learning;
- and consequent strategic planning for a wide range of curriculum experiences.

However, Palaiologou (2012) argues that pedagogy does not occur in isolation or solely in educational settings but is part of a wider dialogue which is socio-economic, political, philosophical, psychological and educational. Moss (2006) and Penn (2005) caution the beliefs which underpin early education pedagogy must be increasingly interrogated and criticised so as to not become a stagnant orthodox. Increased understanding of effective curricular approaches and pedagogy have implications for child observation, assessment and curriculum planning.

Curriculum, pedagogy and child observation, assessment and curriculum planning. There appears to be broad consensus within the literature that effective assessment, observation and curriculum planning are features of quality early years education (Bruce et al, 2015; Sharman et al., 2015; Carter & Nutbrown, 2014; Alasuutari et. al, 2014; Kamen, 2012; Palaiologou, 2012; OECD, 2006; Drummond, 1993; Drummond et. al, 1992). Drummond (1993) views assessment as part of daily practice in striving for quality as it provides a mechanism for evaluation and enhancement of the curriculum offered to enrich children's lives, learning and development. Observational practice is an established feature of

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Early Education practice, for example Montessori (1912) advised practitioners to methodically conduct and record observations of children. More recently developed curricular approaches promote the use of child observation as a form of assessment for example, Nutbrown (2011) describes the Reggio Emilia model as developing through documentation including observations and reflections. The High Scope curriculum (1979) provides training and resources for practitioners using the approach including those specifically related to observation and assessment. However, training in curricular approaches varied greatly in terms of observation, assessment and planning content.

Dunphy (2008) in a research paper informing the development of Aistear –the early childhood curriculum framework (NCCA, 2009) suggests ways of assessing children’s learning and development cannot be separated from features of the curriculum and the views of learners and learning which are embodied in that curriculum. The principles underpinning Aistear relate to how children learn and develop and include a focus on holistic learning and development, opportunities for active learning through play, access to relevant and meaningful experiences, opportunities to develop communication and language and access to well-planned and resourced learning environments. Kelly (1992) argues that the interconnectedness of assessment and curriculum is significant in determining the effectiveness of either. According to Bowman, Donovan & Burns (2001) and Shepard, Kagan and Wurtz (1998) assessment and teaching are considered as inseparable processes in early childhood. French (2007) outlines the complexity and many tenets of early learning and development and suggests approaches to assessment need to be cognisant of this.

International Policy

Interest in studying young children through observation dates back many years and was a significant element of the work of early education pioneers such as Piaget, Vygotsky, Isaacs and Froebel (Wortham and Hardin, 2015; Carter & Nutbrown, 2014; Papatheodorou, Luff & Gill, 2013). Recently developed policy documents for the Early Year's sector, consistently feature promotion of and guidance on observation, assessment and curriculum planning practices in Early Childhood settings (TeWhaariki, New Zealand; Reggio Emilia, Italy; *Belonging, Being, Becoming*, Australia; Early Years Foundation Stage, UK). According to Urban (2012) pedagogical frameworks at national level can contribute to coherence and integration of professional preparation and development. However Urban (2012) also references a link between well educated, experienced and competent staff and quality. In countries where quality assurance of early education training is inconsistent or minimal qualifications are required interpretation of these frameworks may prove a challenge.

Carr (2001) notes a requirement of Early Childhood professionals in many countries to implement assessment procedures to document children's learning and progress and to support planning that enhances children's learning and development. Oberhuemer (2014) cautions that whilst systems of Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe identify similar goals and aspirations, how these goals are sought may vary considerably and are embedded in historical, socio-political and geo-political contexts. Miller & Cameron (2014) suggest the vision of ECEC services that countries choose through policy and practice has a significant impact on the experiences of children and as Penn (2009) points out, what constitutes quality is often complex and contradictory. Research by Hatch & Grieshaber (2002) explored the changing way child observation is being used in terms of accountability and cautioned this may exert pressure on both teachers and children.

Irish Policy

Split system. Ireland operates a split system of education with childcare and early education structurally separated in policy development (Hayes, & Kernan, 2008). A split system typically contains several core problems including fragmentation of services, a perception of education beginning with formal schooling and governments assuming greater responsibility for children in formal education (Kaga, Bennett & Moss, 2010) which can lead to lack of continuity and varying experiences for children and families. According to Pugh (2014) split systems can reflect a nation's societal and policy aims and in practice can lead to inadequate co-ordination, regulation and resourcing (Jenkins, 2012). The level of investment in early education in Ireland remains one of the lowest in the EU at 0.5% GDP (DCYA, 2015; 32) far short of the OECD average of 0.8% and even further from the UNICEF recommendation of 1%. Walsh (2016) contends that without immediate, consistent and significant investment, development and improvement will not happen.

Irish policy development. Walsh (2013) describes a period of rapid policy development for the ECE sector in Ireland since the twenty-first century and suggests that whilst this has filled the previous legislative and policy vacuum, these developments have often been varied and diverse with policy responsibility transferred and shared across numerous government departments leading to an even more complex system for the sector to navigate. A concern raised by Walsh (2013) is that policy is being developed on specific aspects by a range of departments and agencies without sufficient consideration of the overall totality of expectations and requirements, which reinforces the traditional split system. The Department of Children & Youth Affairs (DCYA) was established in 2011 to coordinate and harmonise policy issues affecting children in such areas as ECE but the continuing presence and introduction of multiple stakeholders presents a "*bewildering and complex array of relationships and interconnections between and among the various stakeholders*". (Walsh,

2013, p. 85). DCYA is also responsible for administration of a number of funding schemes for the sector which set requirements in terms of Early Years practice and provision.

National quality and curricular frameworks. There are two key frameworks for the Early Years sector developed to enhance quality:

1. Síolta-the National Quality Framework
2. Aistear-the National Curriculum Framework

The White Paper (DES, 1999) recommended the development of national curriculum guidelines for the early childhood sector. Síolta and Aistear are policy documents which Alasuutari (2014) suggests can give a framework to and motivation for documentation and assessment practices. Development of both frameworks drew strongly on international research and extensive consultation with the Early Year's sector. According to Wolfe et al., (2013) both national frameworks embody a conception of children's rights as integral to ECE practice but are at odds with the prevailing policy domain. Due to a lack of a strategic implementation plan or adequate resourcing (French, 2013) implementation of both frameworks has been limited to date. Despite inadequate resourcing a contractual obligation since 2010 is that preschool settings receiving funding from DCYA to deliver the ECCE (Early Childhood Care & Education Scheme) must implement both frameworks. The National Síolta Aistear Initiative was established in 2016 (DCYA, DES, NCCA) to coordinate the implementation of both frameworks, in response to a consultation with the sector (DES, 2015) which indicated a lack of competence to implement Síolta and Aistear. However, the NSAI is in initial stages of development and with over 4000 EYS nationally, its reach is likely to be limited in the medium term at least. Whilst the presence of national frameworks and the introduction of EYEI can be viewed as a positive development and

progression, supports to implement requirements are limited and there is an absence of clearly articulated consequences for settings who do not meet these requirements.

Implementation of frameworks. McLachlan, Fler & Edwards (2013) argue early childhood curriculum frameworks sometimes seem far removed from the reality of working with children and the implementation of a curriculum framework should be a dynamic process as teachers interpret its use within their classroom. As frameworks Síolta and Aistear can be interpreted in different ways which highlights a point by Dubiel (2014) who contends that ultimately the means by which assessments are recorded and documented are a matter for individual settings, with no set formulas in place, meaning different settings use different systems and approaches with equal measures of effectiveness and ineffectiveness.

Supports available to settings are limited (French, 2013) and those that do exist are not nationally coordinated or quality assured. A number of national voluntary childcare organisations developed as a result of lack of state regulation in the area of education and care for young children (Corbett, 2012). Fisher (2013) suggests a role for moderation of assessment practices which is something that could add value in an Irish context, considering the diversity of provision and practitioners. The survey mentioned previously (DES, 2015) clearly demonstrated practitioners felt a lack of confidence and competence in implementing Síolta and Aistear.

External Influences. It is important that policy decisions are informed by contextually relevant research and practice as Taguchi (2010) cautions that there seems to be a tension in that the more we know about the complexity of children's learning, the more we seek to impose strategies and goals that reduce this complexity. Dubiel (2014) suggests that often a particular format is delivered to settings by outsiders with an expectation that it is used by everyone. This can trigger compliance anxiety and development of 'format dependency' but as there is no ownership by practitioners it becomes something to be done without purpose or

real meaning. Brown and Rolfe (2005) suggest a lack of consensus in regards to what is classed as assessment and suggest clearer messages would support Early Year's practitioners to critically evaluate their own assessment practices.

Roberts-Holmes & Bradbury (2016, p. 600) note that the ways in which "*the surveillance and performative culture of accountability both affirms, legitimates and seduces through discourses of quality while increasingly regulating and governing the Early Years*". Fleet and Patterson (2011), Swaffield (2011) and Grisham-Brown et al, (2006) indicate an increasing context of accountability-oriented policies, creating a narrow approach and risking a lack of authenticity which may lead to a lack of rich insight into children and families. Dahlberg & Moss (2004) contend that once something is reduced to a set of criteria such as a national framework that constitutes a norm, settings conformity to the norm can be measured. This use of policies for accountability can have a neoliberal influence on education at a wider level and as Sims (2016) points out this focus on standardisation and push-down curriculum supports neoliberalism which can have a devastating impact on the early childhood sector.

Assessment in Early Childhood Education

Forms of assessment. There are two main types of or forms of assessment identified in the literature-*Summative assessment* or assessment **of** learning and *formative assessment* or assessment **for** learning. According to Dubiel (2014, p. 36) formative assessment involves translating information into how we "*respond to, interact with, provide and plan for children's learning and development*". The notion of formative assessment as forward looking is supported by Alasuutari (2014) and Nutbrown (2011) who view assessment for learning as a means to extend children's learning. Methods such as pedagogical documentation, observation, portfolios and learning stories can be linked with formative

assessment (Alasuutari, 2014). Summative assessment collects information at a point in time to summarise achievement, attainment, interest and learning behaviours (Dubiel, 2014; Wright, 2009) or to confirm mastery of information or skills (Wortham & Hardin, 2015) and can be linked with such methods as developmental checklists or standardised assessment formats.

According to Alasuutari (2014) the research literature on formative and summative assessment is contradictory and no assessment is purely formative. This is supported by research by Vallberg-Roth (2009) and Alasuutari et al., (2014) who indicate that the variety of assessment forms used in Early Childhood Education cannot be reduced to one or the other and summative and formative assessment can co-exist in documentation at the individual level. This lack of clarity can cause confusion for practitioners in deciding how the assessment data is gathered, how it is used and who will have access to it. Discrepancies between the views of various stakeholders such as government departments and practitioners can give rise to many tensions as curriculum achievements and objectives as set out in policy may make the implementation of authentic assessments challenging for practitioners (Dunphy, 2008). Both *Síolta* and *Aistear* promote formative assessment.

Purposes of assessment. The literature outlines two main purposes of assessment, detailed below.

Supporting individualised curriculum provision. There is consensus in the literature that a primary purpose of assessment is to inform a curriculum that supports individual learning progression. Downs and Strand (2006) suggest that a critical component of an effective and individualised preschool education is assessment of which the purpose of is to provide information to help practitioners to maximise the effectiveness of interventions for each child. According to Dubiel (2014, p.72) “*the explicit purpose of assessment is to*

ascertain the point on development, the propensity for extension, the skill, knowledge, understanding and/or motivation to be built on by the practitioner?. Kamen (2012) contends that the purpose of assessment is to inform planning for each child in order to deepen and extend the child's learning. Fisher (2000; 2013) suggests that assessment should result in planning which is tailor-made for each child and based on their developing interests, skills and understandings.

Drummond et al., (1992) propose the process of assessment should deepen our understanding of children's learning and be used to evaluate, shape and enrich the curriculum offered and provision as a whole including interactions. Daly & Foster (2012) believe assessment for learning is about planning for, nurturing and supporting individual children's learning and development and should shape the action taken by the practitioner. Carter & Nutbrown (2014) agree that the main purpose of assessment is to influence teaching and provide a curriculum which matches each child's pressing cognitive and affective concerns.

Assessment for purposes of regulation and comparison. In practice policy documents may be more focused on measurement of particular achievements and documenting ratings which could be viewed as a way of comparing settings levels of quality, a concern highlighted by Dahlberg & Moss (2004) who suggest that intentions may be about capacity to govern more effectively by ensuring that correct outcomes are delivered on. An example of this is the recent publishing of Early Years Inspection Reports or the Síolta Quality Assurance Programme, which both issue ratings to settings across various aspects of practice. This may influence a tendency to focus on outcomes or achievements for the setting without due regard for the individual child within this process. It remains a challenge to bridge the gap between theory and practice in assessing early learning and development (Dunphy, 2008) and early childhood professional may not always feel adequately equipped to do this (Carr, 2001).

Definitions of assessment. There are a multitude of definitions of assessment within the literature (Wortham & Hardin, 2015; Alasuutari et al., 2014; McLachlan, Fleer & Edwards, 2013; Aistear, 2009; McAfee, Leong, & Bodrova, 2004; Carr, 2001; Appl, 2000; Hutchin, 1996; Drummond et al., 1992), for example Drummond et al., (1992) favour a definition which emphasises assessment as a process, where understanding of children's learning is acquired by observation and reflection and is used to evaluate and enrich the curriculum. The process element also features in Wortham & Hardin's (2015) definition as does the idea of gathering a range of information which should be organised and analysed. McLachlan, Fleer & Edwards (2013) focus on assessment as a tool to monitor and measure achievement in their definition.

According to Vallberg-Roth (2012) what is meant by assessment is ambiguous. Tickell (2011) describes the approach to and understanding of assessment as maligned, misunderstood and misused and the proposition of confusion about assessment is supported by Dubiel (2014); Alasuutari, (2014) and Brown & Rolfe (2005). Dubiel (2014), Nutbrown (2011) and Brown & Rolfe (2005) emphasise the need for the early year's sector to work towards a universal understanding of what constitutes assessment as effective assessment is fundamental to support learning progression for individual children. For the purpose of this research study a definition by Jan Dubiel, a highly regarded, international expert in assessment will be used "*Defined simply, assessment is practitioners knowing the children they work with, understanding their learning and being able to link this with the next steps in progression and development*". (2014, p. 10).

Key features of assessment. The literature identifies a number of key features of effective assessment (Formasinho, Formasinho, Pascal & Bertram, 2017; Wortham & Hardin, 2015; Dubiel, 2014; Carter & Nutbrown, 2014; McLachlan, Fleer & Edwards, 2013; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Critchley, 2002,) including the need for assessment to be ongoing,

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purposeful, strategic, authentic, ethically based, reflect understanding of child development and individual variation in learners, inclusive of children, used to plan learning and based on multiple sources of information. Shepard, Kagan & Wurtz (1998, p. 8-9) propose a set of principles for effective assessment in the Early Years:

- Assessments should bring about benefits for children.
- Assessments should be tailored to a specific purpose and should be reliable, valid and fair for that purpose
- Assessment policies should be designed recognising that reliability and validity of assessments increases with children's age
- Assessments should be age-appropriate in both content and the method of data collection
- Assessments should be linguistically appropriate, recognising that to some extent all assessments are measures of language
- Parents should be a valued source of assessment information, as well as an audience for assessment results

Child observation as a form of assessment

The role of observation in early childhood settings. In Carr's (2001) work on assessment, observation is viewed as central to influencing the curriculum. As Wortham & Hardin (2015) point out, children develop rapidly and continually and observation offers an opportunity to track this development and provide appropriate challenges. Kamen (2012) emphasises that observational assessment is integral to the delivery of effective Early Childhood Education programmes. Giardiello et al., (2013) propose when observation is used

effectively it can help to identify children's strengths and interests. Observation is continually linked with and viewed as part of the cycle of assessment throughout the literature for example in assessing children's progress and needs (Sharman et al., 2015; Dubiel, 2014; Hayes, 2012; Kamen, 2012; Drummond, 1998, 1993; Beaty, 1998).

The literature suggests observations should be implemented as part of daily practice (Palaiologou, 2012; Nielsen, 2006) supported by Nutbrown (2011) & Fisher (2013) who note that sustained practice over time of regular and frequent observation of children is necessary, vital and critical. Some risks of observation include a risk of missing details while taking a narrow focus on specific behaviours (Wortham & Hardin, 2015; Drummond, 1993) and preconceptions of the observer may affect the interpretation of information. McLachlan, Fler & Edwards (2013) offer some reassurance when they suggest that none of these critiques are insurmountable but all do require thought.

The importance of reflecting on observations. The literature suggests observation is more than looking at something, more of a scientific process of looking at a behaviour in a particular way (Bentzen, 1997) and offers potential to interpret what is observed and to evaluate learning (Wortham & Hardin, 2015). Papatheodorou, Luff & Gill (2013) suggest a need to reflect in more depth on observation records to question and consider different possibilities in order to understand what was observed more thoroughly and this is supported by Nutbrown (2011) who views it as wasted effort when observations are not reflected on. Palaiologou (2012) emphasises that observation is a highly complex and highly skilled method that requires self-awareness and reflective practice on the part of the educator.

Approaches to child observation. There are ample resources offering guidance to practitioners in terms of observational methods and tools. In 2002, a study carried out by Pretti-Frontczak et. al., examined the implementation of assessment and curriculum practices in the preschool context and the results noted the use of commercially produced formal

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assessments as well as informal self and programme developed checklists. A previous study by Johnson & Beauchamp (1987) investigated child assessment instruments in use and the factors influencing the choice of instruments. The results indicated practitioners were using instruments already in place in the programme rather than being chosen by the practitioner and the choice of tools was influenced by scope of the instrument and ease of use. The level of information and guidance for practitioners related to observation may be overwhelming and confusing to navigate.

Wortham & Hardin (2015) suggest many professionals use a developmental checklist format either standardised or non-standardised as they are practical, easy to use and may present in many variations, usually organised into categories of development. Papatheodorou, Luff & Gill (2013) indicate a perhaps limited use to checklists as they mainly collect factual information that can be quantified or measured in numbers at a specific point in time whereas a narrative observation may offer more detail and context. Developmental checklists are widely criticised in the literature for reasons such as being non standardised leading to error and teacher bias as a result (Wortham & Hardin, 2015), being an unreliable way of gathering information (Dubiel, 2014) and not considering other explanations for what is being seen as the focus is on theory (MacLachlan, Flear & Edwards, 2013). According to Dahlberg, Moss & Pence (2007) the classifications and ready-made categories, often found in developmental checklists pose a risk of replacing the richness of children's lived lives and "*the inescapable complexity of concrete experiences*". Dubiel (2014) suggests good observational assessment is superior to the 'tick list' approach which merely represents a moment in time when the child responds to the adult, whereas observational assessment is a skilled and skilful process and requires high levels of interpretation. Dahlberg, Moss & Pence (2007) argue the dominant construction of the early childhood institution is as a producer of standardized and predetermined child outcomes, which potentially restricts a view of the child as an individual.

A risk with standardised assessments is that because children interact and learn together, it can be difficult to separate the individual from the group, thus leading to creation of assessments of groups of children interacting together (McLachlan, Flear & Edwards, 2013).

Choice of observation method. Papatheodorou, Luff and Gill (2013) caution the need to be purposeful as the aim and questions posed for observations will determine the methods chosen. Fisher (2013) suggests a need to be clear about the purpose of assessment as the quality of the assessment will be determined by the quality of the observations on which they are based. As Wortham & Hardin (2015) and Drummond (1993) argue, each assessment strategy has strengths and limitations and there is a value in employing a variety of strategies or gaining multiple perspectives (Dubiel, 2014) to provide a more comprehensive picture. Drummond (1993) suggests that as children's learning and behaviour is so diverse and complex, in practice it is more likely that educators will choose to draw on a variety of models that are linked with an over-arching hypothesis about the nature of human experience.

A study was carried out by Giardiello, McNulty & Anderson in 2013 and reports on how child observations were being carried out in a Sure Start Centre in the UK to inform assessment and planning. The study highlights some limitations such as lack of regular observation of some children resulting in limited information about current needs and interests. Practitioners viewed the use of observations to assess children's progress as a challenge. This study also suggested a need to consider the range of backgrounds staff may come from in relation to the required skills and expertise necessary to carry out effective observations.

Connecting child observation, assessment and curriculum planning

The cycle of observation, assessment and planning. Palaiologou (2015) suggests learning is enhanced where practice is planned within a framework of observation and assessment. Brown & Rolfe (2005) and Kamen (2012) view assessment as a tool to allow practitioners to make informed decisions about children's needs within the early childhood setting. Fisher (2013) names observations and conversations as tools for assessment that recognise children's individual competences as the baseline against which future learning needs should be identified. Kamen (2012) agrees that assessing information gathered can form the basis for ongoing planning for children, consistent with the view of Papatheodorou et al., (2013) who state observations enable practitioners to understand and appreciate children's interests and abilities in order to plan worthwhile educative experiences to extend their learning.

McLachlan et al., (2013) believe that planning, documenting and evaluating children's learning should be part of an ongoing cycle. Fisher (2013) believes a critical place for assessment is at the start of the teaching and learning cycle when practitioners find out what children already know and can do in order to plan relevant and meaningful experiences but that it has a value before **and** after learning to support planning at a deeper level. Nielsen (2006) makes the point that authentic early childhood curriculum comes from the children themselves and is built around their interests, needs and unique personalities all of which are illuminated during the assessment and observation process. This is reiterated by Nutbrown (2011) who contends if we know what children can do, we are in a good position to help them take their next learning steps.

Child observation and assessment to inform planning. Much of the literature states that a major purpose of assessment is programme and curriculum planning (Wortham &

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Hardin, 2015; Dubiel, 2014; McLachlan, Flear & Edwards, 2013; Drummond, 1993). However, a study by Moyles, Adams & Musgrove (2002) indicated that the links between assessment and planning appeared to be not well understood or well used in many settings. Kamen suggests it is not enough to simply gather information but it is how this information is used that makes an impact on children. According to Fisher (2013) planning must be amended if it does not meet the current needs of individual children. Crooks (1998) in an influential paper identified reasons for assessment which include supporting practitioners to structure, focus and consolidate learning, to highlight the 'hidden' curriculum and to evaluate teaching. Downs and Strand (2006) propose the primary role of assessment in early childhood education is to provide information to maximise intervention effectiveness for each child.

In terms of planning, Fisher (2013) identifies difficulties occurring during short, medium and long term planning stages. Medium term planning is particularly vulnerable as children's needs change rapidly which makes it difficult to predict, with accuracy children's needs even several weeks in advance, although it is unclear what might counteract this. It is important that observation, assessment and planning are connected as if meaningful connections are not made it may lead to habitual thinking, false assumptions and presumptions and stereotypical thinking. (Dewey cited in Papatheodorou, Luff & Gill, 2013).

Assessment should impact on practice. Downs & Strand (2006) caution that whilst assessment serves a purpose in maximizing effectiveness of interventions and child outcomes, it is crucial that assessment within early childhood programs is re-examined and re-thought. The evaluative purpose of assessment is highlighted by Carter & Nutbrown (2014) as a means to review the effectiveness of provision and observational assessment can identify strengths, weaknesses, gaps and inconsistencies within the curriculum. Dubiel (2014) asserts that assessments must relate directly to planning and if this is not the case practitioners should challenge and address the nature and content of assessments they are

working with. Carter & Nutbrown (2014) suggest it is only when practitioners seek to understand the meanings behind what they have seen that the real worth of observational practices is realised. What is assessed and is not assessed is significant as cited by Moss in Carr (2001, p. 180) as “*what isn’t assessed tends to disappear from the curriculum*”. The literature also offers a reminder that assessment cannot exist meaningfully as a self-standing detached entity as it is only as useful as the purpose for which it is used (Dubiel, 2014).

The individual child within the assessment and planning process

Valuing children’s individuality. Chen & McNamee (2007, p. 16) point out “*diversity is a basic characteristic of the human species*”, a view supported by Wortham & Hardin (2015) who point out that children of the same chronological age, for a number of reasons are not necessarily at the same stage or level of development. According to Alasuutari et al., (2014) motivation for child documentation is based upon perceptions that it produces something good for that particular child. Kamen (2012) argues assessment must be purposeful in planning the next steps in learning for each child, to deepen and extend their learning. However, Wortham & Hardin (2015) question how appropriate assessment strategies are in terms of the diversity of young children attending early childhood settings. Nutbrown (2011) suggests children may be grouped together for organisational or financial reasons and teachers have responsibility for the education of individual children within this context. Observational assessment is a tool for the adult to gain a more complete picture of individual children’s strengths, interests and possible weaknesses and can be used to plan and provide appropriate ways to extend the learning (Sharman et al., 2015). Practitioners should be open minded in terms of individual children’s learning processes.

Individualised curriculum planning. Nutbrown (2011) proposes an effective curriculum should be planned and organised to take account of and nourish individual children's schematic concerns. Hurst and Lally (1992) contend the relevance of a curriculum relies on it being personalised. Nielsen (2006) believes in high quality classrooms, children's individuality is consistently respected and considered but this is countered by others. Drummond (1993) points to a constant tension between what might be appropriate for one pupil and what might be appropriate for many and this tension may not always be resolved.

There is a consistent concern across the literature about the effectiveness of assessment and planning methods to support the diverse, individual needs of children. Fisher (2013) suggests differentiation is critical to children's development and progress and the key to matching experiences to the developmental needs of children and embedding learning in what is already known and understood sends a positive message to children that they are valued. Nutbrown (2011) suggests that as practitioners often work with groups of children, this may challenge the ability to be able to differentiate appropriately. Dubiel (2014, p. 82) reminds us that children are "*individual, idiosyncratic, unpredictable and often non-sequential or apparently illogical learner*" and consequentially in practice flexibility of thought and perception are imperative. Drummond (1993) suggests perceived individual differences can be useful in alerting the practitioner to inappropriate elements of provision, materials and teaching styles.

The role of the Early Years practitioner

Professional and personal background of practitioners. According to Urban, Vandebroek, Van Laere, Lazzari & Peeters (2012) in their work on professionalism in early childhood education there is broad consensus among policymakers, researchers and practitioners that the quality of early childhood education is dependent on well-educated, experienced and competent staff, a view supported by other studies such as *Effective Provision of Preschool Education* (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2006). Carter & Nutbrown (2014) suggest that although quality is often culturally defined and specific, by implementing observational assessment and planning, practitioners are working to provide high quality learning experiences. Backgrounds of educators may be diverse and can impact on practice (Giardiello, McNulty & Anderson, 2013; Urban, 2012). What educators value or place importance on can greatly influence assessment and curriculum practice as assumptions about what children need to know next often informs curriculum provision (Fisher, 2013). As Dubiel (2014) notes we especially record what we consider to be important.

Practitioner competence and skills. The Giardello et al., study (2013) emphasised the complex nature of carrying out observations and assessments in order to inform planning. This study indicated a need for skilled, knowledgeable and informed practitioners with extensive understanding of child development and learning processes and an ability to apply this understanding to practice effectively. The literature strongly recommends the early years workforce should have a high level of competence within the area of observational assessment and planning (Dubiel, 2014; Palaiologou, 2012; Nutbrown, 2011) as the quality of information gained from observation is dependent on the skill of the observer (Wortham & Hardin, 2015). Chen & McNamee (2007) agree an element of good teaching involves being a good diagnostician and effective interpreter, capable of insight into how children are learning and what might support extension of learning. In addition, educators need to be aware of and

responsive to the sensitivities and potential ethical issues when conducting assessments (Wortham & Hardin, 2015; Palaiologou, 2012)

Influences on observation, assessment and curriculum planning practices

Training in Early Childhood Education. Practitioners conduct observations for different reasons which depend on their professional capacity, role and responsibilities (Papatheodorou, Luff & Gill, 2013) and a key influence on practice is training. There is a wide variation in both initial early childhood education training and that provided as part of continuous professional development which influences practice (Urban, 2012). Whilst observation, assessment and planning form content of many early childhood training programmes the quality, content and depth can vary greatly. According to Bruce et al., (2015) practitioners trained in observation value the need for good observation of individual children and use this to inform curriculum planning. As early childhood educators often come from a wide range of backgrounds assessment, observation and planning practices within centres may be inconsistent. Carr (2001) believes that many practitioners have been ill-equipped for the task of observation. The importance of continuous professional learning is highlighted as an important aspect of professional practice in the area of observation, assessment and planning (McLachlan, Flear & Edwards, 2013).

Curricular influences. Another factor influencing practice is the curriculum being provided within the setting, for example within the High Scope programme, practitioners may be trained to use the Child Observation Record system. In addition, Gillham (2000, p. 29) points out “*each location has its own culture: the conventions by which it works*”. Alasuutari et al., (2014) suggest a national curriculum can be seen as a common framework and sets out goals, guidelines and standards. Ireland has a curriculum framework-Aistear rather than a

national curriculum which might be more prescriptive. Urban et al., (2012) suggest that pedagogical frameworks at national level can contribute to coherence and integration of professional preparation and development. In the Irish context the implementation of Aistear has been poorly resourced to date and as a framework rather than a curriculum it is open to interpretation which may have mixed results in terms of effectiveness. Feldman (2010) notes a challenge for preschool teachers who do not employ prescribed curricula in implementing early learning standards and assessments and proposes that the field needs an assessment tool that builds on practitioner's observational skills, uses objective criteria to translate qualitative observations into early learning standards and safeguards against an exclusive focus on criteria identified for assessment.

The practitioners view of children. Drummond (1993) suggests that by investigating ways to make assessment practices more effective, educators are committing to a recognition of children's rights. Alasuutari (2014) states as the basis of documentation is often the child as an individual, it commonly assumes a child with a voice. However, this is an assumption and as Dahlberg, Moss & Pence (2007) argue that child-centredness in practice is very abstract and problematic. Fisher (2013) points out the role of adult as educator is "*inextricably bound up with how children are viewed as learners*". This may impact on the methods and processes of assessment undertaken and can communicate a message to children about what the educator values (Dubiel, 2014). Papatheodorou, Luff & Gill (2013) echo the need to explore underlying meanings of observations to further support children's learning and opportunities for reflective practice are not always facilitated in early years settings. The notion of ongoing learning and development to practice skills of observation, time to reflect alone and with colleagues in order to hone and develop skills is a recommendation by Nutbrown (2014; 2011).

Practitioner values and world views. A significantly influential factor for practitioners is their view of childhood and value system or “*value prism*” as described by Dubiel (2014, p.82) which impacts assessment practice in many ways, suggesting assessment is never an objective activity or value free. This has implications and needs careful consideration to support increased self-awareness and understanding of potential consequences. Alasuutari et al. (2014) argue that Early Childhood Education forms a setting of intergenerational practices, relevant to child documentation as it is intertwined with the conceptions of the adults in the child’s life. Drummond et al. (1993) suggest assessments of children are affected by how they are interpreted, interpretations influenced by our values and beliefs and that completely neutral observations are not possible. Perception of situations are shaped by many factors including past experience, values and beliefs (Wortham & Hardin, 2015; Carter & Nutbrown, 2014; McLachlan et al., 2013; Denscombe, 2007; Carr, 2001). A contributing factor may be that assessing and being assessed brings a deep emotional involvement for both assessor and the individual being assessed (Drummond et al., 1992).

External influences. Additional factors influencing practice in this area include guidance and regulation from external sources. This includes external views of quality which pose a risk according to Dahlberg, Moss & Pence (2007) of delegating responsibility to experts who tell us where we must go and how we should get there, resulting in the constraint of conformity. Dubiel (2014) contends the responsibility of decision making should be dependent on the practitioner to avoid compromise and dilution from external pressures. However given the earlier discussion about diverse backgrounds and capacity of practitioners there is some merit to external guidance such as quality or curriculum frameworks, particularly for practitioners who require support to improve quality. However, guidance around assessment should be evidence based and fit for purpose (Dubiel, 2014). Regardless of the assessment approaches in use it is evident that the process of becoming a skilled

observer is complex and challenging and requires constant self-evaluation and self-development (Palaiologou, 2012).

Conclusion

This chapter reviewed and examined the main themes from the literature relevant to assessment, child observation and curriculum planning for children's individual interests and learning progression. The historical and international and national political context was examined in order to explore influences on and practice and what the literature on effective curricular and pedagogical provision suggests. The main themes emerging from the review connected clearly to the research questions and examined the purposes, definitions of and forms of assessment including a specific focus on child observation as a form of assessment. This chapter also researched the cycle of child observation, assessment and planning practices and the rationale for these processes to be connected. The chapter concluded with an in depth examination of the role of the early years practitioner in assessment and curriculum planning and sought to establish influences on practice. The next chapter will focus on the methodology used in this research project.

Chapter Three

Research Methodology

The previous chapter reviewed and examined the literature relevant to this study and highlighted pertinent themes including connections between observation, assessment and planning with effective early years curricula and pedagogy, the international and national context, assessment in the Early Years, the connection between child observation, assessment and curriculum planning, the individual child within these processes and finally the role of the Early Years practitioner. These themes will support this study in answering the overall research questions, i.e. what models of observation and planning are used and how child observation is used to plan for individual children's interests and learning progression. The previous two chapters indicated limited research in this area to date and the evolving national policy landscape promotes a strong rationale for conducting research into assessment and planning practices in Early Year's settings.

The aim of this chapter is to outline the research design, provide the rationale underpinning the research study and explain the reasons for adoption of a case study method. The specific methodologies used will be detailed including a focus on validity, reliability and ethical considerations. A profile of the sample chosen will be discussed and processes and techniques for data collection and analysis described. Finally limitations of the study will be presented.

Research Methodology

Philosophical paradigms. A constructivist paradigm underpins this study. Cresswell (2009, p.8) describes a social constructivist approach to research as one relying as much as possible on participants views on the situation being studied which leads the researcher to look for the complexity of views rather than narrowing meanings into narrow categories. Cresswell (2009) suggests constructivist researchers focus on specific contexts in which people live and work to understand the historical and cultural settings of the participants and the researchers intent is to make sense (or interpret) meanings others have about the world.

Quantitative, Qualitative and mixed methods research. Silverman (2013, p.13) contends quantitative research is indicated when the researcher is mainly interested in making systematic comparisons in order to account for the variance in some phenomenon. A qualitative approach was deemed to be the most appropriate to answer the research questions focused on in this study. Gillham (2000, p.10) suggests that qualitative methods focus primarily on the kind of evidence that will enable you to understand the meaning of what is going on and a great strength of them is that they can illuminate issues and highlight possible explanations. Studies with mixed methodologies can traverse traditional divides and employ both approaches in a single study (Denscombe, 2014; O' Leary, 2014). Denscombe (2014) argues that confidence in the accuracy of findings is increased using mixed methods as the finding from one method is checked against the findings from a different method and may provide a fuller and more complete picture of the thing that is being studied.

Methodology for this study. For this study a qualitative and interpretive approach was adopted using a case study method. A case study methodology was selected for its suitability as a holistic research method which analyses multiple sources of data (Anderson, 1998). Cohen, Manion & Morrison (2000) suggest case studies can penetrate situations that

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are not susceptible to numerical analysis and a strength is they observe effects in real contexts recognising the significance of context. Cresswell (2009) proposes a case study tends to be more qualitative than quantitative and mixed methods research resides in the middle of this continuum as it combines elements of both qualitative and quantitative forms. This study primarily adopts a qualitative approach but a quantitative approach to the analysis of some documentary data was employed as it was deemed to be the most effective tool for the specific data involved. Wellington (2015) suggests that educational research should not be prevented from using quantitative data where appropriate. This study will take a “*Qualitative perspective with acceptance of quantitative data*” (O’ Leary, 2014, p. 148)

Research Methods and Design

Case Study methodology. A case study methodology was used in this study to explore the connection between child observation and curriculum planning for individual children’s interests and learning progression. Yin (2009) offers a comprehensive definition of a case study and makes the point that it is an empirical inquiry that “*investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real life context*”. (p.18). Simons (2009, p. 3) describes case study as a study of the “*singular, the particular, the unique*” and was thus deemed appropriate to explore practices in a diverse range of early years settings. Cresswell (2009, p.13) describes case studies as “*a strategy of inquiry, in which the researcher identifies the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon as described by participants*”. Bassey (1999) suggests case study involves taking of extensive data from the people being questioned to extract some meaning that was not apparent or substantiated before.

Denscombe (2014) highlights the particular value of the case study in offering an opportunity to explain why certain outcomes might happen, not just identify what those outcomes are and takes into consideration the complexity and subtlety of real life situations. Thomas (2011) argues that the quality of a case study is less dependent on the ideas of sample, validity and reliability and more on conception, construction and conduct of the study which influenced the research design. Thomas (2011, p. 44) argues that the case study is not a method but a “wrapper” for different methods and offers an opportunity to derive unique insights from its analysis.

Limitations of case study. According to Simons (2009) limitations of case study centre on the fact that the mass of data accumulated makes it difficult to process, can contain narratives that over-persuade and that the personal involvement or subjectivity of the researcher can negatively influence the process and findings. There is discrepancy in opinions on the defining features of a case study (see for example Yin, 1994; Merriam, 1998, Stake, 1994). Stake (1994) emphasises the importance of the object or situation of interest in his definition “a *case study is defined by individual cases, not by the methods of inquiry used*” (Stake, 1994, p. 236)

Sub-methods. Gillham (2000, p. 12) describes case study as ‘a main method’ within which different sub-methods such as interviews, document and record analysis, work samples, observations etc. are used. The use of sub-methods allows the researcher to use a variety of sources, a variety of types of data and a variety of research methods (Denscombe, 2014) and provides a range of perspectives to develop a richer picture (Thomas, 2011) explaining how and why things happened (Simons, 2009). For this research study the use of sub-methods and multiple sources of evidence was more likely to be sufficiently valid than one source and data were abstracted and collated to best answer the research question (Gillham, 2000). The sub-methods used for this study were:

1. Documentary analysis
2. Interviews
3. Focus groups

Documentary analysis. Participants in this study provided samples of planning documentation which was analysed using ECERS (see appendix 2). Wellington (2015, p. 209) describes documents as social products which can be used to “*open up and explore a field*” (Wellington, 2015, p. 213) and were treated as a source of data in their own right (Denscombe, 2014). Simons (2009) believes that formal document analysis is used less than interview and observation in case study research and its potential for adding depth to a case has not been fully exploited as it offers potential to portray and enrich the context and contribute to an analysis of issues. Wellington (2015) however cautions that documents should not be accepted at face value but equally “*no amount of analysis will discover or decode a hidden essentialist meaning*” (p. 215). On this basis interviews and focus groups were also conducted to support triangulation of data.

Bohnsack & Pfaff (2010, p. 20) outline an aim of documentary analysis in reconstructing “*the implicit knowledge that underlies everyday practice and gives an orientation to habitualized actions independent of individual intentions and motives*”. McCulloch (2004, p. 129) suggests documentary research offers a number of different perspectives from which to view a given problem or topic. In this study the documents gathered were existing data that the researcher gathered and used described by O’ Leary (2014, p. 243) as secondary data that is situational.

Interviews. According to Cohen, Manion & Morrison (2000) interviews enable participants to discuss their interpretations of the world in which they live and to express their own point of view. Silverman (1993, p. 92-93) suggests that interviews in qualitative research are useful to access beliefs about facts, to identify feelings and motives and present behaviour and in eliciting reasons and explanations. The potential of interviews to gain depth was a strong rationale for its use as a methodology as Wellington (2015) suggests that interviews can reach the parts which other methods cannot reach as they allow a researcher to investigate things that cannot be observed. O' Leary (2014) describes how interviews provide rich, in depth qualitative data and according to Bryman (2015) qualitative interviewing in particular seeks out the world views of participants.

Cohen et al., (2000) and Bryman (2015) suggest that the qualitative interview tends to move away from the pre-structured, standardized form toward the open-ended or semi-structured interview, the latter which was used for interviews conducted in this study. Denscombe (2014) contends a semi-structured approach supports the interviewee to develop ideas and speak more widely. Interview questions (see appendix 3) were compiled in conjunction with a focus on the research questions-a connection which Wellington (2015) emphasises should be clear as they need to map onto each other. One to one interviews were conducted and these offer a range of benefits according to Simons (2009) including supporting the interviewer to identify and analyse issues and importantly a flexibility to change direction or probe in order to pursue emerging issues or deepen a response.

Focus Groups. The third sub-method used was focus groups described by Bryman (2015, p. 350) as a group interview that is concerned with exploring a certain topic. Focus groups were conducted in each of the six early year's sites with practitioners working with the lead practitioner who was interviewed on a one to one basis. Wellington (2015) suggests

the interaction and synergy of a focus group adds value over and above the depth or insight of an interview or survey.

Simons (2009) and Wellington (2015) caution the interviewer needs to be aware of potential dominant voices and the importance of retaining a focus on the research topic which was a consideration in preparing for and conducting the focus groups. However, Cohen, Manion & Morrison (2000, p. 288) highlight that it is “*from the interaction of the group that the data emerge*” and it may yield insights that might not otherwise have been available in a straightforward interview. A similar schedule of questions (see appendix 4) was used in the focus groups and one to one interviews which were chosen with the objectives of the research in mind (Wellington, 2015) and also as cross-group comparability was something to consider (Bryman, 2015). An iterative approach was taken to data collection and analysis as evolving processes which occurred alongside each other (Denscombe, 2014) for example, review of documents influenced questions for interviews and focus groups.

Validity and Reliability

Cohen, Manion & Morrison (2011) contend that validity is a key requirement to effective educational research. Wellington (2015) suggests that whilst we can never be 100% sure of validity and the term reliability is contentious, we can make some claim to the fact that our test or method is valid. Thomas (2011) argues that expectations about reliability reduce within a case study situation as there can be no assumption that similar findings would result in another case. Bassegy (1999) suggests that in case study research the concepts of reliability and validity are not vital but O’ Leary (2014, p. 11) points out it is important that methods are nested within frameworks to provide a “*voracious design that can stand up to the highest level of scrutiny*”.

Triangulation. Gillham (200) highlights that there can be a discrepancy about what people say about themselves and what they actually do which provided rationale for using sub-methods in this study and structuring questions to revisit the same theme with participants. Simons (2009) advocates for triangulation in case study research to validate accounts and experiences. Triangulation is viewed by Cohen et al., as particularly suitable in case study research to reduce researcher bias and which they define (2000, p. 310) as “*the research practice of comparing and combining different sources of evidence in order to reach a better understanding of the research topic*”. Triangulation was employed in this study (see figure 1) to provide as much validity and reliability as possible. In order to offer this research as robust triangulation as possible six individual cases were chosen and consistent sub-methods used with each.

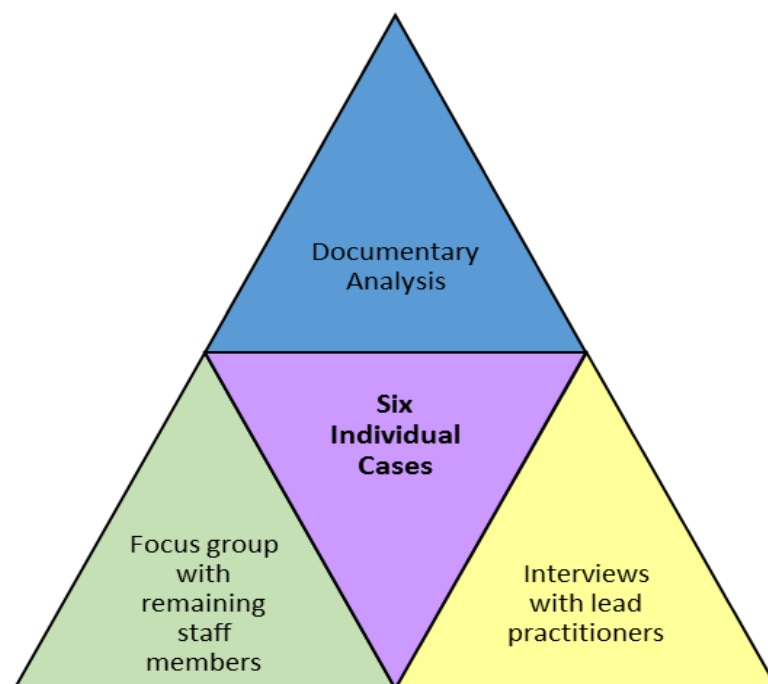


Figure 1. Methodological triangulation used in this study

The triangulated approach offered an opportunity to compare and contrast the findings from different sources and to consider whether the data converged to be reasonably confident that a true picture was achieved (Gillham, 2000). A combination of documentary and non-documentary sources was used in this study which McCulloch (2004) suggests leads to a broader notion of triangulation and methodological pluralism. According to Thomas (2011, p. 68) triangulation is almost an essential prerequisite in a case study approach as viewing from several perspectives is superior than viewing from one and may make us decide to reject initial explanations.

Research sample

Wellington (2015, p.116) suggests that “*a sample is a small part of anything which is intended to stand for, or represent, the whole*”. Cohen, Manion & Morrison (200, p. 92) suggest key factors for consideration in sampling such as the sample size, accessibility of the sample, the sampling strategy, representativeness and parameters of the sample and these were used to guide decisions on the sample for this study. Denscombe (2014) and Wellington (2015) suggest the most common justification to be offered for the selection of a particular case is that it is typical and this was considered in choosing six Early Years settings to participate who shared specific attributes or features that were particularly significant for the particular research questions being investigated. In order that these settings are non-identifiable a detailed description will not be provided on each setting but an overall profile is indicated in table 1.

Number of Settings	6
Location of settings	Two DEIS ² areas in North Dublin
Age Range	Pre-school (2yrs 8mths-5yrs)
Average adult/child ratio	1:11
Type of Curriculum in Place	High Scope (4 settings) Play Based (2 settings)
Operating Hours	3 hours per ECCE session
Main funding source	ECCE Scheme (funded by DCYA)

Table 1 Profile of participating Early Years Settings

For both interviews and focus groups participants (see table 3 for profile of participants) were chosen based on their individual roles and responsibilities as according to Simons (2009) it is likely you will learn most about the issue in question from those who have a key role in the case. Early Years Practitioners were deemed to be “*key informants*” (Wellington, 2015, p. 140) in this study to establish varying perspectives. In an effort to create in house triangulation (Wellington, 2015) those in a leadership position were interviewed on a 1:1 basis with a follow up focus group with remaining practitioners working in that room and this was further supported by accessing observation and curriculum planning documentation from the setting. The rationale in choosing key informants was to gather insider and expert knowledge who have specialised, relevant knowledge of what is going on and this information can be used to confirm the accuracy of other data sources (O’Leary, 2014) such as document review which was an element of this study.

² DEIS-Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools is a national programme aimed at addressing the educational needs of children and young people from disadvantaged communities

Data Analysis

Cresswell (2009) describes the process of data analysis as beginning with gathering information from participants, forming this data into categories and themes which are developed into broad patterns, theories or generalisations that are then compared with existing literature on the topic. The notion of coding and creating categories and themes is suggested in much of the literature to prepare the data in a way which makes them amenable to analysis (Denscombe; 2014, Simons; 2009).

Wellington (2015) suggests data analysis is an integral part of the research cycle and not a separate stage. Each of the data sources (documents, interviews and focus groups) were analysed individually, then on a setting basis and finally across settings allowing for analysis at individual data level, within settings and across settings. Throughout the data analysis process, there was not always an adherence to a criteria of representativeness. As Cohen et al., (2000, p. 185) suggest “*it may be that infrequent, unrepresentative but critical incidents or events that occur are crucial to the understanding of the case*”. Simons (2009) contends the absence of thematic structure may make it unlikely to convey the meaning of the case and on the basis of this the findings were presented thematically and connected and contrasted with the literature and supported by quotations from interviews and focus groups.

Documentary analysis. Each setting provided copies of or access to child observation and curriculum planning documentation. This documentation was analysed using ECERS (see appendix 2) an evidence based evaluation tool published by Siraj-Blatchford, et al., (1980) and used in studies such as the EPPE study mentioned previously.

The sub-scale on diversity (see appendix 5) was chosen for this study as it measures assessment and planning procedures and was fit for purpose and legitimate for the data gathered (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000). This scale was used to generate a numerical

rating for the data analysed. These documents were then given a more in-depth qualitative analysis using the suggested prompts and statements for each rating level, creating a more narrative description of the data. Bryman (2015) suggests criteria for evaluating document quality include authenticity, credibility, representativeness and meaning which were used during documentary analysis. All documents were viewed with a critical eye as suggested by O' Leary (2014) to assess credibility and not presuming the documents were conclusive evidence, were supported also by follow up interviews and focus groups.

Analysis of interviews and focus groups. Transcripts from interviews and focus groups were analysed, the data was coded, categorised and themes developed. These transcripts were analysed using a framework designed based on relevant literature which Yin (1994) suggests can guide data analysis and which Simons (2009) agrees provides security and focus but cautions about the danger of making the data fit the framework or failing to see the unexpected, which the researcher was conscious of. Procedures for assigning the raw material to categories were devised to minimise personal bias (Bryman, 2015). Cohen et al., (2000) highlight the need for transcriptions to be considered as records of social encounters and not just a record of data. As the process of coding used was thematic, a more interpretative approach was taken (Bryman, 2015).

Reflexivity

Wellington (2015, p. 101) suggests being reflexive is a subset of being reflective and involves thinking critically about the research process, how it was done and why, how it could have been improved and involves reflecting on oneself, the person who did the research. The researcher in her professional role is employed by an organisation that could be perceived as having power or authority over early year's settings and was aware of the

potential implications of this, making every effort to minimise its impact as O' Leary (2014) contends that the impact of unrecognised power can be profound. Previous professional connections existed with three of the six settings and the current role did not seem to influence participation in a negative way. Regarding the remaining settings, contact was made via a colleague and settings were happy to participate.

Simons (2009, p. 4) suggests that in case study research and with qualitative methods the 'self' is more transparent and it is important to monitor its impact on the research process and outcome. This was consciously considered throughout the process as the researcher reflected on how her values and actions might be shaping data gathering and interpretation as Gillham (2000) suggests researchers of integrity constantly challenge and scrutinise themselves. The researcher tried to actively engage participants in the research process which supported a more equal distribution of power and facilitated a self-reflexive approach to understanding the case and oneself (Simons, 2009)

Ethics

Ethical issues were a prominent consideration throughout this study, from initial stages of choosing a topic, developing a research proposal, creating a research design, through to data collection, analysis and presentation. The research design considered ethical implications for each sub-method being employed, for example according to Cohen et al., (2000) interviews have an ethical dimension as they concern interpersonal interaction and produce information about the human condition.

Simons (2009, p. 96) describes the importance of establishing a relationship with participants that respects human dignity and integrity in which people can trust and this involved the researcher providing extensive information, verbally and written (see appendix

6) to all participants to gain informed consent. Guidance provided by Thomas (2011) informed the process of gaining informed consent which included information such as the nature and purpose of the study, methods used, information about confidentiality, storage of data, ethics procedure, timelines and contact details of the researcher.

Informed consent was individualised and sought for all participants (see appendices 7-9) –parents, practitioners and children as the study involved accessing data related to them. Fine and Sandstrom (1988) recommend that children’s age should not diminish their rights, although explanations that are shared with them must take into account their level of understanding. On this basis a specific consent form was used with children. Participants were informed that every effort to ensure confidentiality would be taken and as guided by Cohen et al, (2000) an explicit explanation was given to each participant about the meaning and limits of confidentiality for this particular research project. Pseudonyms were assigned to afford individuals and settings some protection of privacy (Simons, 2009). Table 2 details ethical considerations for this study and how they were addressed.

Ethical Consideration	How the issue was addressed
Parental consent (as documentation provided may have identified children, parental consent was sought for this to be used)	A letter was prepared for parents detailing the purpose of the research, methods, what it meant for parents and children and that consent could be withdrawn until a specific time. A consent form was provided.
Child Consent (documentation provided related to children)	A specific consent form was drawn up for use with children and was developmentally appropriate. Guidance was also given to practitioners about how this should be conducted.
Practitioner Consent (for interviews and focus groups)	Verbal (via phone calls and face to face meetings) and written information (information leaflet and consent letter containing information and form) were provided to practitioners.
Power dynamics (researcher could be perceived to be in a position of power)	It was made clear to participants that this research was being carried out separate to the professional role of the researcher and any information gained would be used only for the purposes of this study.
Confidentiality & anonymity	These areas were covered in phone conversations and written information provided to settings. The researcher answered any questions that arose related to these issues and was open about how and when information would be used. Pseudonyms were used for settings.
Providing feedback to settings	It was agreed that if settings wished to receive feedback that this would be provided by the researcher when data analysis had been completed. It was made clear that feedback would only relate to the topic being focused on.

Table 2 Ethical considerations for this study

Limitations

There are some critics of the case study method who contend that it lacks reliability and its findings may have been interpreted differently by another researcher (Anderson, 1998). As Simons (2009) points out each case is unique so although there may be commonalities and consistent themes identified each case is also unique. Wellington (2015) argues that drawing clear cut cause and effect conclusion is impossible due to the complexity of real world situations and connections may occur by chance.

Due to the timescale involved this research study was restricted to focusing on a small number of early years settings. There is potential for further research to focus on a larger number of settings, with perhaps a wider curricular spread. The timescale available also limited the depth of analysis that was possible

Conclusion

This chapter described the research methodology used to investigate the research questions set out in chapter one and outlined the philosophical paradigms underpinning the study. The primary objective of this study was to examine the connection between child observation as a form of assessment and curriculum planning for individual childrens interests and learning progression. A case study methodology was used employing a range of sub-methods to promote triangulation was most suitable. This chapter also detailed the research design, methods chosen, validity and reliability of the study, research sample and processes of data analysis employed. The issues of reflexivity and ethical considerations were also highlighted. The chapter concluded by giving an overview of the limitations of the study. The following chapter will outline the main themes emerging from the coded and analysed data.

Chapter 4

Research Findings

This chapter outlines and presents the main research findings from this study. A profile of the research participants is provided (Table 3). The findings are connected with the research questions and presented thematically following thorough data analysis from a range of relevant sources. As consistent themes emerged across the breadth of data sources (documentary analysis, 1:1 interviews and focus) findings are presented thematically (Figure 2) rather than within each method to avoid repetition.

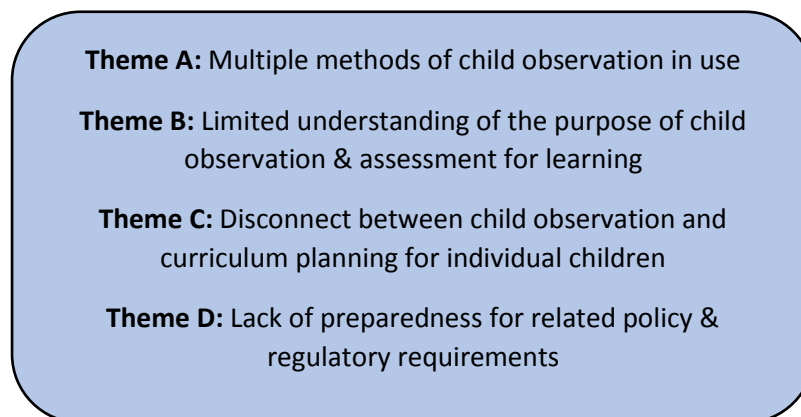


Figure 2. Themes from data analysis.

Profile of research participants

Six interviews were conducted with the lead practitioner in the preschool room and six focus groups took place with the remaining practitioners working with the lead practitioner in each setting. Table 3 provides a profile of the participants.

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Total number of participants	18
Gender	Female 100% Male 0%
Highest Level of Qualification	<p>FETAC Level 6: 33.3%</p> <p>FETAC Level 5: 66.1%</p> <p>FETAC Level 5 in progress: 5.5%</p>
Early Education Experience	<p>1-3 years: 11.1%</p> <p>5-10 years: 22.2%</p> <p>10+ years: 66.6%</p>

Table 3 Profile of participants

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Figure 3 illustrates the connections between the research questions, data sources and the emerging themes from data analysis which will frame the presentation of findings.

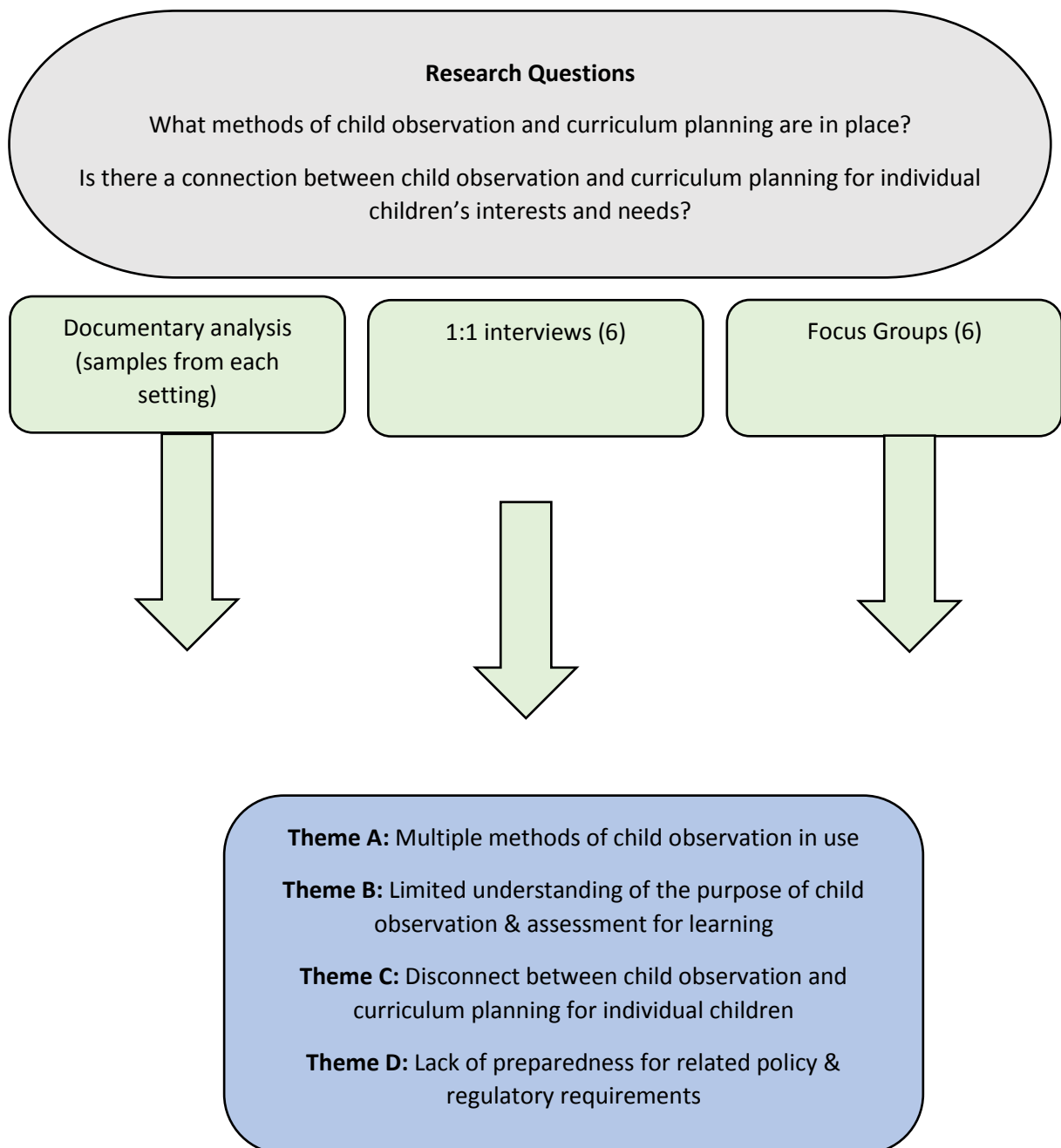


Figure 3. Connection between research questions, data sources and emerging themes.

Multiple models of child observation are in place across and within settings

The first main finding of this study was that multiple methods of child observation were in place within and across settings (Figure 4). Four methods of child observation were reported by settings:

1. Individual learning journals
2. Group learning journals
3. High Scope Child Observation Record (COR)
4. Developmental Checklist

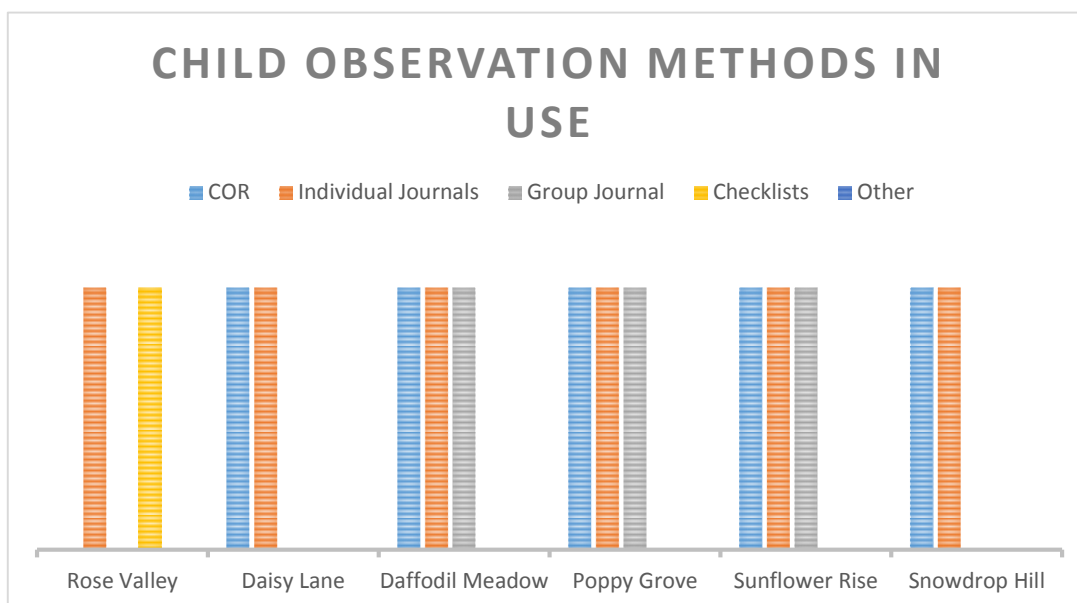


Figure 4. Methods of child observation in place

Learning Journals. As Figure 4 indicates, all 6 settings used individual learning journals (see sample Figure 5) and 50% used group learning journals (see sample Figure 6) in addition to these. Documentary analysis of journals indicated that individual learning journals took various forms using scrapbooks or copybooks and contained a range of information varying from setting to setting that included photographs, samples of children's work, written links to Aistear and Síolta, references to COR, Aistear learning records and comments from adults. These journals were described by participants as *"they tell you stories, or tell you events of the day and these stories go out to the parents."* (Poppy Grove) and *"in a way a memory book"*. (Rose Valley).

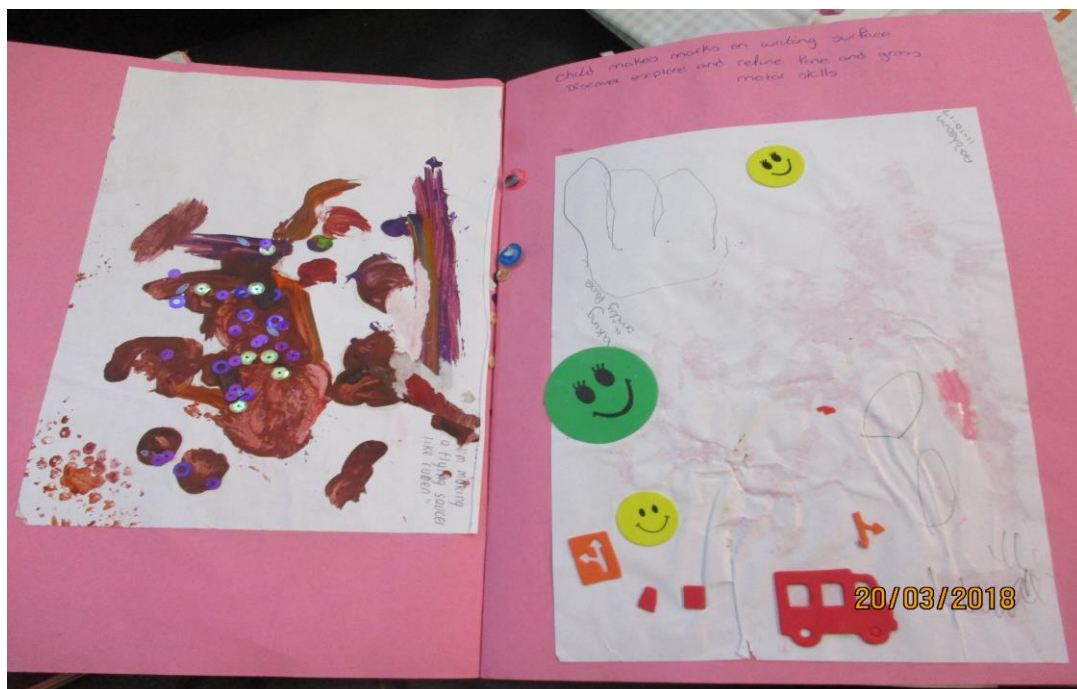


Figure 5. Individual Learning Journal (Sunflower Rise)

your life” whereas another practitioner stated *“I would be suspicious about some of them not even opening it”*. (Rose Valley)

COR. The second most frequently reported child observation method was the High Scope Child Observation Record system (Appendix 10) which was in use in 83% of settings. Opinions on COR varied across settings and indeed within settings, ranging from very positive to very negative about the system. Positive comments included *“I find it interesting as well to see like have they moved up a level”*. (Snowdrop Hill) and *“yeah the COR is great, it’s so straightforward you’re literally following the guidelines in the book”* (Sunflower Rise). In three settings there were very strong criticisms of the COR system with the focus group in Poppy Grove criticising COR for lack of focus on gaps or deficiencies *“like it doesn’t, it wouldn’t have the negative side”* a point supported by practitioners in Daisy Lane who felt COR was not effective for all children *“I think they’re very, very good if you had a child with additional needs and things like that. I don’t think they’re very good for children, the run of the mill child”*.

Of the five settings using both COR and individual learning journals a preference for the journals was expressed due to a perception they were more child and parent friendly *“but doing CORs I says is a waste. The COR is a waste of our time and it’s not understandable for the mothers cos the mothers is not trained in any of it so they don’t know where it’s coming from”* (Snowdrop Hill) and was easier for practitioners to manage *“Yeah, I like doing these, they’re very fast, they’re very quick* (Daisy Lane). All settings using COR viewed it as inappropriate to share with parents in its current format.


Developmental Checklist. The sole setting using a developmental checklist (see Figure 7) developed this in the absence of a suitable alternative and based it on developmental milestones, the Aistear learning goals and a ‘traffic light’ system to assess

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progress “We decided to create the developmental sheet ourselves and we put them in different categories to try and hit all these.” (Rose Valley).

Developmental Report

Name:	Date:	Attendance:	D.O.B
[Redacted]	Feb '18	very good	[Redacted] 03-13

Traffic Light system 

Red: = Not progressing, unable to do, no interest at all.

Orange: = Gaining progress has not reached potential/ or shows little interest

Green: = Competent in this area



Socially	I Can	Red	Orange	Green
 Well being Identity Belonging Exploring & Thinking Communications 	Make friends easily		✓	
	Share		✓	
	Take turns		✓	
	Play in a group		✓	

Figure 7. Developmental Checklist in use in Rose Valley

Frequency and type of information included in observation records

How frequently information was recorded in the child observation method in use varied from setting to setting ranging from daily to once a month but all practitioners agreed this was subject to change on a daily basis “When you have somebody out sick (staff) you don’t take out the writing stuff.” (Daisy Lane). Analysis of child observation records confirmed this varied within and among settings. Decisions on what information was recorded in COR, learning journals and developmental checklists appeared to rest with the individual practitioner with key responsibility for particular children. The vast majority of practitioners had difficulty articulating the decision making process for recording information

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but were consistent in describing this as something which stuck out or stood out “*It could just generally be we see a child doing something, something that stands out*” (Daisy Lane)

There was consistency across settings about the type of information included in learning journals as mentioned above. However just one setting included any reference to Síolta whilst all referenced Aistear to some extent (Figure 8).

Well being Identity Belonging Exploring & Thinking Communications	Be clearly understood			✓
	Talk about myself			✓
	Talk to my friends		✓	
	Talk to Adults			✓
	Maintain eye contact			✓
Behaviour	I Can	Red	Orange	Green
Aistear Well being Identity Belonging Exploring & Thinking Communications	Listen to stories			✓
	Sit still for periods of time			✓
	Concentrate			✓
	Follow instructions			✓
Independence	Play games with rules			✓
	I Can	Red	Orange	Green
Aistear Well being Identity Belonging Exploring & Thinking Communications	Play without adult help		✓	
	Use the toilet alone			✓
	Eat my lunch			✓
	Tidy up			✓
	Put my jacket on and off			✓

Figure 8. Samples of links to Aistear in observation records

In terms of COR, all practitioners completed these based on individual interpretations of the information contained in the KDI's (Key Developmental Indicators). The setting who used the developmental checklist reported a focus on the overall developmental domain being focused on and Aistear Learning Goals.

Limited understanding of the purpose of child observation and assessment for learning

The second theme which emerged, primarily from interview and focus group data was that practitioners demonstrated a limited understanding of the purpose of child observation and assessment for learning.

Consensus on the importance of child observation. All participants agreed child observation was important and the main reason provided was that it supported an awareness of children's development "*yeah definitely valuable, cos you need to know where the child is developmentally*" (Daffodil Meadow); "*well, it's so you know the children are hitting certain milestones*" (Rose Valley) . A small number of participants made reference to child observation as a means to support planning "*it's about what to plan ahead.*" (Daffodil Meadow); "*What to give the child as well like, activities and stuff*" (Daisy Lane). When discussing the purpose of observation most participants tended to focus on its uses in identifying deficits "*you have to be aware of observations to know if there's any shortfalls or things that you can help to focus on*" (Rose Valley); "*And if there's anything going wrong there you pick up from it.*" (Snowdrop Hill).

Difficulty evidencing the purpose of observation. Whilst participants provided some rationale for the purpose of observation, they were consistently unable to sufficiently demonstrate or evidence this in examples provided, hesitating and speaking in general terms of failing to give an example when prompted. However, two participants (10%) appeared to demonstrate a deeper, more in depth understanding of the value and complexity of observation by describing particular practice examples of observation impacting positively on individual children

I'd have never seen some of the things I seen for that child if I hadn't sat back and gave that whole, like I gave it a few weeks of following her and taking different

observation. It made a whole big difference even for Mam. So definitely it made a big huge difference (Sunflower Rise)

Early Years Practitioner role in observations. All participants agreed child observation was beneficial and a necessary part of their role, despite initial resistance or issues with particular methods

I think in the beginning we just didn't want to do it, I said this is ridiculous, it's taking away from the children, but I think it's, it's better for the child cos it's getting more out of us and they're getting more from it" (Poppy Grove).

When asked about particular skills necessary for conducting observations participants indicated a limited range of skills required with a participant from Poppy Grove suggesting "You wouldn't really need much skills and things for that" , a practitioner in Snowdrop Hill only identifying "listening skills" as necessary. Two participants indicated a need for training to improve observation skills as factors such as emotional involvement may impact (Poppy Grove) and critical self-awareness may be lacking

Yeah definitely, like you think you might be doing it right but you mightn't be and I think that's why you need to go on these workshops. You come out of the workshops and you're so focused and you know what you're doing. But it's a skill

(Daffodil Meadow)

Understanding of assessment for learning. Throughout interviews and focus groups participants consistently failed to demonstrate an understanding of assessment for learning. Practitioners overwhelmingly, interpreted questions on assessment for learning as related to formal child assessment where additional needs might be investigated. Responses also consistently demonstrated confusion as to the term assessment and an inability to provide information on views or understanding of it in the context of education “*When you hear the word assessment you’re like what’s that? It throws you off*” (Snowdrop Hill). All participants associated a negative connotation with the word assessment “*Yes, there is a negative thing. You don’t want to be assessed yourself so why would a child want to be assessed*”. (Poppy Grove) which evoked strong reactions in some cases

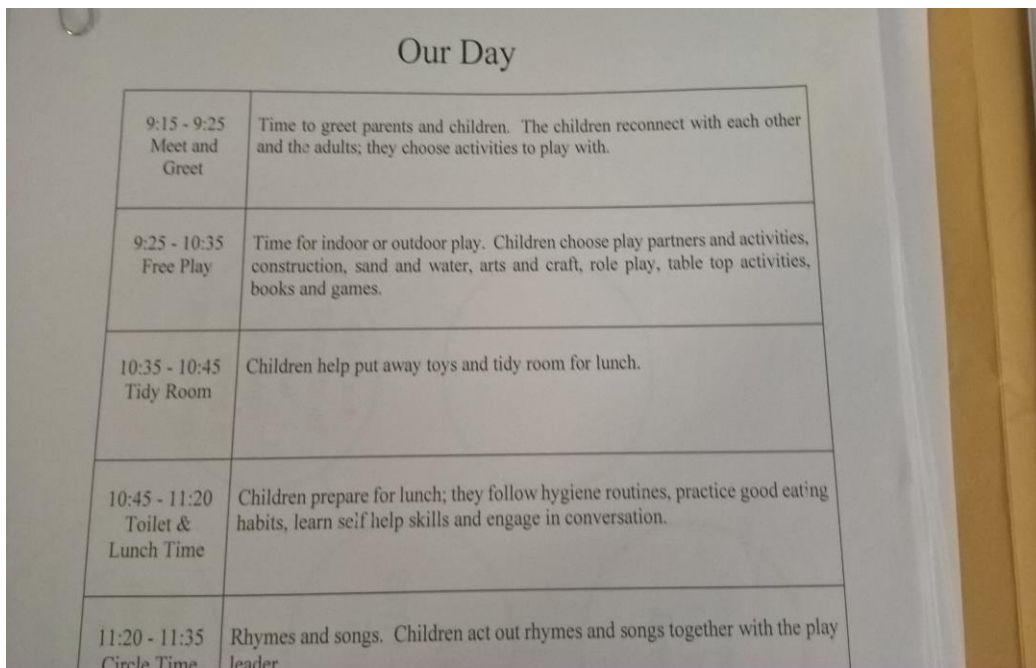
If I was a parent that word would scare me, because immediately I would think my god, there’s something wrong with my child, why are they assessing him. So I think fear would be the first thing that would come to mind when I hear that word

(Daisy Lane)

Disconnect between child observation and curriculum planning for individual children

The third theme apparent from analysis of data is the evident disconnect between child observation methods and curriculum planning for individual children. This was demonstrated consistently throughout documentary analysis of observation and planning documentation accessed, interviews and focus groups.

Documented systems of planning in operation. All settings reported systems in place for curriculum planning and in all cases planning was documented and samples provided (see Figures 9 & 10). Responsibility for planning varied between settings with the lead practitioner taking responsibility for overall planning in 83% of settings. In all cases, settings reported that they planned on a daily basis whilst in some cases annual, term and weekly plans were also used.



Our Day	
9:15 - 9:25 Meet and Greet	Time to greet parents and children. The children reconnect with each other and the adults; they choose activities to play with.
9:25 - 10:35 Free Play	Time for indoor or outdoor play. Children choose play partners and activities, construction, sand and water, arts and craft, role play, table top activities, books and games.
10:35 - 10:45 Tidy Room	Children help put away toys and tidy room for lunch.
10:45 - 11:20 Toilet & Lunch Time	Children prepare for lunch; they follow hygiene routines, practice good eating habits, learn self help skills and engage in conversation.
11:20 - 11:35 Circle Time	Rhymes and songs. Children act out rhymes and songs together with the play leader

Figure 9. Sample Daily plan

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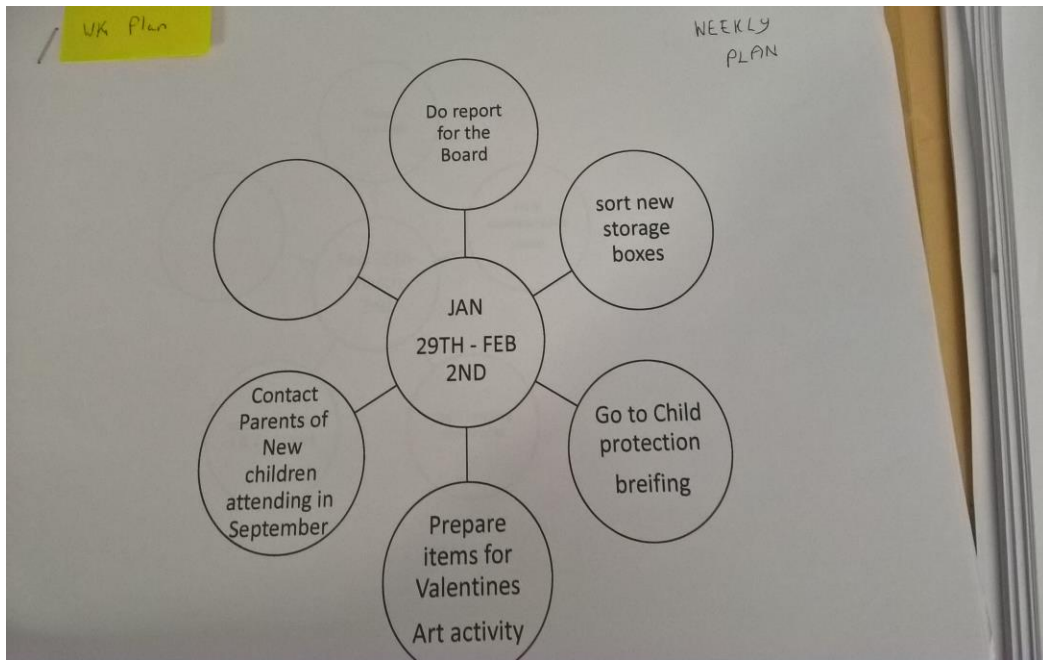


Figure 10. Sample Weekly plan

All settings made connections to Aistear on their planning documentation (Figure 11). No settings made links to Síolta on planning documentation.

Aistear Links	Aims	Learning Goals
A. Well Being	A. 3	A. 3
B. Identity & Belonging	B. 3	B. 2
C. Exploring & Thinking	C. 3	C. 3
D. Communicating	D. 2	D. 1

Case (Easter) art activities

Identity + Belonging

Communicating

Exploring and Thinking

Figure 11. Samples of links to Aistear on planning documentation

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Limited planning for individual children. The analysis of planning documentation using ECERS indicated that all settings tended to plan for a group of children rather than on an individual basis. Differentiation for individual children was not evident in any of the planning documentation reviewed, for example Figure 12 shows a daily planning sheet which refers to ‘the children’ throughout which was typical of documentation analysed.

11:15am Tidy up Time: The children and adults support each other in cleaning up the room.

11:30am Recall Time: The children talk about what they did during work time with their key workers.

11:35am Small group time: The children engage in small group activities planned by their key worker based on the children's interests and choices during the day.

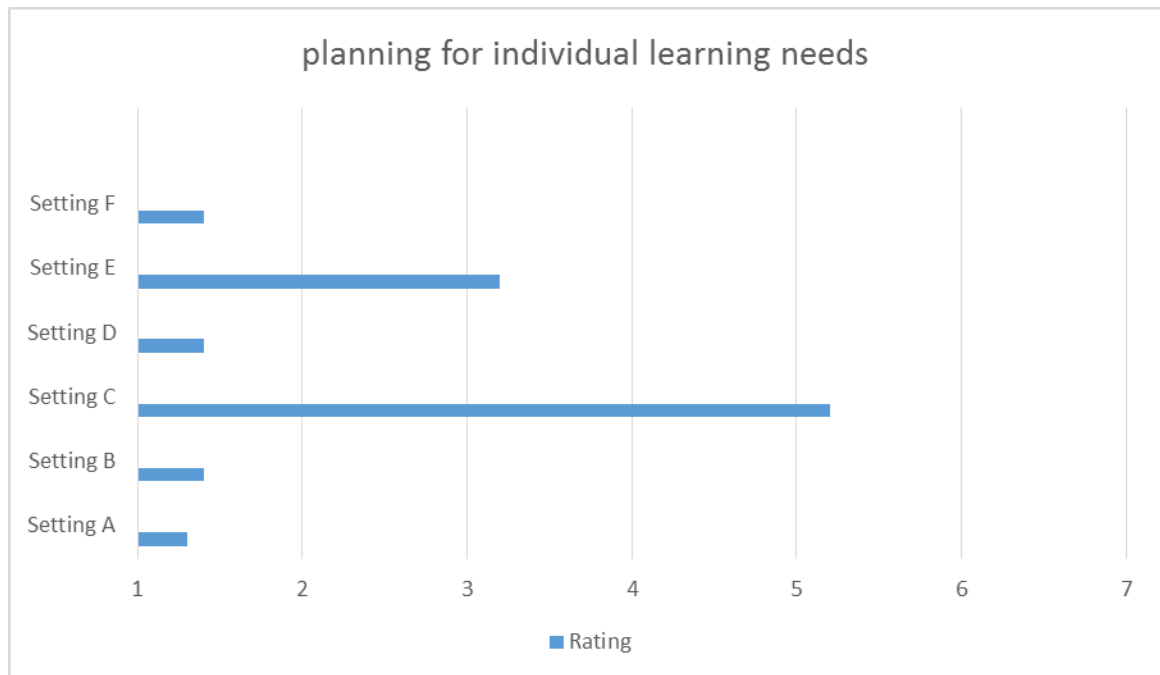
[Redacted] group:	[Redacted] group:	[Redacted] group:
Table Top	(Cling Film) Painting Table TOP	Table TOP

11:50am Large group time: Large group activities are planned by the adult for all the children to explore as a large group.

Large group activity:
outside water play

Figure 12. Daily Plan

Figure 13 indicates that the highest ratings generated by analysis using ECERS was a score of 5 for just one setting indicating a rating of ‘good’ practice and some awareness of children as individuals but for the remainder of settings scores indicate inadequate levels of practice related to planning for individual learning needs.



(Ratings: 1-Inadequate, 3-Minimal, 5-Good, 7-Excellent)

Figure 13. Analysis of planning documentation using ECERS Diversity sub-scale on planning for individual learning needs.

Analysis of interviews and focus groups correlated with the documentary analysis findings with participants consistently referring to the group of children rather than individuals “*they love their outdoor time*” (Daisy Lane) and suggesting that children were generally at the same developmental stage and shared the same interests “*they’re all generally into the same I’d say, yeah*” (Snowdrop Hill). Analysis of data strongly indicated a focus on the group rather than individuals “*I probably plan more for the group than the child*” (Poppy Grove)

Curriculum impact. In the High Scope settings there seemed to be more focus during the planning process for a part of the daily routine called small group time on individual children’s interests “*well, we’d plan our small groups around the child’s interests*”

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(Daffodil Meadow) but the level of consideration of individual children varied “*well we just kind of give them all the same but if they’re not happy they go the library or get something themselves to the table.*” (Daisy Lane). In High Scope settings children usually plan a portion of the day themselves which potentially gives increased opportunities for children to follow their own interests although this varied from setting to setting as restrictions were put on choices available “*each child picks 2 things to do*” (Snowdrop Hill)

Difficulty providing rationale for planning decisions. Participants found it difficult to articulate why particular activities are planned and the process for this “*I just think of ideas. Like say we’re doing play dough and then large group would be song or dance, body movements.*” (Snowdrop Hill). In a small number of cases, the rationale for planning was reported as based on interests but again this was at a group level where the group were deemed to be interested in construction for example. In a number of cases short term plans were drawn from the medium or longer term plans which on analysis were devised well in advance by adults with no information or consideration to individual developmental stages or needs and interests “*if they’re going to be here for 2 years we do a certain curriculum and in the second year we do the curriculum that we do with the children who are here for one year.*” (Rose Valley). In all cases, to a large extent curriculum planning was influenced by seasonal events and adults ideas about what should be covered

Like you know say you have to cover Christmas, Easter, all your holidays so you know you have to have stuff ready for all of that but then you have to do, you know you want them to hold their pencil.” (Poppy Grove)

Disconnect between observations and planning. When asked if practitioners felt that observations and planning were connected, the vast majority found it difficult to answer “*ehhhh....I don't really think so, no. not really no*” (Poppy Grove) and were either unable to provide examples or responding that they did not connect “*Probably not on all sections.*” (Daffodil Meadow); “*In a way yeah and then in a way no as well. Sometimes you might overlook something that you've observed*” (Sunflower Rise).

Flexibility of plans. All participants agreed that plans were flexible and could change for various reasons. The most frequent reason reported was the weather “*If it's a fine day all our activities move outside.*” (Daffodil Meadow) with other reasons including children's engagement “*none of them are into it and you just let them free play*” (Poppy Grove), the time of year “*Some of the children are kind of getting a bit fed up because they'll be leaving soon*” (Daisy Lane).

Benefits of Planning. Participants overwhelmingly identified the primary benefit of planning as being supportive to practitioners to help the day go smoothly “*it's a benefit for the teacher as well because then she knows what's ahead and what she has to do.* (Poppy Grove) and acting as a reminder of key events and responsibilities for that day “*But your plan would let you know, for example if Polly's greeting the parents in the morning*”. (Daisy Lane). The role of planning in supporting children was not identified as a benefit.

Review of plans. There was consensus among participants that plans were rarely revisited or reflected on, and when they were it was usually if something went wrong “*not really, only like that if something goes wrong.*” (Sunflower Rise) or perhaps used to check what activities were carried out to avoid repetition “*the art activities couldn't be the same for Paddy's day. Mother's day so you'd make sure you did something different*” (Rose Valley).

Lack of preparedness for related policy and regulatory requirements

The final theme from data analysis, concerns overwhelming consensus from practitioners strongly indicating they feel inadequately prepared for current policy and regulatory requirements related to child observation and curriculum planning.

Initial ECE training. The majority of participants (95%) indicated a complete lack of or very limited focus on child observation and curriculum planning in their initial childcare training “*I don’t think the FETAC is doing that, I don’t think it does have one thing around curriculum.*” (Daffodil Meadow). The majority (66%) of participants in this study had completed FETAC Level 5 training. One participant, in the process of completing a level 7 degree felt that whilst there was increased content on observation compared to FETAC that it still wasn’t sufficient. All participants agreed that whilst child observation was covered to a limited degree, planning was not covered at all.

Síolta and Aistear. There was also overwhelming consensus that inadequate attention was given to Síolta and Aistear in initial training, despite implementation of both being a requirement to receive funding and for inspection purposes. A survey of early years practitioners by DES in 2015 indicated a lack of preparedness for implementation of Síolta and Aistear and it appears that this remains an issue for the sector as participants reported confusion and lack of understanding of both at a basic level with issues regarding language used in the documents “*On even the Aistear and the Síolta and you’re kinda going oh my god what do they mean. If they said it in English. That’s part of it too, maybe simplify things more*” (Rose Valley).

Current inspection requirements. All but one participant felt that they were not prepared for current policy and inspection expectations “*Probably not. No I wouldn’t say I was equipped.*”(Rose Valley). The participant who felt she was prepared, was not able to expand on why, when prompted. Practitioners voiced concerns about lack of clear messaging from the inspectorate “*Nobody’s told us. Well, I’m not really 100% what they’re looking for*” (Poppy Grove) and at a wider policy level on expectations of settings and as a result were implementing processes based on their knowledge and interpretation “*I’m just kinda winging it with what I’m doing at the moment*” (Sunflower Rise).

Further training and support. Settings who had accessed further training and CPD on curriculum and Síolta and Aistear did feel better equipped than others “*I think doing me FETAC was beneficial but I think that having the High Scope training as well was really good cos I’m working in a High Scope setting now that really helped me.*” (Daffodil Meadow). The majority of participants consistently demonstrated a commitment and openness to CPD and a desire for further training and supports such as mentoring to aid application in practice

but then you try and bring it back and implement it and you go how does it really work, how will we do it? Where if there was someone who could come and give you more help and support, in your service...sometimes you need to see your stuff here to know the areas you need to work on.

(Rose Valley)

Professionalisation. The issue of professionalisation of the Early Years sector came up continuously throughout interviews and focus groups.

Capacity of practitioners. One participant in Rose Valley, highlighted the challenges for some practitioners in meeting current demands for documentation “*I think sometimes the expectation is that you do observations and all that, but not everyone who is working in childcare is, how do I put it, literate as far as writing and describing things but they have it here* (points to head).

Terms and conditions. The poor terms and conditions including lack of or limited non-contact time was described by participants as the biggest challenge in meeting requirements regarding child observation, curriculum planning and associated documentation “*You’re working on your break or you’re bringing work home with you. The girls in the room were bringing work home with them, you don’t want them bringing work home with them*” (Sunflower Rise). Pay was also cited as a major issue “*For the money in childcare that we’re teaching and learning the kids it’s disgraceful. The pay is disgraceful*” (Snowdrop Hill).

Feeling undervalued. The majority of participants reported feeling undervalued and a lack of recognition for the work they do both by parents and society in general “*a lot of parents don’t see pre-school as important, they don’t see it as anything for their development.*” (Sunflower Rise). A small number of participants reported a negative experience of external review or inspection, leading to a feeling of disenchantment and that their best efforts were not good enough “*and then someone comes in and saying to you no, you don’t need to do this or you need to do that, you kinda go, you’re working your socks off and it’s still not getting it right.*” (Rose Valley)

Accountability. Participants consistently referred to external sources as the rationale for particular practices and expressed a worry and anxiety to comply with these requirements “*Yeah. And I think that’s one of the fears with the staff. And probably myself that when they do come in are you hitting all the marks.*” (Daffodil Meadow). Whilst there appeared to be

accountability at an individual level to ensure that observations and planning were carried out according to organisational guidelines, the rationale in all cases for these practices was influenced by a perception of needing to meet external accountability “oh yeah, that’s what they want to see”. (Rose Valley practitioner describing the rationale for a particular practice.)

Conclusion

This chapter presented the data gathered from documentary analysis, interviews and focus groups and explored the main themes that emerged. Findings were presented within the context of the four emerging themes which included that multiple models of child observation were deemed to be in use, participants demonstrated a lack of understanding of the purpose of child observation and assessment for learning, an evident disconnect between child observation and planning was demonstrated and finally a lack of preparedness of practitioners for current policy and regulatory requirements. The following chapter will discuss the findings in the context of the literature review carried out. Connections and comparisons to the relevant literature will also be highlighted.

Chapter 5

Discussion of findings

Chapter Five presents a discussion of the research findings of this study which provides an opportunity to gain an insight into child observation and curriculum planning practices in early year's settings. This discussion is framed within the research questions, set out in the initial stages of this study. A number of key points across the themes identified through data analysis are discussed in light of the research examined in chapter two. Figure 14 illustrates the connections between the research questions and the themes identified through data analysis, leading to the identification of key discussion points.

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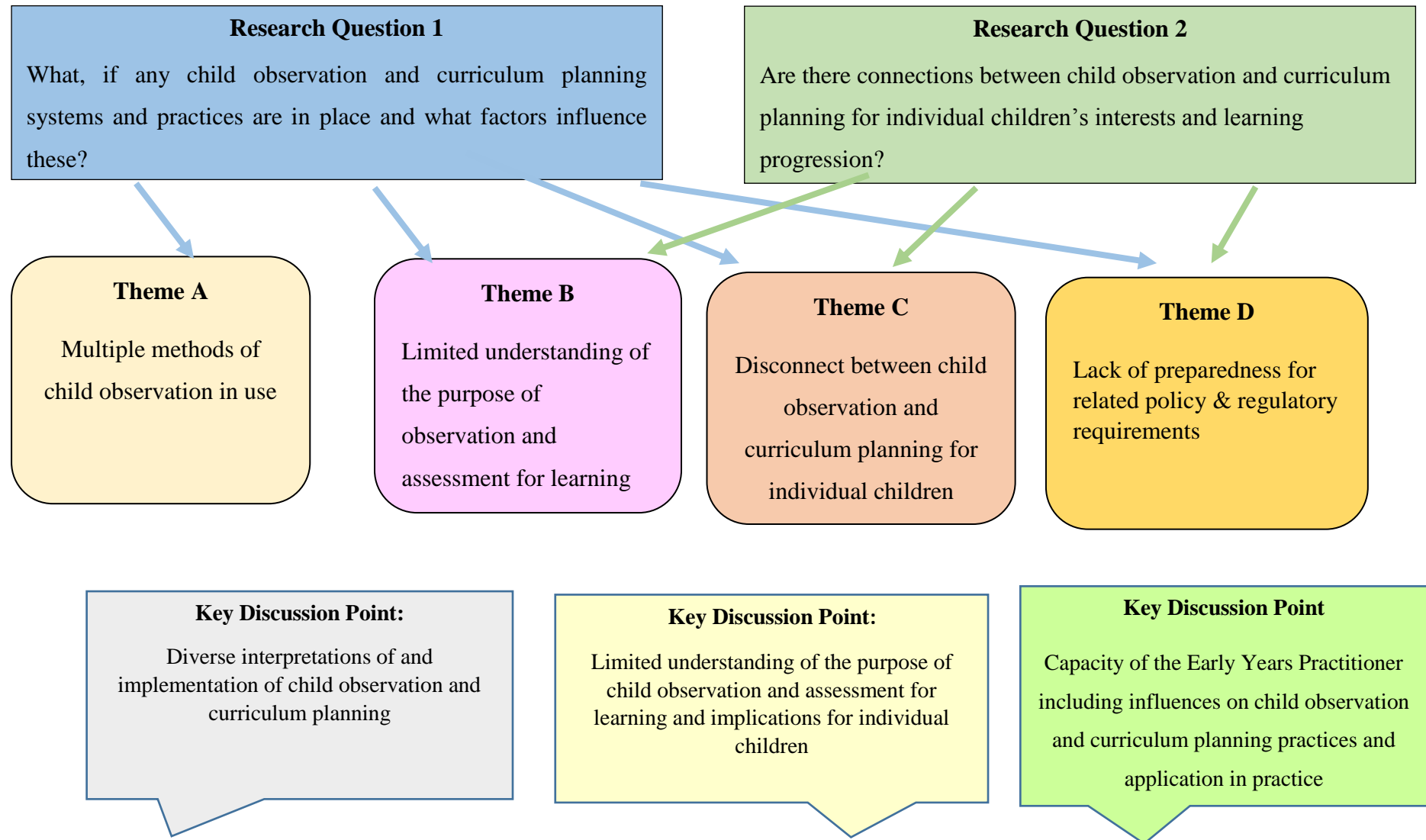


Figure 14. Diagram illustrating connections between research questions, identified themes from data analysis and key discussion point

Diverse implementation of child observation and curriculum planning practices

Observation and planning systems in place. A positive finding of this research study was that regular child observation and curriculum planning practices were in place in all six settings. Whilst Sólta (2006) and Aistear (2009) indicate a need for systems of observation and curriculum planning, a more formal requirement for documentation was only initiated through the inception of the EYEI in 2015 and it is positive that settings are making efforts to put these practices in place. A practitioner with more than 10 years experience noted the positive changes in how observations are conducted *“I think it’s much better now. Yeah, because you’re really working with the child and you’re going with their progress”* (Daisy Lane). According to the literature, regular child observation and curriculum planning practices are a critical component of quality early years provision (Carter & Nutbrown, 2014; Fisher, 2013; Palaiologou, 2012; Nutbrown, 2011), therefore it is positive that the foundational practices are being put in place by Early Years settings.

Multiple methods and interpretations. This study indicated that across six settings, four different forms of child observation methods were in use, with 50% of settings using three methods. In addition to this varying systems of planning were evident in settings.

Individual and setting interpretation. Even when the same method such as COR was used, implementation varied widely depending on individual or setting interpretation and approaches to implementation. This is of particular interest as a large majority of practitioners had received High Scope training (85.7%) which is reported to be standardised and includes a specific focus on observation and curriculum planning. Gillham (2000) echoes the findings in this study that choices about methods employed are influenced by setting conventions and cultures.

Effectiveness of methods. Whilst this study did not measure effectiveness of specific methods of child observation and planning, participants were unclear about why they used a range of methods and which method was more effective for their particular context. This is perhaps directly related to a lack of clarity on the purpose or rationale for using particular methods. The need for a clear understanding of the purpose of assessment and for methods chosen to be meaningful and effective are particularly important in influencing the quality of the assessment itself (Papatheodorou, Luff & Gill, 2013; Fisher, 2013). Whilst the literature indicates a value in employing a variety of strategies (Worth & Hardin, 2015; Dubiel, 2014; Drummond, 1993) to gain multiple perspectives, this rationale was not provided by participants in this study.

Learning journals, whilst named by settings as a child observation method, may perhaps be more accurately described as pedagogical documentation as in the majority of cases the inclusion of child observations was limited. Developmental checklists were in use in just 12.5% of settings (1) although all participants reported that they had used these in the past. The fact that the use of developmental checklists has decreased is positive considering the literature largely criticises these as being limited (Papatheodorou, Luff & Gill, 2013) and unreliable (Dubiel, 2014). However, the fact these are in use in some settings needs to be addressed at policy and practice level.

The needs of the system impact on the focus on children. In the vast majority of settings it seemed the key goal of the practitioner was to meet the needs of the observation system in place, resulting in an unintended lack of consideration of the child within this system. Many examples were provided where the practitioner sought an observation to fit with a particular aspect of COR or Aistear “*if you’re going with exploring and thinking on one day try and go with communications another day*” (Daisy Lane). Observational practices appeared to be dictated by what the demands of the system was for example, sourcing an

observation that ‘fit’ with a particular Aistear theme, and therefore failing to observe or tune into what may have been particularly significant for a child on that day. Wortham & Hardin (2015) & Drummond (1993) agree that a narrow focus may increase the risk of missing relevant details. The perhaps unintentional valuing of the system over children elicits questions about valuing the rights of children who should be the central focus of observation and planning practice which is quite clearly not the case in the participating settings. Drummond (1993, p.13) emphasises this “*The choices teachers make in assessing children’s learning must be subject to this one central, inescapable principle: that children’s interests are paramount*”.

Diversity V Consistency. The findings of this study pose a question for policy makers about balancing a value for diversity of approaches to child observation, assessment and curriculum planning, whilst also maintaining a consistent standard of practice. Síolta and Aistear were developed as unifying frameworks to support diverse settings to enhance standards of quality. It is evident from this study that the national frameworks have yet to achieve this goal as large inconsistencies were evident in observation, assessment and planning practices both within and across settings ‘*We all do it different. I mightn’t do it the way other people do it but it works for me*’ (Daffodil Meadow). The diversity of implementation raises questions about consistency and quality assurance and perhaps, highlights a need for training and stronger induction and leadership processes within settings.

Limited understanding of the purpose of child observation and assessment for learning and implications for children

A main finding of this study was that practitioners demonstrated a limited understanding of the purpose of child observation and assessment for learning which has a number of implications at policy and practice levels.

Lack of understanding and misinterpretation. According to Wall (2006) a clear understanding of the purpose of observational assessment should be a guiding principle for all Early Years' practitioners. This was clearly not evidenced by practitioners in this study who misinterpreted observation for example as a means of monitoring children "*Like, if you're standing back and watching them*" (Poppy Grove) rather than for assessment purposes. The term assessment caused confusion for the vast majority of participants. There was a notable change in body language during interviews and focus groups when the issue of assessment was introduced, including avoiding eye contact, appearing uncomfortable by fidgeting and a lot of hesitation. A number of participants verbalised their confusion '*what is child assessment? What would that be? When you hear the word assessment you're like what's that? It throws you off*' (Snowdrop Hill). The literature correlates with the finding of this research study that there is misunderstanding and misinterpretation about assessment and it is imperative that a universal understanding of what constitutes assessment is reached (Alasuutari, 2014; Dubiel, 2014; Nutbrown, 2011; Tickell, 2011; Brown & Rolfe, 2005) which is necessary at a national level.

Negative association to assessment. Participants who attempted to articulate their understanding of assessment, primarily highlighting its purpose in identifying deficits "*I suppose the assessment it needs to be done if the child isn't hitting certain areas.*" (Daffodil Meadow). Not one participant used the words assessment for learning or focused on

assessment as a tool to evaluate and plan for extending individual children's learning progression.

A cyclical approach to observation, assessment and planning. Prominent researchers in the area of quality early years education, particularly those who focus on effective assessment and planning systems often refer to a **cycle** of observation, assessment and planning (Sharman et al., 2015; Dubiel, 2014; McLachlan et. al, 2013; Hayes, 2012; Kamen, 2012; Drummond, 1998, 1993; Beaty, 1998). If there are challenges in understanding the purpose of observation and assessment for learning, this is likely to have negative consequences for further elements of the cycle, which is perhaps demonstrated in this study through the apparent lack of capacity to plan for individual children's learning progression.

Difficulty articulating rationale for observational practice. Participants consistently struggled to respond when asked what influenced the decision to document a particular observation and in most cases appeared to be the individuals decision about what was important *'it's more things that you know, stand out in your mind.'* (Sunflower Rise) or about demonstrating the links with the particular system in use *"it has to be something that happens that makes an observation interesting I feel anyway, so that you can find an aim and a theme for it'* (Rose Valley). This suggests a value judgment by the adult about what is 'worthwhile' to record.

Gaps in training and supports. Participants overwhelmingly agreed that initial training failed to prepare them adequately for observation, assessment and planning practices and this is something which needs to be addressed at a policy level. Lack of understanding of the national frameworks is something which should be covered within both further, higher and ongoing education.

Using a system not suitable for sharing with key stakeholders. The findings of this study also indicate a potential ethical issue regarding assessment practices. A number of settings reported that the some of the methods in use may not be suitable for sharing with parents as they might not understand the system, may misinterpret it for example when levels are assigned or may be focused on negative aspect “*the COR is a waste of our time and it’s not understandable for the mothers cos the mothers is not trained in any of it so they don’t know where it’s coming from*” (Snowdrop Hill). In one case, a participant suggested she focused on documenting only positive aspects as she was conscious the parent would be looking at it. This raises a question about the authenticity and suitability of methods in use if they are not suitable for sharing with the primary caregivers of children. The literature suggests involvement of parents in assessment processes should be a critical component and questions how fit for purpose particular methods are.

Implications for individual children. The limited understanding of the purpose of child observation, assessment and curriculum planning has potentially significant implications for individual children within Early Years settings.

Lack of child-centredness of methods used. A major aim of this study was to assess the extent to which the individual child was considered within the observation, assessment and curriculum planning processes. It seemed that regardless of the type of child observation or planning method in use, a lack of consideration of the child as an individual was consistently demonstrated. There was a perception from participants that learning journals were more child centred, however children were not involved in the development of these in a number of cases. In addition, whilst these journals were titled as ‘individual’, in most cases, the information captured in these was largely the same for all children ‘*They more or less start of the same, date of birth etc.*’ (Daisy Lane). The most individual element of these journals appeared to be that photos of children were individual and the work carried out was

from that particular child but within settings the ‘significant’ events documented appeared to be the same for each child. Alasuutari (2014) suggests that documentation commonly assumes a child with a voice, however that is an assumption that appears to be unfounded in this study as despite some level of involvement of children in some methods of assessment, this falls short of true and meaningful participation of children and should be considered further.

Planning to support individual children. During interviews and focus groups there were some insights into interests and needs of particular children but there were limited examples of how this information was incorporated into curriculum planning to support individual children’s interests and learning progression. In general, there was a lack of use of information gathered through observations, which participants confirmed were rarely reflected on or discussed. A strong theme throughout the literature is that an underpinning principle and critical component of effective preschool education should be the provision of individualised interventions for each child to deepen and extend their learning and development (Wortham & Hardin, 2015; Giardiello et al., 2013; Daly & Foster, 2012; Tickell, 2011; Downs & Strand, 2006; Fisher, 2000, 2013; Hurst & Lally, 1992).

Participants reported that often the quieter children may not be observed as much “*that would be my problem, that some children are just not observational material (laughs)*” (Rose Valley) which raises issues about equity and valuing the uniqueness of children and lack of information makes planning more challenging. Very limited differentiation was demonstrated throughout the data sourced and according to Fisher (2013), Nutbrown (2011) and Nielsen (2006) this is the key to matching learning experiences with the needs and interests of children. One participant did demonstrate an understanding of the need to reflect on observations to consider what might be significant for the particular child “*You look back*

so like they could be painting a picture but the picture mightn't be about painting it might be about them talking about their Mammy or something at home" (Sunflower Rise).

Tendency to plan on a group basis. In all settings children were mainly considered as part of a group rather than as individuals and planning documentation confirmed that planning took place based on group needs rather than with a particular focus on individual needs and interests. The literature suggests children can be grouped together for financial or organisational reasons (Nutbrown, 2011) which is the case for many Early Years' settings who are therefore challenged to plan for individual children where a group of children may contain a range of developmental stages. Participants reported that children generally shared the same interests and were at the same developmental stage. A lack of focus on children as individuals impacts not just on observation practices but also on interactions and curriculum planning. Drummond (1993) describes a constant tension in balancing what is appropriate for individual needs and what is appropriate for the group which is something it seems that practitioners are grappling with on a daily basis. The practice of planning well in advance is something that conflicts with the promotion of an emergent and inquiry based curriculum promoted by Aistear.

Some effective examples were given by two of the settings on interest based planning but again it was about the group rather than individuals '*a group of children were really into block area, so we introduced hammer and nails, different textures, little people etc.*' (Daffodil Meadow). When children are consistently considered as part of a group and not as individuals there is perhaps a concern that this may impact negatively on a child's self-identity and individual learning progression. As Fisher (2013, p. 73) outlines, embedding learning in what is already understood sends a message to children that their competencies and contributions are valued, which can positively impact on self-esteem and motivation. There was also a presumption in one setting that "*If they weren't interested they wouldn't be taking part, you'd*

know by looking at them". (Daffodil Meadow) which may not be true for all children who may comply but may not be fully engaged or could benefit more from another activity.

Capacity of the Early Years Practitioner and influences on practice

Competence and confidence. The role of the Early Years practitioner is a crucial factor in supporting effective observation, assessment and planning practices. The competence and capacity of Early Years practitioners is a theme which has permeated throughout this research study. Urban (2012) emphasises the importance of well trained and experienced Early Years practitioners in providing quality Early Childhood Education. Throughout this study, participants did not demonstrate a competence or confidence in their work regarding observation, assessment and curriculum planning. Given the profile of the participants in this study all meeting minimum qualification requirements and the majority having 10+ years experience (88%) it is evident that practitioners require further support.

The current policy context. The role of the Early Years practitioner needs to be considered within the wider policy context which has an impact on practice. As outlined in the introductory chapter and the review of literature, policy responsibility for early year's provision is spread across a number of government departments and agencies which makes it particularly challenging to support coherence, consistent messaging and transparency of requirements. There is a strong body of literature which criticises the split system of education and childcare, such as that in operation in Ireland (Pugh, 2014; Walsh, 2013; Jenkins, 2012; Kaga, Bennett & Moss, 2010; Hayes & Kernan, 2008).

Lack of clarity of expectations. Dunphy (2008) suggests that the involvement of various stakeholders in curriculum policy can make the implementation of authentic

assessments challenging for practitioners. This view was supported in the findings of this study as practitioners felt that they were unclear and unprepared for inspections

The last DES inspection we had the inspector wasn't really that overly impressed with the books as we thought she was going to be because we were told if you have this planning sheet in your book and observation and all that that's all you need and she dismissed it; it's very contradicting. We just said look we'll just wing it ourselves"

(Rose Valley).

The fact that there is a statutory inspection system for the ECCE scheme and those inspected are not clear about the requirements in terms of observations and planning is a huge cause for concern and something which should be addressed at policy level as a matter of priority.

Professional identity. Whilst there have been a number of positive developments in the early years sector in recent years, including increased investment in resources and access to training, some core issues remain at a basic level such as pay and conditions *"It's changed big time, there's a lot more paperwork, awful lot more paperwork in it. You're expected too much of, the pay is disgraceful"*. (Snowdrop Hill). This has a direct impact on professional identity which was indicated by many participants in this study who felt undervalued for the work they do *"I personally don't think they recognise us as educators, early educators. I don't think they do"*. (Rose Valley).

The increased expectations in terms of documentation and observation and planning practice has compounded this feeling of worthlessness as practitioners believe that demands and expectations are increasing but terms and conditions have not increased as a result *"I just think it's ridiculous, the paperwork. You're permanently writing...but they're not giving you any time, any money for it. It's an awful lot of pressure. Too much pressure"* (Poppy Grove).

The most recent annual profile of the Early Years sector in Ireland highlights issues related to

terms and conditions such as the average wage of an early years assistant is €10.88 per hour, half of all staff working in early years do so on a part time basis which is a much higher proportion than other sectors and 39% are on seasonal contracts only.

Transfer of learning into practice. The findings of this study indicate an issue related to application of learning in practice *“Probably you go away with an idea in your head and it's not really what the idea is but it's your idea”* (Rose Valley). Limited content on observation, assessment and planning and Síolta and Aistear in training and CPD may contribute to this. However, this study appears to indicate that even when there is increased focus and depth on observation and planning, for example in the High Scope training programme, there still appeared to be a challenge for practitioners in application to practice

Is training alone sufficient. The findings of this study raise a wider question about the quality, pitch, depth of training and indeed if training alone is sufficient or whether it should be accompanied by additional supports such as coaching or onsite mentoring to address the issue of consistency and quality assurance. Participants in this study indicated a positive experience of mentoring and suggest that tailored and individualised coaching may support more effective application in practice *‘Where if there was someone who could come and give you more help and support, in your service...sometimes you need to see your stuff here to know the areas you need to work on’* (Rose Valley). Research by Joyce & Showers (2002) and Rogers, Welling & Conner (2002) indicate that between 5-10% of what is covered in training is actually transferred to the job. Interestingly, in Joyce & Showers (2002) analysis when on the job coaching was added to training, large gains were seen in knowledge and teachers’ ability to demonstrate the skills in the classroom and as much as 95% of learning was transferred.

Influences on child observation and curriculum planning practices

The findings of this research indicate that child observation and curriculum planning practices are influenced both positively and negatively at various levels-practitioner, setting and policy.

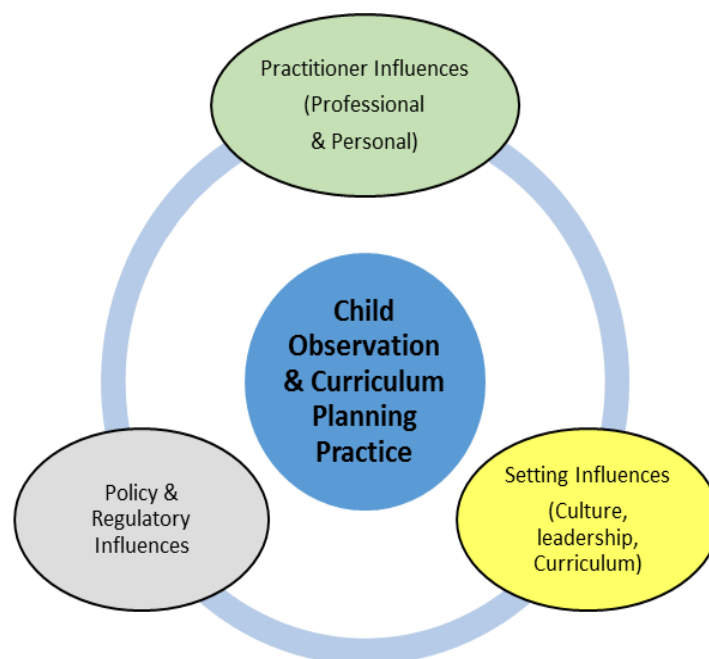


Figure 15. Influences on child observation, assessment and curriculum planning practices

Influences at practitioner level. There are a number of factors at practitioner level which influence practice.

Professional background. The professional background of the practitioner is significant (Urban, 2012) and impacts on levels of confidence and competence in conducting observation, assessment and planning. Whilst Dubiel (2014) points out that decisions about assessment should be the responsibility of the practitioner and not subject to external pressures there is also a conflict as many settings in this study report a need for guidance and support which is particularly important when capacity may be diverse. Interestingly, the sole

practitioner in the research reported here, currently studying for a degree indicated an increased ability to demonstrate effective observation and planning practices. However, it is impossible to say if this is a result of the level of training being acquired or as a result of other factors such as previous work experience or training or other experiences. The literature does strongly suggest a correlation between higher qualifications and experience and quality provision (Urban, Vandenbroeck, Van Laere, Lazzari & Peeters, 2012; Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2006). Whilst the qualifications of early years practitioners has risen from 71% with a level 5 qualification in 2010, to 92% in 2016/2017 (Pobal, 2018) it remains that a move towards a more graduate led workforce may impact positively on quality practices.

Personal background. The impact of the personal background of the practitioner was noted in this study. The literature acknowledges the diverse backgrounds of educators can impact on practice (Anderson, 2013; Urban; 2012) particularly the impact of personal beliefs, values and views on the assessment process (Wortham & Hardin, 2015; Dubiel, 2014; Denscombe, 2007; Drummond et al., 1993). This is evident in this study as a number of participants reported documenting areas that they deemed to be significant. This study also highlighted the emotional element of the work and how personal experiences may impact on practice. An example of this is the practitioner who spoke about negative experiences in school and not completing her leaving certificate and how this, how this impacts her professional identity and self-worth

I used to always be in trouble for my writing, used to get beaten when I was in school and now Id sooner type anything up then actually write. And I was horrified when we had to do all these observations and little anecdotes and things. My writing-I can't do that so I don't feel as confident to do that

(Rose Valley).

Influences at setting level. The culture, ethos and leadership within the setting had an impact on curriculum and planning practice. It could perhaps be argued that the setting level exerted the most influence on practices as it decided on the curriculum, child observation and curriculum planning systems and structures in place. Whilst individuals had scope to interpret information in their own way there was a clear requirement to adhere to organisational expectations. Fidelity to the given curriculum model was not always demonstrated with older versions of COR in place in all settings. In some settings, the lack of clarity about the curriculum in place may cause challenges which is supported by Feldman (2010). Capacity of those in leadership positions to provide adequate guidance and support was limited *“I mean I think it would be better if I was going with them and sitting down with them and doing the books and to find that time it’s very hard. It is very hard”*. (Sunflower Rise) Practical issues such as staff/child ratios, availability of non-contact time, the leaders’ role also working directly with children and daily routines also impacted to some extent on practices. The literature supports the finding that observation and curriculum planning practices are influenced at setting level and depends on professional capacity, roles and responsibilities (Papatheodorou, Luff & Gill, 2013).

Influences at policy level. The findings of this study strongly indicate that there are two key influences at policy level:

1. the required implementation of the national frameworks, Síolta and Aistear and;
2. the perceived expectations of the early years education inspectorate

Implementation of Síolta and Aistear. Whilst settings reported a knowledge of both frameworks, it was evident through data collection that more support was required to support effective and meaningful implementation in practice. Efforts were made to link child

observations and planning documents to Aistear but these connections were very much at a superficial level and did not demonstrate meaningful links. At a basic level, issues were raised with the language of the frameworks

Sometimes, now this is a personal thing I think some wording like curriculum and all that. What is curriculum? Some of the wording what the hell is that? You know but that is what it needs to be brought down to make it simple

(Rose Valley)

Urban (2012) suggests a value in national frameworks in contributing to coherence and integration which was supported by respondents in this study

EYEI inspections. The EYEI inspections were identified consistently as the rationale for particular practices in place and inspectors were often referred to as ‘they “*They want to see that we’ve connected what we’re doing. It’s for the inspectors*” (Rose Valley). Despite inspections reportedly influencing practice, participants consistently expressed a lack of clarity of expectations of inspectors. Dubiel (2014) does note that in practice this may lead to irrelevant and misguided attempts to meet externally set demands which correlates with the findings of this study as practitioners act on what their perception of inspectorate requirements are. Dubiel (2014) speaks about ‘compliance anxiety’ created when a particular format is delivered to settings by outsiders which appears to be evident in the findings of this study as practitioners failed to demonstrate ownership of processes.

Conclusion

This chapter presented the key discussion points from the findings of this research study which examined the connections between child observation and curriculum planning for

individual children's learning progression. The key discussion points were presented in light of the two main research questions and connections made with the relevant literature, outlined in chapter two. Chapter 6, the concluding chapter will provide a summary of the main findings together with recommendations at research, practice and policy levels.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

According to Nutbrown (2011, p. 154) effective assessment is an essential ingredient of all forms of successful early education. The literature outlined throughout this study, indicates the strong correlation between effective child observation, assessment and curriculum planning practices and high quality Early Childhood Education provision. The aim of this study was to explore the connection between child observation and curriculum planning for individual children's interests and learning progression in Early Year's settings. This chapter reviews the main findings of this research study and consider recommendations for Early Years' policy and practice and further research in this area.

Summary of key findings:

The main findings of this study provided an insight into the child observation, assessment and curriculum planning practices across a range of Early Years' settings by answering two main research questions:

- What, if any child observation and curriculum planning systems and practices are in place and what factors influence these?
- Are there connections between child observation and curriculum planning for individual children's interests and learning progression?

Four themes emerged from the analysis of data gathered through documentary analysis, 1:1 interviews and focus groups:

- A. Multiple methods of child observation and planning were in place across settings.
- B. Practitioners demonstrated a lack of understanding of the purpose of child observation and assessment for learning
- C. There was an evident disconnect between child observation and curriculum planning for individual children
- D. Practitioners were unprepared for the current policy and regulatory requirements related to child observation, assessment and curriculum planning.

Recommendations

As this study was conducted as a small scale research project with a limited amount of time available, it impacted on the depth of data analysis possible and the number of settings that could participate. Notwithstanding the limitations of this study the data gathered would support the following recommendations made with respect to research, policy and practice:

Further research. The small sample size and short timescale for this research study impacted on the depth of analysis that could be carried out. Despite this, very rich data was gathered from the various sources. In light of the findings of this study, a strong case could be made for further research in this area on a larger scale in order to gain a national picture of child observation and curriculum planning practices in early years' settings and to explore some of the issues raised in more depth.

Recommendations at policy level. The findings of the PEEL study (Moyle, Adams & Musgrove, 2002), mentioned previously, identified a limited understanding of assessment and planning for progression of learning within Early Years settings which echoes the

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findings of the current study and recommended that training in this area was a high need. Palaiologou (2012) notes the complex nature of becoming a skilled observer and that this requires ongoing self-evaluation and self-development which is something which needs investment and resourcing at a practice level.

To support the enhancement of assessment and planning practices in Early Years settings the following actions are recommended:

- Development of a nationally coordinated CPD programme for the Early Years sector, which clearly and comprehensively supports enhancement of knowledge and skills to implement effective observation, assessment and curriculum planning practices and is clearly aimed at meeting requirements of Síolta, Aistear and the Early Years Inspectorate.
- To provide clarity and transparency on policy requirements and processes, a coordinated and coherent message needs to be developed at policy level by the multiple stakeholders involved and strategically and clearly communicated to stakeholders in the sector.
- To develop and implement systems of quality assurance for further, higher and continuing professional development to ensure consistency of quality of delivery and messaging and to ensure content is reflective of current needs.
- Provision of paid non-contact time to facilitate time for conducting observations, carrying out planning and completing necessary documentation

Recommendations for practice. The complexity of observational assessment and effective curriculum planning is evident and indicates a strong need for skilled, knowledgeable and informed practitioners with a comprehensive understanding of child

development and learning processes (Giardiello et al., 2013). This study indicates challenges in transferring knowledge into practice and as a result recommendations are as follows:

- Provision of on-site mentoring and coaching supports for Early Years practitioners.
- Specific mentoring supports to be provided for those in leadership roles in Early Years Settings to promote pedagogical leadership within settings who can provide guidance and leadership to colleagues.

Conclusion

This research study offered an invaluable opportunity to gain insights into the child observation and curriculum planning practices of a range of Early Years settings. It is evident that observation and curriculum planning processes are progressing as a result of policy developments and efforts at individual setting level. This study highlighted elements of quality Early Years practice and the value practitioners place on their work was demonstrated throughout interviews and focus groups. Challenges to effective child observation were evident and indicate a need for a clearly agreed understanding of the purposes of assessment and curriculum planning and the role of Early Years practitioners within this.

The findings of this study correlate strongly with relevant research and literature in this area and strongly echo the findings of the recent review of EYEI inspections which indicated challenges for practitioners in using assessment of learning strategies and processes. The recommendations issued as a result of this study offer an opportunity to evoke meaningful change in this area for the Early Years sector and most importantly for children and families. There is a clearly identified need and desire for additional supports for practitioners to support assessment and curriculum planning practices “*and when you go on training it enlightens you, it just enlightens you a bit*” (Daisy Lane). Despite the challenges

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facing Early Years Practitioners it is clearly evident that the individual practitioners who took part in this study are committed to their work with children and have their best interests at heart *“you want to be able to come into work happy, knowing you’re fulfilling every area of every child and that the child leaves here happy as well.”* (Daffodil Meadow).

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Appendix 1

Information on Early Years Education Inspection (DES)

The early years inspection framework tool focuses on four areas of practice and for the purposes of this research an analysis will take place on **Area 2- ‘The quality of processes to support children’s learning and development’**. This area is the most relevant to this research design as it focuses on how information about the child’s development informs the next steps in learning and if planning for learning is closely aligned to children’s interests and developing capabilities. There are a number of outcomes identified which may be used as part of the data analysis and this will be clearer when the methodology is being examined in more detail. Some examples include:

Outcome 5: ‘Information about the children’s development informs next steps in learning’

- A variety of assessment approaches is used to inform the next steps in children’s learning experiences and ensure continuity in their learning
- Information about children’s learning is regularly documented to build a rich picture of children’s learning and development

Outcome 10: Provision for children’s learning and development is closely aligned to their interests and developing capabilities

- Planning for children’s learning and development builds on the interests, previous experiences and achievements of children
- Children are enabled and supported to make connections in their learning and to transfer their knowledge and skills to new learning situations
- Learning activities provide progressively more complex, varied and challenging experiences for children in accordance with their individual needs and abilities

Area 3, Outcome 13 may also be relevant when conducting the documentary analysis ‘Children experience achievement and are developing through their learning experiences’

- Information documented about children’s learning reflects their development with due regard for their individual interests, needs and approaches

Appendix 2

Information on ECERS:

Mathers, Roberts & Sylva (2014) describe ERS (Environmental Rating Scales) as standardised quality assessment scales, used widely around the world for research, regulation and quality improvement and have been shown to be reliable and valid. The ECERS (Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale) curricular extension on Diversity, item 13 measures the quality of planning for individual learning needs based on accessing observation and planning records. I have been trained in the use of ERS and plan to rate settings observation and planning records against the scale of 1 (Inadequate)-7 (excellent)

Examples within the rating scale include:

- **1.2:** Planning is not written down
- **3.2:** some of the written planning shows differentiation for particular individuals or groups
- **5.3:** Children are observed frequently and individual records are kept on their progress in different aspects of their development
- **7.2:** Planning also shows a range of capability levels at which a task or activity may be experienced
- **7.3:** Observations and records of progress are used to inform planning

Appendix 3

Interview schedule:

Context/Background:

- Can you tell me a little bit about your training/qualifications and experience in Early Childhood Education?
- Do you remember when you trained if there was any focus on assessment and planning?
- Have you received any training or support and guidance on assessment and planning since your initial training?
- Can you give me a brief overview of this setting (number of children/age range etc.)
- Can you tell me about your role as a leader in this setting and how long you have worked here?
- How would you describe the curriculum in place here?
- What is your role as a leader in observation and planning

Child observation/assessment:

- Can you tell me what you think about the purpose of child observation?
- What kind of assessment or child observation practices are in place?
- Why do you carry out child observation? Are there internal and external influences on this?
- How do you decide what to observe?
- Could you define assessment in your own words?
- Can you give a specific example of observing in your day to day work?
- Are observations documented/discussed?
- What happens with these observations? How are they used?
- Who contributes to assessments of children?
- What are the challenges to observation?
- Are there strengths/positives to observation?
- What kind of skills do practitioners need for conducting observations?

Curriculum Planning:

- What kind of curriculum planning takes place here?
- Why do you plan? Are there internal and external influences on this?
- Are plans written/discussed? With who?
- What is your role as a leader in curriculum planning?
- Can you give an example of where you planned for needs or interests?
- What are the challenges to planning?
- Are there strengths/positives to planning?
- What kind of skills does a practitioner need for planning?
- Are curriculum plans ever reviewed? When might this be? Do you ever need to change or adapt a curriculum plan? Why might you do this?

Conclusion

- What kind of things would be helpful to improve or help observation and planning practices?
- Anything else you would like to add that hasn't been covered?

Appendix 4

Focus group schedule:

Context/Background:

- Can you tell me a little bit about your training/qualifications and experience in Early Childhood Education?
- Do you remember when you trained if there was any focus on assessment and planning?
- Have you received any training or support and guidance on assessment and planning since your initial training?
- Can you give me a brief overview of this setting (number of children/age range etc.)
- Can you tell me about your role in this setting and how long you have worked here?
- How would you describe the curriculum in place here?

Child observation/assessment:

- Can you tell me what you think about the purpose of child observation?
- What kind of assessment or child observation practices are in place?
- Why do you carry out child observation? Are there internal and external influences on this?
- How do you decide what to observe?
- Could you define assessment in your own words?
- Can you give a specific example of observing in your day to day work?
- Are observations documented/discussed?
- What happens with these observations? How are they used?
- Who contributes to assessments of children?
- What is your role in child observation?
- What are the challenges to observation?
- Are there strengths/positives to observation?
- What kind of skills do practitioners need for conducting observations?

Curriculum Planning:

- What kind of curriculum planning takes place here?
- Why do you plan? Are there internal and external influences on this?
- Are plans written/discussed? With who?
- What is your role in curriculum planning?
- Can you give an example of where you planned for needs or interests?
- What are the challenges to planning?
- Are there strengths/positives to planning?
- What kind of skills does a practitioner need for planning?
- Are curriculum plans ever reviewed? When might this be? Do you ever need to change or adapt a curriculum plan? Why might you do this?

Conclusion

- What kind of things would be helpful to improve or help observation and planning practices?
- Anything else you would like to add that hasn't been covered?

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Appendix 5

ECERS-E: The Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale Curricular Extension to ECERS-R (Sylva, Siraj-Blatchford, Taggart)

Diversity. Item 13. Planning for individual learning needs (Ask to see the records kept on individual children)

Item	Inadequate	Minimal	Good	Excellent		
	1	2	3	4	5	6
1.1	Activities and resources are not matched to different ages, developmental stages or interests	3.1 some adaption is made to address specific needs of individuals or groups (Ex. Additional learning or English language support)	5.1 The range of activities provided draws on children's interests and includes all developmental stages and backgrounds, enabling all children in the group to participate to promote their success and learning	7.1 The planning and organization for social interaction enables children of all developmental stages and backgrounds to participate at an appropriate level in both individual and common tasks (Ex. Pairing children of different ages and abilities for certain tasks)		
1.2	Planning is not written down	3.2 Some of the written planning shows differentiation for particular individuals or groups	5.2 Daily plans are written with the specific aim of developing activities that will satisfy the interests and needs of each child, either individually or as groups	7.2 Planning sheets identify the role of the adult when working with individuals/pairs/groups of children. Planning also shows a range of ability levels at which a task or activity may be experienced		
1.3	Written planning takes no account of specific individuals or groups.	3.3 Written records indicate some awareness of how individuals have responded to activities, or of the appropriateness of activities (<i>ex. needs bilingual support, able to count to 2</i>)	5.3 Children are observed frequently and individual records are kept on their progress in areas of development	7.3 Observations and records of progress are used to inform planning		
1.4	No records are kept, or if records are kept, they describe activities rather than the child's response or success in that activity (<i>ex. completed checklists or samples of children's work</i>)	3.4 staff show some awareness of the need to support and recognize children's differences, publicly praising children of all abilities*	5.4 Staff consistently draw children's attention to diversity in a positive way	7.4 Staff specifically plan activities which draw the attention of the whole group to difference and abilities in a positive way (<i>ex showing children who are disabled in a positive light, celebrating bilingualism</i>)		

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***Notes for clarification**Activities and planning

1.1/3.1/5.1/1.2/3.2/5.2 There should be evidence that differentiated activities and/or resources are offered to children with particular needs (e.g, those who do not speak English as their first language) and according to age and developmental stage.

-1.1/3.1/5.1 relate to the provision/adaptation of activities and resources offered to children (whether these are planned or informal) and the extent to which these cater to differing needs

-1.2/3.2/5.2 specifically assess the extent to which differentiation is *planned for*.

Examples of appropriate differentiation can be found in *All About the ECERS-E* (Mathers & Linkskey, forthcoming)

5.1/5.2 The range of activities should provide for all children (e.g. children of different ages/stages, children with English as a second language) and not simply those with identified special needs

7.1. It may be necessary to ask about this as it will not always be apparent why children have been encouraged to work together on a task. For example: "Why have you encouraged those children to work together?" "Do you ever encourage particular children to work together? Why? Can you give some examples?"

7.2. The adult guidance should be more detailed than simply listing which adult works with which activity/group. Both elements of the indicator (i.e., the adult guidance and the range of capability levels) must be met in order to give credit.

Observations and record-keeping

3.3. At this level credit can be given for records/observations that show fairly minimal awareness of how individuals have coped with activities (or of the appropriateness of activities.)

5.3. To give credit, children should be observed weekly (or almost weekly) in some form. This may take the form of post-it notes recording specific incidents or achievements, rather than formal observations. Records of progress do not need to be updated weekly.

7.3. It may be necessary to ask a question to establish whether this happens (for example, ask staff to provide or show specific examples of observations being used to inform planning).

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Celebrating difference

3.4. Give credit if it is clearly part of usual practice to praise all children in the group regularly

5.4. This indicator relates to celebration of differences among children in the group. To give credit, the discussion must be more specific than what is required for 3.4 (e.g. drawing specific attention to a new skill a child has mastered; a sensitive discussion with the group at lunchtime about why a particular child doesn't eat meat; explaining in an appropriate way why a child with a disability needs to sit on a special chair). At least one example must be observed, and supporting evidence may also be found in display (e.g. children's work displayed with specific comments about their achievements)

7.4. This indicator goes beyond the children in the group to consider the celebration of difference more generally. Observers should check planning for evidence that celebration of difference and capability are specifically planned for (e.g. discussing blindness and deafness as part of a topic on senses). Evidence may also be found in display or in children's records. To give credit, at least one example of explicit planning for celebration of difference should be found in the materials reviewed.

Appendix 6

Joanne Roe-Research Study Information Sheet for Participants

Thank you for considering your involvement in this research study. This information leaflet contains further details on the study to help you in making an informed decision on whether you wish to participate or not. Please also see the relevant consent form for additional information.

Purpose of Study: To investigate child assessment and curriculum planning practices in preschool rooms of Early Childhood Settings to help us to learn about what works well and what might need to be improved. This research project is being carried out to fulfil part of the requirements of a Master's in Education Studies in Marino Institute of Education.

Type of Study: This study will use a case study approach to explore in depth the child assessment and curriculum planning practices of the staff teams in 6 Preschool Rooms.

How the study will be carried out:

The study will comprise of three different elements:

1. Obtaining copies of child assessment and curriculum planning documentation from early years settings for the time period of February 2018
2. Interviewing key staff members in each of the pre-school rooms
3. Talking to the staff team in each of the pre-school rooms to find out more about their views and practices.

Confidentiality& Data Collection/Retention:

Participation in this study is on a voluntary basis and participants have the right to withdraw anytime before 26/03/18. All information received from settings will be anonymised and settings will not be identified in information used in the study. Data will be retained and destroyed appropriately in line with Marino institute ethics guidelines.

Timeline for the Study:

February 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Possible early years settings and participants identified
March 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Information provided to potential participants ▪ Consent obtained from participants (practitioners, parents and children) and returned to researcher by 9th March 2018 ▪ Early Years Settings to gather assessment and planning documentation from the month of February 2018 ▪ Researcher to collect documentation from early years settings by March 9th 2018 ▪ Interviews with participants to take place Week of 12th and week of 19th March ▪ Focus Groups with participants to take place week of 19th and week of 26th March <p><i>*Dates will be agreed with individual settings/participants</i></p>

Appendix 7

 **Child Consent Form**

A person called Joanne is interested in some of the things we do here. To help her we would like to show her some of the things we write down about how we decide about the different kinds of things we do here. I want to make sure you are happy for me to do this. To explain what I am going to do, I want to ask and show you these pictures. Will you mark the happy face if you are happy for me to do this and the sad face if you are not. I will only do what makes you happy. We will also talk to your Mammy/Daddy/Other about it.

Can I show Joanne some of the notes I write down about what you say and do?



Can I show Joanne some of the plans for our activities in here?



Child's Name:	
Date :	
Witnessed by & Signature of Staff member:	
Date:	

Appendix 8

23rd February 2018

Parent/Carer Consent Form

Dear Parent,

My name is Joanne Roe and I am currently studying for a Masters in Early Childhood Education in Marino Institute of Education. I am writing to ask for your help with a research study that investigates how early years' settings assess children and plan the curriculum provided. The research project involves learning more about the process of how this happens.

To help to find out more about this I am asking your child's setting to share copies of:

1. Documentation related to child assessment and curriculum planning for the month of February 2018

This means that the setting might share copies of documents where your child may be named.

When I receive the information I will anonymise it so that your child will not be identifiable in any of the information used as part of this study.

The setting can show you copies of anything they are sending on regarding your child if you wish to see it first.

I hope you will be willing to participate as access to this information will be an important and valuable part of the study. Your child's participation will remain strictly confidential.

We will also be asking your child if they are happy to participate but the information will only be shared if we have parental **and** child consent.

Your participation is completely voluntary and you are welcome to withdraw your consent at any point prior to data analysis (23rd March 2018) –If you wish to do so please let one of the staff members or myself know.

Your participation in this study is greatly appreciated. If you have any questions regarding your participation, please contact:

Joanne

iroemece16@momail.ie

If you agree to participate please complete and sign the statement overleaf

Statement of consent:

Please read the questions below and indicate whether or not you are willing to participate in the study as described.

Do you consent to participate in the study by permitting the early years setting to share observation and planning records regarding your child?

Yes No

Name of Child:	
Parent/ Guardian Signature	
Date:	

This study has been considered from an ethical perspective by the Marino ethics in research committee. Should you have any questions or concerns about the ethical approval or conduct of this study, please contact MERC@mie.ie

Yours Sincerely,

Joanne Roe

Appendix 9**Early Years Practitioner Consent Form**

Name:	Address:
Email Address:	Phone:

	Please Initial Box
I agree that I am over 18 years of age	
I confirm that the research study and my participation in it has been explained to me and I have read and understand the information sheet provided and have had the opportunity to ask questions	
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from the study prior to data analysis (23/03/18), without giving a reason	
I agree to participate in the following elements of the above study	
Providing Documentation Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	
Interview Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	
Focus Group Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	

	Please Tick Box	
	Yes	No
I agree to the interview being audio recorded		
I agree to the focus group being audio recorded		
I wish to receive a copy of the transcript for verification		
I agree to the use of anonymised quotes in publications		

Name of Participant	Date	Signature

Name of Researcher	Date	Signature

Appendix 10

Information on High Scope COR-Child Observation Record

The preschool **Child Observation Record (COR)** is an observation based instrument providing systematic assessment of young children's knowledge and abilities in all areas of development

It is used to assess children from the ages of 1 ½ to 6 years. The infant-toddler COR is for programs serving children between the ages of 6 weeks and 3 years. Because children develop at different rates rather than according to an exact timetable, the two instruments overlap in the age range covered. Having both instruments is especially useful for programs serving children with special needs, who's chronological and developmental ages may differ widely on one or more dimensions.

The COR is organised into six broad categories of child development. Within each category is a list of observation items. These items are based on Key Developmental indicators-KDI's in each content area for the age range covered. There are six categories and 32 items on the preschool COR and six categories and 28 items on the infant-toddler COR. Under each of the items are five developmental levels that describe behaviour ranging from simple (1) to more complex (5)

The COR is an observational tool. Teachers or caregivers spend a few minutes each day writing brief notes (anecdotes) that describe significant episodes of young children's behaviour. They record their notes on printed forms or in computer files and then classify and rate them according to the COR categories, items and levels

COR anecdotes gathered on a child over time and systematically rated according to the COR framework, are the basic units of information that are compiled and analysed to provide a

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comprehensive portrait of each child's developmental gains and of the progress of the group as a whole.

The pre-school child observation record (COR) assesses children's learning in every content area. Each day teachers and caregivers generate brief written descriptions or anecdotes; they objectively describe children's behaviour. They use these notes to evaluate children's development and then plan activities to help individual children and the classroom as a whole progress