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The University of Dublin

Exploring Educator Presence as a Critical Dimension of Relational Pedagogy

An Interpretative Phenomenological Study

by Catriona Hodgers

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Supervisor: Professor Conor Mc Guckin

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis has not been submitted as an exercise for a degree at this or any other university and it is entirely my own work. I confirm that the work has been completed in full compliance with relevant university policies, including the Academic Integrity policy, the Trinity Policy on Good Research Practice, and the guidance on AI and GenAI in Teaching, Learning, Assessment and Research.

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Summary

Methodology: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine Early Years Educators (EYE) using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The participant's narratives were analysed in fidelity with IPA methodology, following the seven IPA stages (Smith et al., 2022, 2009) to develop Personal Experiential Themes (PETS), and Group Experiential Themes (GETS).

Findings: While some EYE used instinctive models of attachment-related concepts, others lacked knowledge of Attachment Theory. Many issues related to working condition challenges were also highlighted

Educational Implications: Knowledge gaps are important because a lack of understanding of attachment concepts may limit the extent to which the newly updated Aistear Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (Government of Ireland, 2024) might fully implement its emphasis on attachment-based slow relational pedagogy for children aged birth-to-three years. Therefore, the findings of this study highlight the need for an audit of training content.

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Abstract

Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969) is regarded as highly influential in psychology, particularly in understanding early social and emotional development. It is considered the cornerstone in Developmental psychology research. Central to the theory is the concept of relational security. However, there is a paucity of research examining the lived experience of attachment for Early Years Educators (EYE) working with birth-to-three (BTT) children, in Early Learning and Care (ELC) settings in the Republic of Ireland. Nine female EYE in the Republic of Ireland provided their lived experience of attachment in ELC settings through semi-structured interviews. Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was applied in seven stages using thematic analysis to develop personal experiential themes (PETS), and group experiential themes (GETS). Despite reporting challenges EYE managed to create loving relationships with the children. Two Group Experiential Themes (GETS) emerged, "Barriers to Attachment" and "Facilitators to Attachment. Nested within these GETS were twelve Personal Experiential Themes (PETS), which revealed that while EYE used instinctive patterns of attachment, some lacked knowledge of Attachment Theory and attachment-related concepts such as "presence". Presence involves the capacity to understand children's behaviour in terms of underlying mental states, through the application of intersubjectivity, attunement, emotional co-regulation, and synchronicity. Attachment-related concepts are not simply psychological theories, they offer a scientific explanation for why relationship-based practice matters, and provide a language for understanding what EYE are actually doing when they build trusting relationships with young children. Without that language EYE may still do excellent work intuitively, but with it they can become more intentional, reflective, and theoretically-informed in their practice, not just knowing that relationships matter, but understanding their key role in supporting socioemotional wellbeing and development in ELC settings. This research was novel as it explored the lived experience of attachment from the perspectives of a sample of the EYE. The original contribution of this study also lies in its conceptualisation of educator presence as a critical dimension of relational pedagogy. The findings demonstrated that the quality of pedagogical relationships is not only notable by the existence of relationships, but by the capacity for emotional presence, attentiveness, attunement, and emotional availability in everyday interactions. By making visible these dimensions of relationships, this study extended existing understandings of relational pedagogy, and offered a framework through which policy, training and practice can better support BTT children in ELC settings. The findings call for an audit of training content to ensure that the importance of relational security in ELC settings is explicitly foregrounded and highlighted as a central organising principle with regard to pedagogy for BTT children.

Chapter One

1.1 Introduction

This thesis presents an exploration of Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1946, 1969/1982, 1973, 1980, 1988), and its links to social-emotional learning (SEL) in children aged birth-to-three (BTT). Attachment can be understood as the close bond between two individuals, which creates relational safety and a felt sense of security (Bowlby, 1969). The study explored these concepts through salient literature, and with a sample of EYE and Early Learning and Care (ELC) managers, working with children aged birth-to-three (BTT) in Early Learning and Care (ELC) settings in the Republic of Ireland.

The centrality of attachment research in the wider literature on ELC, is due to a consensus on the psychobiological foundations of attachment for socioemotional development, otherwise known as Infant Mental Health (IMH) (Henderson, 2011). Whilst the term socioemotional development is used instead of the term mental health (Zeanah et al., 2005), yet both terms describe the same core ideas in relation to attachment relationships. As will be seen, the area of research in attachment has evolved from a theoretical hypothesis to a scientific construct involving contemporary attachment research (Schore, 2016). Contemporary attachment research looks at the influence of attachment on early brain development as the foundations of socio-emotional development (Schore, 2016). The next section will discuss how the study of attachment gained increasing importance in recent decades due to advancements in attachment research.

1.2 The Study of Attachment Early Learning and Care Services

The construct of attachment is defined by the American Psychological Association (APA) as "the emotional bond between a human infant or a young nonhuman animal and its parent figure or caregiver" (APA, 2018). John Bowlby, the original founder of Attachment Theory, thought of attachment as a "physiological control system" (Bowlby, 1982, p.371), that is not only organised by

the central nervous system (CNS), but located "within the CNS" (Bowlby, 1982, p.371). Attachment research suggests that secure attachments for children, are a vital foundation to many developmental processes (Ainsworth, 1991) to avoid attachment disorders (Bowlby, 1988; Prior & Glaser, 2006). Attachment disorders can range from anxiety and depression (Madigan, Atkinson, Laurin & Benoit, 2013) to externalising challenging behaviours (Fearon et al., 2010), and emotional dysregulation (Sroufe et al., 2005).

From a socioemotional perspective, studies emphasise that disruptions in attachment mechanisms in the BTT age, whether though neglect or inconsistent caregiving, are strongly associated with increased risk of attachment disorders (Zeanah & Gleeson, 2015). Additionally, disruptions in attachment can mean challenges in self-regulation (Shanker, 2012). Research therefore underscores how early attachments are not simply relationships, but are involved in neurodevelopmental mechanisms (Schore, 2003a, 2003b, 2016), through which adult-child interactions shape important emotion-regulating systems with lasting effects on brain architecture (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2011, 2006), and attachment styles (Ainsworth et al., 1978). Therefore, a close attachment with attuned adults is vital for socioemotional well-being and attachment mechanisms

According to attachment research, BTT children are in a biologically sensitive period, in which attachment experiences scaffold future mental health through the foundations of emotional regulation and social development (Shanker, 2012; Schore, 2021). However, adult-child relationships for BTT children, were recently brought into sharp focus following a systematic literature review by French and McKenna (2022), indicating that relational curricula for the BTT child attending ELC settings in the Republic of Ireland was not evident, and that there was a need for relational curricula within the concept of relational pedagogy (French and McKenna, 2022). Shortly thereafter, Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework, was updated (Government of Ireland, 2024). The update reflected significant societal, political, and educational developments

since its first original publication in 2009 (Government of Ireland, 2024). Although the update to Aistear was not undertaken specifically to address the invisibility of BTT children, following a public consultation process, the revised framework included a new section entirely devoted to infant and toddler development (NCCA, 2024).

Subsequently, the Building Blocks Extension scheme (Department of Children, Disability and Equality (DCDE), 2025) was introduced to the ELC sector. The Building Blocks Extension Scheme provided funding to deliver additional ELC places for BTT children. The scheme was designed to support community and private providers, and was projected to deliver an additional 1,500 full time places for BTT children (DCDE, 2025).

In 2021, Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) introduced Professional Award-Type Descriptors (PATD) for ELC programmes at Levels 5 and 6. These descriptors underpinned the design of QQI awards, and outlined the knowledge, skills, and competencies required for practice within the sector. In addition to these award-level descriptors, guidance for degree-level qualifications was also provided through the Professional Award Criteria and Guidelines (PACG) (QQI 2021). These further articulated the expectations for professional knowledge and practice, supplemented by the Nurturing Skills policy, the Workforce Plan for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare 2022-2028 (Government of Ireland, 2022). This set out a broader policy vision for the development of a graduate-led workforce across the sector. Within the PADT (QQI, 2019), and the PACG (Department of Education, 2019), there was a clear emphasis on the relational interactions EYE are expected to engage in with children. However, attachment constructs were largely embedded within broader areas, rather than explicitly foregrounded as a central organising principle with regard to BTT children.

With regard to the PADT (QQI, 2019), and the PACG, it is important to distinguish the difference between them. PATD operate at a broad conceptual level, outlining the expected knowledge, skills, and competence associated with professional awards at QQI Level 5 and 6. They provide an

important point of reference for understanding the broad professional expectations associated with ELC qualifications. By contrast, the PACG are more directly concerned with QQI Level 7 and 8 programme design and implementation, offering guidance on how professional standards should be realised within degree level provision at QQI Level 7 and 8. This distinction is important to this research because it allows consideration not only of whether relational constructs are recognised at the level of professional standards, but also how far they are explicitly articulated and translated into programme design and the curriculum for ensuring a relational pedagogy.

1.3 The Research Problem

As part of the entry requirements to work in the ELC sector, all educators must study certain modules at QQI level 5 and 6 (QQI, 2021). Level 5 represents the minimum mandatory qualification required to work with children aged birth to six in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) settings in Ireland, as part of the entry requirement, while QQI Level 6 outlines the areas of study in advanced knowledge and skills.

Taken together, QQI Level 5 and 6 indicate that the qualification landscape is increasingly attentive to professional knowledge and pedagogical competence within the ELC sector. However, although themes such as relationships, emotional development, wellbeing, and responsive caregiving are present with QQI Level 5 and 6, their inclusion does not guarantee an understanding of attachment as a developmental necessity in keeping with contemporary attachment research. Therefore, the critical issue for this research was how attachment knowledge was translated into practice in relation to BTT children.

The key issue was not simply whether attachment-related literature was present in the above qualifications, but whether it was afforded sufficient conceptual visibility and significance in order to meaningfully inform and instruct attachment practices with BTT children. Important constructs, such as attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969, 1988), attunement (Stern, 2010), intersubjectivity (Trevarthen & Aitkin, 2001), and shared effective states (Schore, 2016), are required for relational

pedagogy. This was especially important in relation to BTT children for whom socioemotional development and secure, attuned relationships are foundational. These constructs are theoretically concentrated and conceptually-specified by the research cited above.

Thus, the research problem was not simply whether relational constructs were identifiable within QQI Level 5 and 6, and the Award Criteria and Guidelines for degree-level qualifications for ECEC qualification, but whether such constructs were sufficiently foregrounded to enable translation into practice in meaningful ways that shaped BTT pedagogy.

1.4 The Research Gap

Despite increasing policy emphasis on quality, inclusion, and professionalisation within the ELC sector, there was limited research that examined how attachment concepts were conceptualised, prioritised, and operationalised across qualifications, and indeed whether these translated into relational pedagogy in practice. While relational pedagogy was increasingly recognised as central to quality ELC practice, and qualification frameworks and policy initiatives increasingly emphasised workforce development, there was a lack of critical analysis examining how relational constructs were embedded across qualification levels, and whether they were sufficiently foregrounded in practice. Therefore, the research gap lay not in a lack of relational constructs currently present in training programmes, but whether these constructs were sufficiently foregrounded for attachment practices in ELC settings for BTT children.

1.5 The Research Aims

The purpose of the current programme of research was to explore attachment relationships with EYE and ELC managers in the Republic of Ireland, and understand how they operationalised attachment relationships with BTT children. There was a paucity of research examining how attachment relationships were operationalised within ELC settings in the Republic of Ireland. This aligned with Sheehan, Butler & O'Neill (2024), with research in an Irish context, examining how

early childhood experiences and relational processes are understood and operationalised in ELC settings.

Attachment research has tended to focus mainly on children's attachment styles (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Christie, 2024; Hutchings et al., 2023; Paquette et al., 2024). However, having regard to the aforementioned updated of the Aistear Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (Government of Ireland, 2024), the introduction of the Building Blocks Extension scheme (DCDE, 2025), the current programme of research aimed to focus on the perspectives of adults, in this case, the EYE and ELC manager.

1.6 The Research Objectives

The research objectives were twofold. Firstly, a literature review of attachment research was conducted to explore and apply the "particular attention" (French & McKenna, 2022, p.41), required to understand the attachment needs of BTT children that form elements of a relational pedagogy. By reviewing attachment research, which discussed adult-child micro-dynamics such as intersubjective attunement, responsive interactions, and the emotional presence of the adult, the Literature Review revealed how relational experiences shape early brain and emotional development. The researcher sought to understand why attuned, responsive, affectionate interactions were considered the bedrock of healthy early brain and emotional development (Schore, 2016), and why these interactions created the foundations for attachment. This created a research synthesis, and positioned attachment and socio-emotional development within a neuro-relational (Lebedeva, 2018) framework. This was because as discussed by Lebedeva (2018), all learning occurs within the context of relationships, and these relationships profoundly influence the early developing social brain and attachment mechanisms.

1.7 Early Intervention

Alongside exploring attachment in ELC settings for BTT children, the research aimed to explore the availability of Early Intervention (EI) for BTT children in ELC settings. Access to EI in ELC settings for BTT children was important because the focus of EI research is on early detection and identification of children at risk for developmental and socioemotional difficulties. International studies reviewing EI programmes taking place within ELC settings, found positive results for children's emotional skills and social development, with many positive outcomes for educational attainment, economic status, and health (Cashman et al., 2023; Diamond et al., 2013).

The need for early intervention had also become increasingly significant in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Emerging research, both nationally and internationally highlighted increased developmental vulnerabilities among young children in relation to communication and socio-emotional competences, following pandemic-related restrictions. Irish research had similarly pointed to concerns regarding the impact of disrupted early experiences on children's educational and developmental trajectories ((Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2025; Wang et al., 2022; White et al., 2025). Within this context, the role of early intervention became critically important, specifically in mitigating potential long-term impacts on children socioemotional capacities. Additionally, developmental difficulties in BTT children benefit from early identification for which EYE are in a pivotal position to not only spot developmental delays, but also enable inclusion strategies, and implement full assimilation of children with special needs into mainstream preschools (Hodgers, 2017).

EI is also relevant to this research because of a global move towards inclusion practices, e.g. the Salamanca statement, (1994) and the Dakar Framework for Action (2000). Consequently, the multidimensional and interdisciplinary field of EI is best placed to provide a detailed and nuanced understanding of the holistic development of BTT children (Engle et al., 2011; Guralnick, 2005; Heckman, 2008; Reynolds et al., 2001).

1.8 The Research Question

Following the literature synthesis, the four research questions that emerged were as follows:

Main Research question: How is attachment experienced by a sample of EYE and managers working with children aged birth to three years in early learning and care settings in the Republic of Ireland?

1.8.1 Research Sub-questions

Sub-question 1: What are the barriers to attachment relationships with children aged birth to three years of age in ELC settings?

Sub-question 2: What are the facilitators to attachment relationships with children aged birth to three years of age in ELC settings?

Sub-question 3: How do EYE attachment relationships compare with contemporary attachment literature and how can both co-exist?

The researcher utilised the research questions to empirically explore the lived experience of attachment with EYE and ELC managers. Using interpretative analysis, the researcher then compared the lived experience of attachment in ELC settings to the findings in contemporary attachment research. The next section introduces the methodology used to explore the research questions.

1.9 Methodology

The methodology chosen to answer the research questions was Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith et al., 2009). IPA can be understood as a qualitative research approach, which allows the researcher and research participants to explore the lived experiences of a particular phenomenon, and draw meaning from it (Smith et al., 2022). The centrality of adopting this

approach from the wider choice of methodology, was due to IPA research having the ability to capture the personal and professional experiences of individuals (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). IPA is both a methodology and a method of data collection, with data analysis through a process of seven steps (Smith et al., 2022). From an interpretive analysis of the EYE and ELC manager's views, Two Group Experiential Themes (GET) were identified. These were; "Barriers to Attachment" and "Facilitators of Attachment". These were derived from the Personal Experiential Themes (PETS) which were; "Equality in Identity", "Perceptions of Paperwork versus Presence", "Not Everyone's Time Is Equal", "Early Intervention versus Challenging Behaviour", "Compliance versus Connection", "Temporal Aspects of Practice", "Stress and Cleaning", "Playing with Meaning", "This Is Me", "Intuition versus Intellect", "Affection Beats Adversity", and "Love Is All You Need".

1.10 Contribution of the Study

This research extended knowledge of attachment in the context of ELC settings in the Republic of Ireland, and identified the importance of attachment development for future socioemotional developmental and mental health in very young children. This was important because the findings from the present study, based on a sample of EYE and managers, provided an understanding of the challenges that they face every day, which have the potential to derail their relational capacity and consequently the children's socioemotional well-being. It also contributed to theory by providing an account of attachment which involved children in ELC settings. This study contributed to a limited body of research examining the lived experience of attachment relationships in ELC settings in the Republic of Ireland. The research also contributed to answering the historical debate concerning the issues of whether BTT children receive early education or care in ELC settings. As was seen, in a neuro-relational pedagogy, learning and care are equal. Early learning is care, and early care is also learning for the BTT child, making the role of the EYE working with BTT children unique, in how they combine these individual constructs into one pedagogy.

The present study was also an empirical investigation into the impact of delivering policy objectives on attachment and occupational identity among EYE and ELC managers. Although this is not the first Irish study in this area of ELC research (see Moloney, 2015, 2010), it none-the-less highlights how the same issues exist despite fifteen years of progress in the ELC sector between each study. The contemporary attachment literature identified in this study further supported the idea that "childcare" as highlighted by Whitebook et al., (2014). is a worthy and noble occupation, and that when considered within the context of a neuro-relational pedagogy, there is no greater role than that of the EYE who work with the BTT child. This corroborated the ideas of Rike et al., (2008), who suggested that EYE needed to "look at their work in a different light — not just providing care, but significantly affecting children's brain development" (2008, p.22). Additionally, a neuro-relational framework is also compatible with early "preventive interventions" (Guralnick, 2013, p. 6), and is entirely consistent with the Developmental Systems (DS) approach, as espoused by Guralnick (2005). Guralnick believed relationships in the child's environment to be the starting point of interventions (Guralnick, 2005), and a neuro-relational framework promotes an influential connection, similar to "patterns of interaction" (Guralnick, 2013, p.9), which underpins the DS approach.

1.11 Relevance and Application of the Research

This study also established a qualitative framework for IPA studies in attachment by revealing the lived experience of attachment as a phenomenon. This approach is useful in expanding the literature in the field of IPA research, as the methodology used for this study can be applied to other EYE elsewhere in the world. These findings were of broad use to the educational and scientific communities because the issues identified assist in an understanding of attachment, and the role of the EYE in education and child development. This was important given that, ninety-six per cent of all eligible children aged 2 years 8 months to school-going age, were registered for participation in the ECCE programme in 2024 (Government of Ireland, 2025).

The thesis examined the relationship between contemporary attachment theory and early brain development through a structured literature review and conceptual analysis of attachment literature. This involved tracing the evolution of the concept of attachment from John Bowlby's (1969) seminal Attachment Theory to contemporary interpretations of attachment as a scientific construct (Schore 2003b). These contemporary perspectives involved research on early brain development, examining how these developments intersected with current contemporary understandings of early emotional development. This integrated psychological and neurodevelopmental perspectives through a scholarly and methodological review process. The association between contemporary attachment research and early brain development was thus undertaken through critical engagement with research studies in this area, which led to a synthesis of these perspectives. This field of research lies at the intersection of developmental psychology and developmental neuroscience for the broad use and advance of EI programmes, EI teaching, EYE teacher training, and the field of early years' mental health.

1.12 Limitations of the Research

The study findings need to be interpreted cautiously having regard to the research methods and methodology. This is because in IPA analysis, the researcher does not generalise, but rather maintains the principle of context (Yardley, 2000). Being limited to seven EYE and two ELC managers means that this study lacks generalisability, and the transferability of the findings is subject to methodological limitations. Another limitation was that the sample of EYE and ELC managers was representative of Irish ethnicity. This limited the cultural composition of the sample, as all nine participants were from Irish backgrounds. As attachment is considered a culturally-mediated construct (Tronick, 2009), this homogeneity may limit the transferability of the findings by being culturally homogenous. The study was also limited by the responses relating to staying in fidelity with IPA research, these were personal narratives, and were therefore potentially susceptible to recall bias.

1.13 Structure of the Thesis

The following section is a breakdown of the structure of the thesis, and a brief overview of the chapters to come. Chapter Two presents a critical review of the pertinent policy and practice literatures in relation to the ELC sector in the Republic of Ireland. This chapter explains the terms "pedagogy" "relational pedagogy" "special educational needs (SEN)" "early intervention" (EI), Early Years Educator (EYE), and Early Learning and Care (ELC).

Chapter Two Section One provides context and understanding of ELC settings the Republic of Ireland. Whilst subsequent chapters critically review the theoretical literature (Chapter Three) and empirical research (Chapter Four), chapter two critically reflects on issues within the sector that pose a risk to implementing a slow relational pedagogy in line with the updated Aistear Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (Government of Ireland, 2024). Such a focus on the challenges in ELC is essential to understanding the challenges that face EYE as they care for and educate BTT children. This provides the urgency for a focus on a slow relational pedagogy for BTT in the ELC sector. This is followed by a discussion of funding streams, and the current political landscape for ELC. The chapter also reviews the early education professional workforce, with a look at training and the preparation for working with BTT children.

Chapter Two Section Two also introduces the idea of a neuro-relational pedagogy (Lebedeva, 2018). This idea calls for a focus on attachment and early brain development as key components of a BTT pedagogy, that is social and emotional in its approach.

In Chapter Three, The Theoretical Framework sets out Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model of human development. Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) iteration of the bioecological model of human development was utilised. This was particularly relevant to the study as the bioecological model of human development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) demonstrated the importance of relationships and interpersonal interactions in the context of early attachments. The focus was on

exploring the “a priori” research question, which asked; What are the developmental processes of attachment and what behavioural and environmental factors influence these processes and impact socioemotional learning and development in children aged birth-to-three?

In Chapter Four, the Literature Review is divided into two sections, each section critically evaluated the contribution made to attachment research by seminal and contemporary theorists. Section One set out the foundations of Attachment Theory (Bowlby 1942, 1969/1982, 1973, 1980, 1988), to provide an exploration of the theory. Section Two presented new insights into contemporary attachment research to date. The review of the literature observed the progression of attachment theory, from a theoretical construct to links with social and emotional development in early childhood. The Chapter identified key studies that influenced the development of attachment from theoretical speculation to a biological construct (Schore, 2016). The research on attachment, including arguments against the notion of attachment, are discussed.

In Section Two of Chapter Four, the role of attachment in socioemotional development for infants and toddlers is discussed. This chapter synthesises research gathered from the fields of developmental psychology, developmental social neuroscience, affective neuroscience, developmental neurobiology, and child psychotherapy (Play Therapy) research. In addition, research from the field of Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health (IECMH) is also reviewed, as pertinent to the development of secure attachment in childhood. The chapter evaluated the contributions made by the psychological, neurobiological, neuroscientific, and developmental studies. It examined links between attachment and early brain development, and explored the relevance of this approach for a relational pedagogy in ELC and EI settings.

This research synthesis informed the development of the research questions in terms of the practice of attachment relationships, and social emotional learning for BTT children. The conclusions drawn from the literature synthesis provided the researcher with justification for the

exploration of attachment relationships with a sample of Irish EYE and Early Learning and Care (ELC) managers in the Republic of Ireland.

In Chapter Five, Methodology, the literature from Chapters Two, Three, and Four inform the formulation of the research problem and the development of the research questions. This in turn influenced the research methodology. The methodology of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith et al., 2009), was the approach adopted to answer the research questions.

Chapter Five charts the development of the research questions. It also documents the search for an appropriate methodology for exploring attachment relationships with a sample of Irish EYE and ELC managers. An examination of other methodological approaches which were considered for the research design are also presented. Ethical issues and the process of ethical approval for the study is also presented. The chapter includes information about the participants, the recruitment process, and the procedure of the interviews. Following this, a discussion on conducting Interpretive Phenomenology interviews was presented. Details are provided about the stages of planning and development of the interview schedule, conducting the pilot study, identification of the themes drawn from the EYE, and development of overarching themes from interpreting the lived experience of attachment practices with BTT children.

Chapter Six set out the findings from the IPA interviews. The two Group Experiential Themes (GET) that were identified, were “Barriers to Attachment” and Facilitators of Attachment”. These were derived from the Personal Experiential Themes (PETS) which were; “Equality in Identity”, “Perceptions of Paperwork versus Presence”, “Not Everyone’s Time Is Equal”, “Early Intervention versus Challenging Behaviour”, “Compliance versus Connection”, “Temporal Aspects of Practice”, “Stress and Cleaning”, “Playing with Meaning”, “This Is Me”, “Intuition versus Intellect”, “Affection Beats Adversity”, and “Love Is All You Need”. In Chapter Seven, the findings are discussed

Chapter Seven discussed the findings in relation to the research questions, theory, and previous literature, with recommendations for policy and practice explored. The strengths and limitations of

the research are outlined. The thesis concludes with an outline of the practical implications of the findings and recommendations for future research.

The next section of this chapter provides the researcher's position and identity in the research project. The research addresses a topic that has personal meaning for the researcher, therefore the section that follows presents a reflexive account of the researcher's personal stance and positionality in the research.

1.14 Researcher's Identity and Positionality in the Research

Positionality in research is derived from a person's beliefs and views about the world, which reflects attitudes and concerns about what they deem to be important, in matters such as gender, race, politics, and experiences (Berger, 2013). These views can be conscious or unconscious at times, as they are related to the researcher's personal stance and multiple experiences. To help openly show reflexivity, Savin-Baden and Major (2013), discuss the researcher's personal stance as a conscious acknowledgment of their position in the research, and reflexivity as an exercise in self-awareness. According to Savin-Baden and Major (2013, p.144), reflexivity is defined as "an understanding of the knowledge-making enterprise, including a consideration of the subjective, institutional, social and political processes whereby research is conducted, and knowledge is produced." As a concept, reflexivity is considered to be part of the researcher perception of themselves, and of the world. It is used in qualitative research as a method to "legitimize, validate, and question research practices and representations" (Pillow, 2003, p. 1). Holmes describes how researchers should "acknowledge and disclose their selves in their research" (2020, p. 3) to make known their positionality.

Positionality is important to this research because it helps bring into conscious awareness issues that could be potential sources of bias (Pillow, 2003). This researcher understands her responsibility to identify past interactions with others that played a role in her life, and have brought her to conduct this research.

The researcher's reflections on positionality prompted deep self-awareness. This requirement called for an exploration and self-examination of the researcher's personal experiences, views, and position on certain matters, and a reflection on how these may directly or indirectly have influenced researcher. Therefore, what follows is a self-assessment written in the first-person singular of the researchers' position in three main areas of her life (i) the researcher as a person, (ii) the researcher as an academic, and (iii) the researcher as a professional. These disclosures of positionality informed the researcher's open reflexivity, in order to assert and make aware the influences, potential or otherwise, on the design and execution of the research, either directly or indirectly, and the measures taken, such as the reflexive diary to mitigate bias. To begin, the researcher's reflexivity begins with the researcher as a person.

1.14.1 The Researcher as a Person

I grew up in the 1970's in Dundalk, Co. Louth, Ireland and the 6th child in a family of seven girls and one boy. My mother was a stay-at-home-mum, but before she married, she was a talented and beautiful amateur dramatics actor and amateur opera singer. My father Michael was an extraordinary character, who quietly worked in Clarkes Shoe Factory, by day, but by night, taught with the local Civil Defence. He taught apprentice Firemen and prepared them for the Fireman's Exam. This meant they could emigrate to England to sit and pass the Fireman's Exam, and find work as a Fireman in England, at a time when unemployment in Ireland was high. My father volunteered with the Civil Defence for many years in this role, and his memory and dedication to these men is still honoured in Dundalk Fire Station. In short, my early years were spent with loving parents, and a best friend who lived across the road, in the quiet suburbs of Dundalk where to my memory, we really did have endless summers.

This pleasant existence was shattered when I was ten, with the sudden passing of my pregnant mother on Christmas night in 1978, from a pulmonary embolism. In an instant her life, and the life of our unborn sibling ended, and our lives changed forever. My father, always stoic, held the family

together and made us feel safe in what felt at times like a randomly cruel world. He was then, and continued to be, a walking, talking “secure base” of attachment for which I am eternally grateful. As an attachment figure, he navigated his children through grief with patience, kindness and a confidence that sent a clear message that everything would be okay. I’m convinced this is where I developed my interest in human behaviour, and I’m sure if given the educational opportunities that I have been given in my educational journey, that he would have made a brilliant child psychotherapist.

My Dad was a typical father of his generation. He didn’t say “I love you” because we confidently knew that he did, and we never needed or thought to ask. Dad was an ardent advocate of many things, namely human rights and social justice. Our many chats on this topic taught me to call out unfairness in the world wherever I saw it. My recognition of inequality is the reason for my research, and is a position that I declare openly as prompting me to want to make a change in the ELC sector, as far back as the 1980’s.

After my mother’s passing, my Dad took early retirement from the shoe factory and became a stay-at-home dad, supported by my older sister Bernadette, and his own sisters. My siblings and I were surrounded by “a village” of aunts, uncles, and cousins on both sides of the family. I will forever be in their debt for the love, laughter, holidays, and secure attachments they gave us. I think my experience of loving family can contribute one explanation to Bowlby’s question of how far the loss of An attachment figure can be eased if the family as a whole offers a secure base (Bowlby, 1973, 1988).

My father made many sacrifices to give us a very joyful, stable, but by societal norms of the day, no means “normal” childhood. In taking on the role of a stay-at-home dad in 1970’s Ireland, he challenged the gendered views of the traditional father in Ireland at that time, particularly for men doing what was largely considered women’s work (Ferry, 2015, in Ren & Mc Guckin, 2022),. As one

of seven girls, I had strong role models in him, my older sisters, and my aunts, and I was encouraged to be anything I wanted to be, as long as it involved a job in the local factory.

Growing up I always had an interest in science, which I picked up from reading my father's old books. I still own some of those same books today. The seeds of my interest in psychology were also planted around this time. As a child, I loved spending blissful Saturday mornings, eating Rice Krispies in my pyjamas with my younger sister watching psychology lectures on the Open University programmes. One Saturday morning, my father sat with us for a while, and together we watched a film vignette on child psychology from the Open University. This was about handling a toddler having a temper tantrum. After the programme ended, my dad asked myself and my younger sister what we would do in that particular situation, and how we would have managed the toddlers' tantrum. My sister replied jokingly that she would spank the bold child, and we laughed at her no-nonsense approach. However, because the vignette centered on the child not wanting to put his coat on, going outside in winter, I replied that I would wait until we were outside, let the child decide if he was cold first, and that I was confident he would want his coat then. Immediately my dad answered with a large thoughtful smile, and said that one day I would become "a brilliant child psychologist". I didn't know what that meant at the time, but in that moment a seed was sown, and it set me on the lifelong goal to study and understand psychology and behaviour. A love for understanding human development was ignited in that instance, and it drives my research to this day.

I met partner in 1984, and we had our first child in 1990. Two more children followed after that. As a mother, I chose to be a stay-at-home mum, and I enjoyed every minute watching my children grow into the wonderful men they have become.

On reflection, I am consciously aware of how my interest in social justice, child psychology, and child development has led me to the current topic being investigated. I acknowledge my past, and how this could be both advantageous and disadvantageous to the research project. Laugharne and

Baird (2009, p.2), refer to this position as an “insider researcher”, and advise the researcher to fully acknowledge and be transparent in their position. Therefore, the purpose of declaring these personal events is to firstly create my own awareness of my positionality in the research, and then to be fully transparent in setting that out for others to judge. In setting out transparency for others, the researcher as an academic follows in the next section.

1.14.2 The Researcher as an Academic

I enjoyed school, however my dream to become a child psychologist would not take a linear route. I had major disruptions to my education which forever changed the path I was on. The biggest disruption happened the same year my mother passed away. It was agreed by those who loved me that I should repeat that year. This single decision, although very well meant, was to have an unforeseen effect on my education as being separated from my best friend strained my coping mechanisms, and the loss of mum I was already grappling with.

As time went on, 5th class and 6th class rolled around, I found that I was also unable to take in or retain some of the information and have since learned that this is a symptom of attachment loss, whereby the brain enters into a freeze state which can exist over many years (Porges, 2022). Whilst I still attended school every day, the lack of focus, the disengagement, loss of my closest friendships, and grief left overwhelmed my ability to learn. I disengaged from school entirely and eventually left school following 5th year in secondary school. This was my first lived experience of why social and emotional well-being in education is so important, and why I champion the stellar work by researcher’s Mc Guckin and Lynam for their research on supporting student bereavement in schools. My experience of events unrelated to education taught me to tread carefully in children’s educational worlds.

In 1988, shortly after leaving secondary school early I discovered the local Adult Education Centre ran a course called “Introduction to Child Psychology”. This course brought me back to education

but on a different, and again non-linear path. As part of the course, I read a book called “Dibbs in Search of Self: Personality Development in Play Therapy” (Axline, 1964). I loved the gentle principles and the methodology of Play Therapy, and its rights-based view of children. Whilst I have since come to agree with Jackson (2010), that the child in this case study was in fact exhibiting signs of being on the autistic spectrum, (as opposed to having a lack of ability to express emotions), I can accept that very little was known neurologically about autism at the time of Axlines’ writing. I believe that this case study can still shine a light on the benefit of play therapy for children on the autistic spectrum.

When exam time came, I was an award winner in my psychology class, and I prepared an application for University to continue studying psychology. However, on the day after my results came out, I discovered I was pregnant. Unable to commit financially to a psychology degree, I put my application on hold, and found a job in a crèche near the flat I was sharing with my partner. This put any thoughts of a career in psychology to the back of my mind until 2006, when I applied to re-start psychology studies with the Open University. However, faith struck again, and I had to drop out in 2009, due to the global recession. Both my partner and I lost both our businesses, and without my business I was not able to pay for the final year or exam fees and had no option but to put education on hold again. In the end, my academic career didn’t begin until I was forty-two. After my business closed, I went back to full time education as a mature student, starting with my Leaving Certificate in 2010. I returned to the same adult education centre where I had studied child psychology in 1988. When I took my seat on that first morning, I did not know that I was about to embark on an education journey.

Being a mature student was a positive, healing, and confidence-building experience. I went on to complete a BA (Hons) in Early Childhood Studies in Dundalk Institute of Technology and an M.Ed. in Early Intervention in Trinity College Dublin, under the excellent supervision of Dr Miriam Twomey and Professor Conor Mc Guckin.

Following my master's degree, in thinking about conducting Ph.D. research, I realised that I wanted to explore developmental psychology, and I chose attachment as my specialist subject. I proposed a programme of research in this area and began investigating this topic. It soon became apparent from reviewing the literature that, while attachment related and socio-emotional concepts were identifiable within existing ELC training frameworks, including QQI level 5 and level 6 qualifications, these concepts were not sufficiently foregrounded, integrated, or explicitly translated into attachment informed relational practice for birth-to-three (BTT) children. Therefore, the lived experience of attachment and attachment relationships in ELC settings became an important focus of my Ph.D. research.

My Ph.D. research benefited from my personal experience. My observations as a practitioner-researcher on the issues of children's emotional well-being in education led me back to psychology in education as a researcher, and have helped me explore ways to connect research and teaching practice to socioemotional well-being in education. My professional experience brought me closer to being an advocate for emotional health in schools. I have stayed in this field and have become a member, researcher, writer, and presenter on the topic of mental health in education. My accomplishments in this field to date include presenting findings to the World Association of Infant Mental Health (WAIMH), the Prevention and Early Intervention Network (PEIN), and the Inclusion in Education and Society research group in Trinity College (IES).

1.14.3 The Researcher as a Professional

My professional career as an early year's educator (EYE) began in 1986. Over the years that followed I noticed children's behaviour patterns. Furthermore, whilst these behaviour were a normal developmental stage, some colleagues could misinterpret these as challenging behaviours, and before long the child would be pigeonholed as "challenging". Like Delahooke (2017), it was also a regular occurrence for me to learn that particular children had gone on to struggle in school, due to being pigeon-holed.

I remained in the ELC sector for many years. Then shortly after I had my third son in 1999, I became a registered childminder. I employed two staff assistants, and together we ran a preschool service from my home. Watching toddlers learn was nothing short of a marvel, and this stage in child development brought me joy. I became known for my mantra to "separate the child from the behaviour" when I supported parents or my staff to understand their behaviour. This was a fascinating and indeed privileged time in my life, and I continued to learn from the children for a further eight years.

The global downturn of 2008 caused great difficulty in sustaining a viable childcare business, and eventually in October 2009, I had to take the difficult decision to close my business. The following month, my partner's business closed, and we found ourselves in a similar position to a lot of people around that time, so as mentioned above I then returned to education.

Whilst not linear, I believe my experience of these matters and my professional career to date has brought me to academia. The ELC sector has given me a first-hand education in child psychology and behaviour, observing and truly understanding children's psychological development in their natural environment. Across these age groups my observations and life experiences have led me to an understanding of precisely why adult-child interactions are important in education.

In addition, as an Early Intervention Specialist I now utilise my experience and additional qualifications in therapeutic play, to work with toddlers presenting with developmental delay. I work with children with SEND/D, and write Early Intervention programmes which address areas of their education and socioemotional well-being. The programmes work well as evidenced by the results.

Whilst I cannot eradicate my past, and I cannot completely eradicate any potential influence from my life experiences. However, I am very aware of the need to openly declare these life events in an effort to consciously mitigate any bias in my research. Above all, I have become aware of how my personal, academic, and professional journey has provided me with an understanding of human behaviour. I have used my academic research and seasoned experience to become a good early intervention practitioner, a believer in inclusive education and a life-long learner. My academic journey so far, like many other students, has been fraught with obstacles. There have also been many other things in between, including a broken ankle, my son's wedding, and the sudden passing of my beautiful sister Bernadette, to whom me and my siblings owe so much for giving us a devoted parent figure.

On reflection, I'm grateful for the non-linear journey, and the learning it has brought into my life, including Ph.D. research. I am now a lecturer and a dissertation supervisor who, owing to these experiences, puts student well-being above all other academic pursuits. I realise that I had to take this route in order to become the teacher-researcher, and the early intervention practitioner that I am. I have accepted these life events, and they are part of who I am, and what I research. With Professor Conor Mc Guckin as my research supervisor, and his unstinting confidence in me, I now explore the psychology of education from lived experience.

1.15 The "A Priori" Research Question

Because of my background working with children and the M.Ed. in Early Intervention, when it came to Ph.D. research, I had an interest in exploring children's emotional well-being in education. However, to propose a programme of research, an "a priori" research question was first developed. The following section sets out the "a priori" research question that proposed a programme of research. The "a priori" question reflected a desire to explore the usefulness of Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969). Therefore, the interest that initially guided the research project asked;

"What are the developmental processes of attachment and what behavioural and environmental factors influence these processes and impact socioemotional learning and development in children aged birth-to-three?"

In asking this question, careful attention was directed to how the "a priori" research question initially guided the research, and this would be continually applied through to reviewing the literature. The research project quickly shifted from a personal interest in attachment, to the literature on the social development and emotional well-being of very young children, those aged birth-to-three years (BTT), in the Early Learning and Care (ELC) sector in the Republic of Ireland. The research questions were periodically revisited as the literature review developed, so as to ascertain whether they needed to become more nuanced and focused in response to the literature. The next chapter first contextualises the study by explaining why Early Learning and Care (ELC) in the Republic of Ireland was chosen as a context for the research

Chapter Two: The Contextual Review

2.1 Section One: Introduction to the Early Learning and Care Sector

The focus of this Chapter is on the concepts and terminologies in relation to the Early Learning and Care (ELC) sector in the Republic of Ireland. ELC in Republic of Ireland can be understood as a child-centered and play-based system of provision that integrates care and learning within a developmental framework, informed by pedagogical principles. ELC is underpinned by Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (Government of Ireland, 2024) and by Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (Department of Education and Skills, 2017). While the sector has a clear educational function, its position within the broader Irish education system remains contested (Moloney, 2015). ELC has historically experienced a longstanding critique concerning professional recognition afforded to the workforce (Moloney, 2010; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, (OECD) 2021). The relevance of this has implications not only for workforce status, conditions, and identity, but also for pedagogical and relational work.

This chapter provides a necessary contextual background of ELC, whilst later chapters critically review the theoretical framework (Chapter Three) and literature review (Chapter Four). This chapter also reviews training for the ELC workforce, with a look at the Professional Award-type Descriptors (PATD) (DES, 2019), and the Professional Award Criteria and Guidelines (PACG) (Department of Children, Disability and Equality, 2020), for programmes at levels 7 and 8 on the QQI framework. These documents form part of the broader qualification structure relevant to workforce development.

Section One of this chapter gives a general overview of the ELC sector in Ireland as a whole, including policy and the demographics. Sections Two and Three discuss pedagogy and practice. To begin, Section One briefly looks at the establishment and expansion of the ELC sector in the Republic of Ireland.

2.1.2 Early Education

In the late 1990's the development of Ready to Learn, the White Paper on Early Childhood Education (Department of Education and Science, 1999), paved the way for much change and reform. This led the sector from a time when the Irish Government considered early education as childcare and a family matter (Wolfe et al., 2013), into a political discourse on children's rights (United Nations, 1989), and eventually human capital investment (Heckman, 2006). The publication of Ready to Learn, marked an important turning point in the development of policy in the Republic of Ireland. Rather than simply expand provision, the White Paper positioned early childhood as a significant period for learning and development, and recommended the development of national curricular guidance to support quality practice across the sector.

"Ready To Learn" set out a broad vison for children from birth to six years of age, encompassing areas such as quality provision, parental support, and the need for greater policy coherence. In doing so, it helped lay the groundwork for later policy developments, including the emergence of a more play-based approach to learning (Department of Education and Science, 1999). This direction was further developed through the National Children's Strategy, Our Children - Their Lives (Department of Health and Children, 2000), which built on the foundations of Ready to Learn, and reflected a growing emphasis on children's rights. Developed in the context of Ireland's obligations under the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (United Nations, 1989), the Strategy sought to place children at the centre of national policy, and to recognise that children's well-being, development, and participation were matters of public concern (Department of Health and Children, 2000).

This wider rights-based policy context was important as it provided the background on which contemporary understandings of children in the Irish ELC sector had evolved. Significant capital investment in ELC began with the Equal Childcare Programme (Department of Justice, Equality and

Law Reform (DJELR) (2000), and the National Childcare Investment Programme (Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, 2006).

In the space of ten years, government investment in what is now termed Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School-Age Childcare (SAC), increased from €270 million in 2015, to €1.37 billion in 2025 (Department of Children, Disability and Equality, 2025). The use of the term ELC, became more firmly embedded in Irish policy discourse following the publication of First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019–2028 (Government of Ireland, 2018). This reflected a broad policy shift away from the narrow term "childcare" towards one that placed greater emphasis on learning, development, and quality provision.

Historically, the majority of government investment did not directly prioritise the birth-to-three cohort to the same extent as preschool aged children (OECD, 2020). However, more recently the Government expanded provision of ELC places for children aged birth-to-three (BTT), under the Building Blocks Extension Scheme (DCDE, 2025). Funding for this provision was part of the new Core Funding model (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. (2024) and was ahead of the 1 billion investment promised by 2028 in "First 5", the Whole-of-Government Policy Strategy for Babies, Young Children and Their families (2019-2028) (Government of Ireland, 2019), which the following page will discuss within a policy context.

2.1.3 Policy

Explored in this section will be relevant policy areas, including the demographics of ELC provision, governance of European Union (EU) funding, and the Early Childhood Care and Education Programme. The inspection process and the Government's new Core Funding model will also be reviewed, alongside First 5, the Government's Overarching Strategy for Babies, Young Children, and their Families (Government of Ireland, 2019). The policy context is important to the present study

as it helps situate the broader structural and environmental factors that may shape attachment processes.

2.1.4 The History and Expansion of Early Childhood Care and Education

ELC in the Republic of Ireland exists within a legislative framework that operates under the Childcare Act (1991), and which provides the statutory basis for the regulation of the early year services. This legislative foundation is operationalised through the Early Years Services Regulations (2016), which sets out the requirements for service provision including, registration, inspection, staff-child ratios, and quality standards.

In addition to this regulatory framework, the ELC sector has undergone significant expansion and reform over the past two decades, shaped by increasing government investment and policy development. A key contemporary policy in this regard is First 5, the Government's Overarching Strategy for Babies, Young Children, and their Families (Government of Ireland, 2019). First 5 sets out a whole-of-government approach to improving outcomes for children, with a particular focus on access, affordability, quality, and workforce development within the sector. Within this policy context, a number of initiatives have contributed to the expansion of service provision, including the Early Childhood Care and Education Programme (Department of Children, Disability and Equality, 2019), and more recent funding models such as Core Funding (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. (2024).

2.1.5 Different Types of Services

The demographics of ELC provision in the Republic of Ireland vary in terms of structure and age range, going from birth to six years of age. In considering the structure and funding underpinning the sector, it is important to recognise the role of Pobal, an organisation established in 1992 by the Irish government to support the financial administration and governance of European Union (EU) funding allocations (Pobal, 2025). Pobal measures the demographics of the ELC sector by publishing

the Annual Early Years Sector Profile Survey (Pobal, 2025). According to the latest figures, services range from privately run enterprises, to large community services, preschool, and after-school classes in mainstream education (Pobal, 2025). Pobal defines community services as those on a not-for-profit basis, whereas private enterprises are run for profit by private providers (Pobal, 2025).

Additionally, there are approximately 37,866 early education staff, including managers, but excluding ancillary staff, working in ELC services in the Republic of Ireland. Of this figure, 95.36% of staff are female, with 4.26% making up the male cohort with 0.38% identifying as other. In addition, 8,329 educators have been in the sector for on average two years with 7,479 staff working in the sector for between five and ten years.

With relevance to Capital Funding, it is important to distinguish the different forms of government funding within the Irish ELC sector. In this regard, capital funding is directed towards the expansion or improvement of ELC infrastructure, including the creation of new places, and the enhancement of service facilities. This differs from programme funding which supports the ongoing delivery of provision in the operation of government-funded schemes.

Under the Childcare Act (1991) (Early Years' Services) (Amendment) Regulations (2016), early years' provision in Ireland is also structured across a number of distinct models for registered services. There are currently 4,826 ELC services across the country, of which, 75% are privately run services. The remaining 25% operate community-based services. These include, sessional services, and full daycare services. The distinction between these two categories are primarily based on the duration and type of service provided. For example, a sessional service offers a planned programme for no more than 3.5 hours per session, while full day care refers to the provision of more than 3.5 hours per day. These distinctions are important in the context of the present study because the structure, duration, and rhythm of children's attendance may shape the relational conditions in which attachment processes are experienced with ELC settings. The next section will discuss the developmentally different needs of ELC classrooms and BTT children.

2.1.6 Developmentally Different Early Learning and Care Practice

In the Irish context, ELC has become a significant component of family life. Its importance now extends beyond childcare, to supporting parental employment and children's early learning and development (Government of Ireland, 2019). For many families, participation in ELC is shaped by a combination of economic necessity, work or study commitments, and the limited availability of informal care (McGinnity, Murray, & McNally, 2013). State-supported provision has expanded in recent years to the extent that ELC is not only a matter of childcare provision, but also is a broader, social, developmental, and policy issue (McGinnity, Murray, & McNally, 2013). Underpinned by Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (Government of Ireland, 2029), and Síolta the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) 2025), the ECCE programme has evolved beyond providing access, to being a central component of the early education infrastructure in the Republic Ireland, with implications for participation, inclusion, quality, and the structuring of early care and education. This is largely attributed to the ECCE programme introduced in 2010, which provides children with fifteen hours per week of free early education spanning over a 38-week year (DCYA, 2017). In September 2018, this was expanded to two years of free pre-school (DCYA, 2018).

Government policy in Ireland has increasingly sought to improve quality in the ELC sector through a combination of regulatory reform, curriculum and quality frameworks, inspection processes, and professional support initiatives. This has included development of Síolta, the aforementioned National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (Department of Education and Skills, 2017), and Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (Government of Ireland, 2024) and the National Childcare Scheme (NCS), which provides financial support for childcare, covering children aged 24 weeks to 15 years (National Childcare Scheme, 2025). In addition to these frameworks, quality assurance has also been strengthened through both Tusla Early Years Inspections (Tusla, 2018), and the education-focused inspections from the Department of

Education (Department of Education and Youth, 2025). These measures reflect an increasing policy emphasis on accountability, pedagogy, and practice within the sector.

However, these policies have exacerbated fragmentation with regard to childcare and education. Unfortunately, fragmentation has characterised the ELC sector from its inception, dividing BTT children from pre-school age children. Subsequently a split system has emerged regarding childcare provision and early education (Van Laere et al., 2013). The split system divide distinguishes the role of the "teacher" from the less paid, and perceived lower status of the EYE who work with BTT children (Core Report, 2013). While the ECCE programme strengthened the educational aspect of ELC, provision for BTT children have traditionally been positioned within a childcare discourse. AS a result, different age groups have been associated with different purposes and different professional identities. This has inadvertently contributed to a stratified workforce, in which work with preschool children is more readily associated with education, teaching, and school readiness while work with babies and toddlers (BTT children), is frequently understood as care provision. Such distinctions are increasingly challenged within contemporary early childhood research which emphasises that care and education are inseparable dimensions of children's development and learning. ECCE and NCS operate within this split, and in some respects have continued to reflect this distinction between care and education. From this perspective, the continued separation of care and education risks obscuring the pedagogical significance of relational interactions that are central to BTT practice. This divide is also further reflected in the wider governance of the sector, where care and education have not been fully integrated into one single idea or government department. It is also reflected in the inspection process, which the next section will discuss.

2.1.7 Early Years Education Inspections

ELC settings in Ireland are regulated by Tusla, the Child and Family Agency. Tusla Early Years (Pre School) Inspectorate have responsibility to ensure compliance with the Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations (2016). The underpinning premise of Tusla's regulatory inspections are to strengthen the regulation, standardisation, and safeguarding of early years' provision, and move the sector towards a formal standardised model. Regulations are recognised as a necessary way to ensure children's rights, needs, and safety are being met (Moloney, 2023).

In addition to Tusla inspections, ELC inspections are carried out by the Inspectorate of the Department of Education (DE), in accordance with the Education Act (1981). Early Years Education Inspections are carried out in line with section 13(3)b of the Education Act, 1981 (DE, 2025). While Tusla inspections are primarily concerned with compliance, safeguarding, and welfare, the education-focused inspections evaluate the quality of children's learning and development, the processes which support children's learning and development, children's achievements, and the quality of management and leadership. Inspections of pedagogical provision across these four areas of practice have expanded recently to oversee provision for BTT children (Department of Education, 2025). The Early Years Education Inspection (EYEI) evaluate the educational experiences of babies and young children in ELC settings by following the Early Years Education Inspection (EYEI) Quality Framework (Department of Education, 2025).

ELC inspections are important to the current programme of research. This is because despite the top-down approaches (Howard et al., 2024), of the Early Years Education Inspection Quality Framework (Department of Education, 2025), Tusla-led inspections, and public reports, the sector still struggles with quality practices for BTT children. The top-down expression refers to quality practices that are developed at policy level and filtered down to practice on the ground, rather than

bottom-up approaches, which emerge from EYE own understanding and enactment of quality practices (Howard et al., 2024).

Failure of top-down approaches was evidenced when abusive practices were identified in a televised documentary in 2013, by a team of undercover journalists investigating ELC settings in the Republic of Ireland (Hillard, 2013). A subsequent second documentary aired in 2018, then uncovered verbal and emotional abuse directed at toddlers (Williams, 2018). While the documentary prompted scrutiny of the sector, academics argued that these revelations should not be interpreted as isolated incidents, but rather as symptoms of broader structural weaknesses within Irish ECCE, including limitations in regulation, inspection, workforce conditions and accountability (Moloney, 2014). It is important to remember that the 2013 documentary pre-dated many of the reforms discussed above which were later introduced in response to these quality concerns, including the implementation of the Early Years Services Regulations, (2016), the establishment of the EYEI, and the QQI Level 5 minimum qualification, all of which were absent or in the early stages of development at the time of the second documentary. As can be seen, Government policy in the ELC sector in Ireland seeks to improve quality. As part of this discussion, the next section will look at the new Core Funding Model.

2.1.8 The Core Funding Model

Core funding was introduced as direct government investment ELC and School-Age-Children (SAC) service providers, following the recommendations of the Expert Group report "Partnership for the Public Good (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY, 2022). As one component of the broader Together for Better funding model (Department of Children, Disability and Equality, (DCDE) 2022), Core Funding was designed to support a new partnership between public and private ELC providers, and to address longstanding sectoral concerns related to affordability, quality, and sustainability.

In practical terms, the scheme provides funding towards providers operating costs, in return for compliance with specified conditions including fee management, participating in the Annual Early Years Sector Profile, financial transparency, and implementation of practice frameworks (Department of Children, Disability and Equality, 2022). The scheme also includes targeted mechanisms intended to support quality improvement, such as premiums for graduates, and funding linked to workforce capacity, thereby reflecting a policy shift in which questions of quality are addressed not only through inspection and curriculum reform, but also through public funding. While Core Funding reflected a significant policy shift in public governance of the sector, questions still remained as to the extent to which funding alone could address stability or equal rights for the ELC workforce (DCEDIY, 2025; Simmie & Murphy, 2023; Urban, 2024). In response to these pressures, the new Government's attention to workforce reform has intensified. This culminated in the Joint Labour Committee agreement for an Employment Regulation Orders (ERO) (Joint Labour Committee, 2024), which the next section will discuss.

2.1.9 The Employment Regulation Order

In response to concerns that were increasingly voiced, Government reform in this period took place through a change in Government and evolving departmental responsibility. Subsequently, a change in name reflected departmental restructuring and further reform. As discussed, the ELC sector had been marked by low pay and weak employment protections, and long-standing criticisms of government policy in relation to pay, conditions, and professional recognition, within the sector. These reforms are better understood in the context of these pressures, where Government attention to workforce reform intensified and culminated in the Joint Labour Committee agreement for an Employment Regulation Orders (ERO) (Joint Labour Committee, 2024).

The ERO established minimum rates of pay and employment conditions for ELC workforce through statutory instruments (Joint Labour Committee, 2024) as negotiated between the Services,

Industrial, Professional and Teachers Union (SIPTU) and Government (Department of Children, Disability and Equality, 2025).

Prior to the introduction of the ERO, the ELC sector had been marked by concerns that were becoming increasingly pronounced through advocacy and collective action, including a national march on the Dáil in 2020 (Greer, 2020). However, some reservations over the ERO were raised, because an ERO is more in keeping with protecting employees in sectors that are traditionally "low or unskilled occupations" (Joint Labour Committee, 2024, p.39). Urban (2023) echoed these concerns, and pointed out that the ERO would give greater incentive to large corporate employers as regards pay, regulations, and working conditions.

2.1.10 Graduate-Lead Educator and Graduate Manager Premiums

Previously under the ECCE programme, Higher Capitation was an extra payment of €11.25 per child per week (on top of the €69 standard rate) for ECCE sessions led by an EYE with QQI Level 7 or 8 degree and based on the number of children enrolled in the service. However, there are differences in capitation fees. Within the new Core Funding model, the Higher Capitation payment evolved into the Graduate-Lead Educator and Graduate Manager Premiums, which continued to provide targeted funding to services employing ECCE graduates, but was broader in its remit, and unlike the its predecessor, was no longer exclusively tied to the number of children attending the service.

2.1.11 Summary of Section One

The focus of Section One was on policy, Government investment, inspections, and funding for the ELC sector in the Republic of Ireland. As discussed, policy is governed under ""First 5": A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families (2019–2028) (Government of Ireland, 2019). Explored here were details regarding how government investment and inspections operate in the sector. As can be seen, the ELC sector has come a long way from the White Paper

"Ready to Learn" (Department of Education and Science, 1999) which first articulated a broad policy vision for early childhood provision in Ireland. Having reviewed policy, government investment, inspections, and funding for the ELC sector, Section Two reviews the early year's curriculum in the Republic of Ireland, which as mentioned, has recently been updated. Reviewing the updated curriculum was important to this research because despite an increased emphasis on BTT children, questions remain as to how policy and a new funding model are translated into daily attachment practices with the BTT age group. Whilst there has been progressive reform in relation to the workforce, such as targets towards a graduate-led workforce by 2028, the establishment of the Qualifications Advisory Board (QAB), and the publication of the Award Criteria and Guidelines (PACG), the extent to which these developments are fully realised in ways that can meaningfully support EYE in their attachment relationships with BTT remains an important question.

2.2. Section Two: Birth to Three Pedagogy

Introduction

The focus of this section is on the topic of pedagogy. Although pedagogy is often broadly understood as the art, science or profession of teaching (OECD, 2021), within early education and care, this concept requires a wider interpretation. Reviewed here will be Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (Government of Ireland, 2024), and Síolta, the National Quality Framework, in order to explore the inclusion of BTT children.

In the context of BTT children, pedagogy cannot be reduced to formal instruction or curriculum delivery, rather it involves the relational, emotional, developmental and caregiving practices through which BTT children experience learning. This includes how educators respond to their cues, support emotional regulation, structure daily routines, plan and facilitate play, and create environments in which very young children feel safe and seen (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004).

As such, pedagogy for the BTT child is better understood as a relational pedagogy (French, 2019), which the next section will discuss in the context of the wider literature on environmental factors that influence attachment and emotional development in BTT children. As will be apparent, whilst the curriculum is cognisant of the learning and development of BTT children, it remains to be seen if the new curriculum means better relational pedagogy for the BTT child.

2.2.1 Pedagogy in Early Childhood Care and Education

Relational pedagogy for BTT children requires an understanding of how very young children learn and develop. As discussed by Schore (2016), during this period, learning is rapid, embodied, relational and highly dependent on the quality of the child's interactions with familiar adults. Unlike older children, infants and toddlers do not primarily engage with pedagogy through abstract instruction or formal teaching, but through sensory exploration, repetition, routine, co-regulation, play and emotionally attuned interactions (Page, 2013). Consequently, care and education are not separate domains for the BTT child, but are deeply entwined (Dalli et al., 2011). Therefore, feeding, comforting, nappy changing, support with transitions, and intersubjective moments through shared play, are central to learning, communication and socioemotional development for BTT children.

The titles of staff in these services can range from early learning and care teachers to early year's teachers, early educators, or childcare practitioners. In the past, no clear consensus could be reached for the use of one occupational title, and only working titles could be applied (Government of Ireland, 2022). However, in Nurturing Skills, the workforce development plan for the ELC sector, the Government adopted the nomenclature Early Years Educators (EYE) and Early Learning and Care (ELC), in their overarching policy framework, "First Five" (Government of Ireland, 2022), and this replaced the many various names referred up to that time. However, ELC settings are still referred to as Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), or Early Childhood Education and Care (ECCE).

With specific reference to ELC practice, the OECD refer to pedagogy as: "Respective strategies and techniques implemented by ECEC staff to provide opportunities for young children's development

within a particular social and material context. It involves staff's pedagogical knowledge, but also the way the knowledge is applied, and the practices are implemented in interaction with children, and in response to children's requests and interests" (OECD, 2021, p. 162). The next section will discuss pedagogy and putting relational pedagogy into practice

In the Republic of Ireland, ECCE is guided by Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (Government of Ireland, 2024), and Síolta, the National Quality Framework (CECDE, 2006). Both these document oversee the implementation of what children will learn, how they will learn it, and how learning will be assessed (Government of Ireland, 2024). The next section will introduce these frameworks.

2.2.2 The Aistear Early Childhood Curriculum Framework and Síolta The National Quality Framework

In Ireland, ECCE settings follow Aistear the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (Government of Ireland, 2024). Síolta, The National Quality Framework (Department of Education and Skills, (DES) 2010), is an accompanying document to Aistear, comprised of twelve principles, sixteen standards, and seventy-five components of quality provision (DES, 2010). When taken in tandem with Aistear, Síolta is designed to support the application of Aistear's four themes in a quality framework.

As discussed in the Introduction Chapter, recently, the Aistear Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (Government of Ireland, 2024), has been updated. In the updated curriculum, the original twelve principles have been reduced to nine principles. Both Aistear and Síolta are for all children from birth to 6 years of age. Aistear identifies three overlapping age groups: Babies (birth to 18 months); Toddlers (12 months to 3 years) and young children (2.5 to 6 years).

Within Aistear, early learning for the birth-to-three child is not regarded as separate from the older children. This trend for overlapping age groups means the focus is on a unified curriculum, which is standard in the European Union (EU) with Belgium being the only country in the EU to have a

separate relational pedagogical framework for babies and toddlers (OECD, 2021). With regard to this, the next section will describe the idea of relational pedagogy (Dalli et al., 2011), and in particular a slow relational pedagogy.

2.2.3 Relational Pedagogy

As discussed by Lebedeva (2018), the fundamental idea of a relational pedagogy is that all learning happens in the context of relationships. The work of French (2022, 2019, 2018) and others such as Green & Clark (2024) and Haals-Brosnan et al., (2025), provide important insights into the specific elements of practice which support relational pedagogy for the BTT child. Dalli describes the concept of relational pedagogy as being "at the level of one-to-one interactions" (2014, p. 2). Ljungblad defines relational pedagogy as, "a theoretical perspective based on the concept of human beings as relational beings, and teaching as relational processes" (2019, p. 863). Moyles and Papatheodorou (2009), articulate relational pedagogy as "the interconnections between attitudes, interpretations and practices" (cited in Hedges & Cooper, 2018, p.372). The notion of a relational pedagogy is also aligned with the concept of "professional love" (Page, 2011, pg. 2), which underpins the position of EYE working with BTT children and identifies the role of the BTT educator. Adding to this concept, French discusses the need for a BTT pedagogy of "emotional nurturance" (French, 2019, p. 6), in the aforementioned systematic literature review of the Aistear Early Childhood Curriculum Framework carried out by French and McKenna (2022).

2.2.4 Re-framing Infant and Toddler Pedagogy

As argued by Page (2015), the role of the EYE working with BTT children requires respect and a rights-based view of infants. Additionally, a relational and nurturing pedagogy (Hayes, 2008), needs to reconceptualise care as a nurturing education (Hayes, 2007). This reframes care as nurture, which as highlighted by Hayes, strengthens the attention given to the social value of those providing care in a professional role (Hayes, 2007). This places the emphasis on emotional regulation, and co-

regulation for the purpose of developing socioemotional skills (Noddings, 2013). This requires presence (Goodfellow, 2008), and an ethic of care (Langford, & Richardson, 2020; Noddings, 2013). In essence, a re-framing of BTT pedagogy is required which is written through a lens of affection and attention to early emotional development (Hodgers, 2017), love (Page, 2018), and compassion (Taggart, 2016).

2.2.5 Relational Pedagogy as a Conceptual Bridge in PACG Standards

The recent update of the Aistear Framework (National Council for Curriculum Assessment (NCCA), 2024), has relevance to this programme of research. This is because, while the concept of a slow relational pedagogy is still in its infancy, it non-the-less is established in the newly updated curriculum (Government of Ireland, 2024). However, attention is still required to the implementation of a slow relational pedagogy in practice. This is important to this programme of research because relational pedagogy is especially significant in the context of BTT children from an attachment-informed perspective. The quality of the adult-child relationship is not additional to relational pedagogy, but is central to it (Mitchelmore, Degotardi, & Fleet, 2017). When adults are responsive, emotionally available, consistent and attuned to children's cues, they do more than just support care routines. In these interpersonal interactions, they contribute to the child's sense of safety, trust, exploration, and emerging socioemotional developments (Dalli, 2014). A relational pedagogy therefore provides an important conceptual bridge between curriculum, and attachment constructs such as intersubjectivity, synchronicity, and neurobiological perspectives of early emotional development. This approach is not only concerned with what children are taught, but how they are held, responded to, spoken to, and emotionally supported through every new experience.

While QQI Level 5 and 6 include broad references to child development and relational practices, contemporary theoretical constructs such as intersubjectivity, synchronicity, and neurobiological perspectives on early development are not explicitly articulated within the PACG standards. As

such, the application of relational pedagogy within ELC settings may depend on the extent to which EYE and ELC managers interpret the general guidance on relational pedagogy provided in these training standards. It may not be enough that the new curriculum should simply assume that "the educator tailors their interactions and practice to support this special period of human development" (Aistear Early Childhood Curriculum Framework, NCCA, 2024, pg. 11). It may also not be sufficient for the curriculum to expect that "the educators also support babies, toddlers and young children to understand, express, recognise and co-regulate and self-regulate emotions, to develop empathy and compassion towards self and others (NCCA, 2022, P.22). In addition, the accompanying document Guidance for Good Practice (Government of Ireland, 2024), states that

> Aistear promotes planning for and developing the curriculum in practice through a continuous cycle of Noticing, Nurturing, Responding and Reflecting. The reflective cycle of planning and assessing supports learning and development through an emergent and inquiry-based curriculum underpinned by súgradh (play). It is founded on an understanding of slow relational pedagogy. (Guidance for Good, Practice, 2024, p.2)

This is a concern for this research because in order to become agentic, competent and confident educators (Government of Ireland, 2024), training content will need to explicitly foreground and interpret these constructs and how to achieve them in practice.

2.2.6 Conclusion to Section Two

The focus of this section was on pedagogy. As discussed, pedagogy is the concept of the art, science, or profession of teaching and the ways in which knowledge is applied. Reviewed was salient literature which explored the concept of relational pedagogy, and in particular, a slow relational pedagogy. This was against the backdrop of expectations for implementing the newly updated Aistear Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (Government of Ireland, 2024), and the Building Blocks Extension scheme (DCDE, 2025), both of which emphasise relational pedagogy and increased provision for BTT children.

While the PATD provides an important point of reference for understanding the broad professional expectations associated with early childhood qualifications, they do not fully capture how such expectations are translated into programme design, curriculum structure or initial professional education. Therefore, in the context of the present study, consideration of both documents is important in order to examine not only professional knowledge and competence, but also how far expectations may meaningfully support relational pedagogy. Although themes such as relationships, emotional development, wellbeing, and responsive caregiving may be present within Level 5 and Level 6 training, their inclusion does not in itself guarantee a coherent or applied understanding of attachment as a relational concern.

2.3 Section Three: Early Learning and Care Training and Qualifications

2.3.1 Introduction

The focus of this section is on training and qualifications as set by Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI). QQI is the state agency responsible for standards of minimum qualification required to work in early education. The relevance of training to the wider literature on attachment relates to the environmental factors which influence attachment mechanisms, of which EYE knowledge of attachment is a large part. There is a need for training content to be in fidelity with the ethos and principles of attachment in order to meet the learning outcomes of the updated Aistear Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (Government of Ireland, 2024) with regard to a slow relational pedagogy.

2.3.2 Early Educator Training and Qualifications

Early educator training for those working with BTT children is central to this research with regard to attachment development. Children in the BTT age range present with different developmental needs (French, 2019) Infants and toddlers' social development takes place in the context of adults (Stassen-Berger, 2005). Therefore, effective implementation of a slow relational pedagogy is

closely associated with EYE understanding of attachment-related constructs. Section Three will now consider the training content available to EYE, and explore in more detail early education training standards and qualifications with regard to relational pedagogy.

All employees working directly with children in a pre-school service are required to hold at least a major award in ECCE at QQI Level 5 on the National Framework of qualification (DCEDIY, 2024; OECD 2021). These requirements reflect efforts to professionalise the ELC sector and regulate quality provision. Levels are set by QQI and specify the knowledge and competencies expected of students at each stage of Initial Professional Education (IPE) (DES, 2019), prior to entering professional practice. Table 2.1 on the following page outlines the areas of training for ECEC QQI Level 5 and Level 6.

Table 2.1

Areas of Study for ECEC QQI Level 5 and Level 6

Area of Study	**QQI Level 5 (Foundation)**	**QQI Level 6 (Advanced)**
Child Development	Introduction to development (birth–6 years); milestones; foundational theory	Advanced understanding; observation and assessment
Early Learning & Curriculum	Play-based learning; supporting development through play	Curriculum planning; application of pedagogy
Holistic Care & Wellbeing	Health, safety, nutrition; general wellbeing	Promotion of holistic development in varied contexts
Professional Practice / Work Experience	Supervised placement; application of theory; reflective practice	Autonomous practice; critical reflection; leadership
Inclusion & Diversity	Equality, diversity; supporting additional needs	Inclusive practice in complex contexts
Policy & Regulation	Child protection; regulatory frameworks	Policy engagement; children's rights
Communication & Relationships	Supporting communication; working with families and colleagues	Advanced interpersonal communication; collaboration
Professional Skills & Ethics	Roles, responsibilities, ethical awareness	Professional autonomy, ethical decision-making
Observation & Assessment	Basic observation and recording	Systematic observation; assessment for planning
Leadership & Management	—	Leadership and supervision in ELC settings

As can be seen in table 2.1 relational pedagogy is largely embedded within broader curricular areas, rather than explicitly foregrounded as a central organising base. At Level 5 relational dimensions are visible within the “Communication and Relationships” module, which focuses on supporting communication and working with families and colleagues. However, this positioning frames relationships primarily in functional and interpersonal terms, rather than as a complete pedagogical foundation. Similarly, modules such as “Child Development and Holistic Care and Well-being” reference developmental processes and caregiving practices, tend to emphasise developmental milestones, health and general well-being, with the limited engagement with relational concepts such as attachment, attunement, or intersubjectivity. Within Professional Practice / Work Experience, relationships are encouraged in practice, but remain largely implicit within broader expectations of reflection and application of theory.

In analysing Level 6, it is clear that while there is progression in complexity across modules such as “Early Learning Curriculum, Professional Practice / Work Experience, and Leadership and Management”, relational constructs continue to be subsumed within wider themes of professionalism and leadership. For example, “Communication and Relationships” still does not explicitly conceptualise relationships as underpinning teaching and learning. Likewise, “Inclusion and Diversity and Holistic Care and Well-being” provide important contexts for relational practice, particularly in supporting children with additional needs, but do not consistently articulate how relationships shape pedagogical decision making. Relational knowledge is not explicitly foregrounded across QQI Levels 5 and 6. This indicates that while relational constructs are undeniably embedded across multiple areas of study, their presence remains largely implicit, which may limit their visibility and reduce the likelihood of meaningful translation into practice. This has particular implications for EYE working with BTT children because its positioning remains insufficiently foregrounded within training pathways.

Additionally, within the PACG, there is reference to the types of interactions EYE are expected to engage in with children (QQI, 2021). However, in the PACG there is limited integration of important constructs required for relational pedagogy, such as attachment (Bowlby, 1969, 1988), attunement (Stern, 2010), intersubjectivity (Trevarthen & Aitkin, 2001), and shared effective states (Schore, 2016). In addition, non-verbal communication, attunement, or intersubjective relationships as would be required to fully understand and implement a relational pedagogy are not explicitly specified. These constructs are important, as they underpin relational pedagogy with BTT children.

Within the Irish ELC sector, qualification levels are structured along the National framework qualifications (NFQ), ranging from Level 5 to Level 8 (QQI, 2021). However, the aforementioned PATD and PACG provide more detailed insight into the knowledge, skills and competencies expected at each level. For example, at Level 5 and 6, emphasis is placed on the development of practical childcare skills, developmental knowledge and the ability to operate under supervision within the ECCE setting. In contrast, degree-level qualifications (Levels 7 and 8), require deeper theoretical understanding, critical reflection and the capacity to apply knowledge independently in complex and dynamic ECCE environments.

The PACG were published in 2019, setting out the standards for degree-level ECCE programmes. In August 2023, QQI deactivated Level 5 and 6. QQI programmes at Levels 5 and 6 were revised and standardised as the Certificate in Early Learning and Care (Level 5) and the Advanced Certificate in Early Learning and Care (Level 6) (DCDE, 2025).

These programmes are now titled the Certificate in Early Learning and Care (Level 5) and the Advanced Certificate in Early Learning and Care (Level 6). However, it should be noted that the QQI level remains unchanged. These programmes were rewritten in line with the PATD, which outlines the expected knowledge, skills, and competencies expected at these levels.

The Qualifications Advisory Board (QAB) established in 2020, was tasked with assessing programme compliance with the PACG (Department of Children Disability and Equality, 2020). In parallel,

degree-level programmes (QQI Level 7 and 8), are subject to oversight by the Qualifications Advisory Board (QAB) (DCDE, 2020), which assess programme compliance with the PACG. These measures reflect a broader policy emphasis on quality assurance and professionalisation within the ELC sector, as only programmes deemed to be aligned with the PACG are approved for delivery through the Central Applications Office (CAO).

Both PATD and PACG remain conceptually broad in articulation, potentially underspecifying the depth of knowledge required for attachment-informed practice with BTT children. This is because pedagogy for BTT children is deeply relational, requiring a deep understanding of intersubjectivity, attachment processes, and attuned moment-to-moment interactions. Such competences are not solely technical, but rely on recent contemporary research on attachment, including neurobiological perspectives on early emotional development. In this context, questions still remain regarding the extent to which they can fully support the enactment of slow relational pedagogy with very young children.

As evidenced by this review, the issue is not the presence of relational concepts in training, but the depth and level of articulation at which this operates. The issue is not merely one of curricular inclusion, but of how far such knowledge is explicitly articulated, theoretically integrated, and enacted in practice. This is especially important in relation to BTT children, for whom socioemotional development and secure, attuned relationships are foundational to attachment, which in turn is foundational to both learning and socioemotional wellbeing.

International research has clearly shaped contemporary early childhood curriculum frameworks, including the Early Years Learning Framework in Australia (EYLF), (Department of Education, 2024), and the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (Department for Education, 2021), in England. In Australia, the framework foregrounds Belonging, Being and Becoming, positioning relationships as foundational to early learning (Department of Education, 2024). Likewise, in England, the EYFS (Department for Education, 2021), provides a unified statutory framework for children aged birth

to 5 years old, with a focus on social and emotional development. Equally, Aistear the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (Government of Ireland, 2024) is similarly informed by international research, and reflects a strong emphasis on holistic approaches to early learning.

At the same time cross national comparisons must be approached cautiously. For example, the United States lacks a unified national curriculum or a single professional structure for early childhood education, with requirements varying significantly across states (Kagan & Landsberg, 2019; Whitaker, Jenkins & Duer, 2022). Yet, despite this fragmentation there remains a strong emphasis on relational pedagogy, supported by accessible neuroscientific research and professional learning initiatives, such as those provided by the research organisation Zero to Three and the work of the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child at Harvard. Across these research institutes, there is a shared emphasis on neurodevelopmental approaches to early learning, particularly in areas such as social and emotional development with a focus on the centrality of adult-child relationships. On balance this indicates that in comparison to other frameworks, in Aistear research informed policy is not absent at a structural level. However, crucially the variation is not in the presence of research within training preparation, but in how that research is explicitly foregrounded. This raises questions about the depth and specificity with which relational pedagogy is explicit within QQI level 5 and level 6 programmes, and also level 7 and level 8 programmes.

In December 2021, The Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Roderic O'Gorman, T.D., launched Nurturing Skills, the Workforce Plan for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare, 2022-2028 (DCEDIY, 2022). Nurturing Skills sets out a plan to strengthen the ongoing process of professionalisation for those working in ELC and SAC. Nurturing skills (2022-2028), set out a comprehensive suite of measures to professionalise the workforce, which includes financial supports for upskilling, the development of a career framework and establishment of a national continued professional development infrastructure. It also includes targeted actions to

support recruitment and retention. Central to the plan is the achievement of a graduate-led workforce by 2028, with specific qualification targets and mechanisms to enable EYE to pursue higher qualifications while remaining in employment (DCEDIY, 2022).

A graduate-led workforce is understood to mean all Lead Educators and Managers would hold a relevant qualification at Level 7 or above. However, recent data from the Pobal (2026) highlights a significant level of staff turnover within the ELC sector. A total of 544 services reported they had lost 4 or more staff in the current year. Of these, 2,665 were qualified to Level 7 or above. These figures represent an annual turnover rate of 24.5%. This means that the higher qualified staff are in reality leaving the sector. Additionally, Pobal (2026) indicates that the number of EYE staff holding an NFQ level 8 qualification has increased over time from 20.1% in 2021/22 to 23.3 % in 2024/25, with 745 EYE in the process of obtaining a Level 8 degree. Staff mobility carries a potential impact on young children's learning and development. In particular, instability in educator-child relationships may disrupt processes associated with socioemotional development (Vicente, Venegas & Guerrero, 2025). This reinforces the significance of workforce retention within the ELC sector.

The increasing proportion of EYE holding QQI Level 7 and Level 8 qualifications as reported by Pobal (2026) can be understood in relation to the incentives embedded within the Core Funding model. In particular, the introduction of measures, such as the Graduate Lead Educator Premium. Alongside funding conditions linked to staffing profiles, this has encouraged services to recruit and retain more highly qualified staff in ECCE roles. Crucially, these incentives are not only linked to qualifications, but also to the distribution of graduates directly working in the ECCE programme with children aged three to five years old. In practice this appears to influence how staff are concentrated across the 3-5 age group. This subsequently shapes where highly qualified educators are most likely to be placed within ELC settings.

2.3.3 Children with Additional Needs

The Access and Inclusion model (AIM) is a model of support to enable equal access to the ECCE programme for all children, from age two years eight months to school going age. AIM achieves this by providing tailored non-medical supports such as additional staffing, specialised equipment, and training for EYE, in order to facilitate meaningful participation for all children within ECCE settings (Department of Children, Disability and Equality 2023).

The Access and Inclusion model (AIM) is a model of support, rather than a model of early intervention. While access to the ECCE programme has recently been expanded, disparities remain in how benefits are experienced across the different age groups. Previous to Budget 2026, the AIM initiative (Department of Children Disability and Equality, 2023), provided a range of supports primarily structured around ECCE participation. As a result, BTT children with additional needs did not have access to the same level of coordinated support as children attending the ECCE programme. However, more recent policy developments, including provisions introduced under Budget 2026, have signalled a growing recognition of this issue, with plans to extend support to children prior to their entry into ECCE. This is significant as it means all eligible children with additional needs can access ECCE. Nevertheless, this still raises important questions regarding the timing of intervention and access, particularly given the well-established importance of early identification and support for children's developmental trajectories (Guralnick, 2005). It raises broader questions about the current timing and reach of support in the early years, particularly in relation to BTT children requiring intervention prior to entering ECCE. Consequently, while policy frameworks increasingly promote inclusion, the current availability of support across age groups suggests that very young children with additional needs may still encounter uneven access.

2.3.4 Summary of Section Three

The focus of Section Three was on training to support EYE to implement a slow relational pedagogy. As discussed, a slow relational pedagogy is based on the view of unhurried one-to-one adult-child interactions as the overall approach, where all learning happens in the context of the relationship between the adult and the child. Reviewed also were the content of EYE training programmes, including programmes designed to equip EYE to support the inclusion of children with additional needs.

While QQI Level 5 and level 6 qualifications and the Professional Award Type Descriptors (PATD), represented an important step in standardising knowledge and practice, there are inherent limitations in the scope of these Levels when considered in relation to BTT pedagogy. At level 5 and 6, emphasis is placed on the development of practical care giving skills, developmental knowledge, and the ability to operate under supervision within the ECCE setting. Effective implementation of a slow relational pedagogy is closely associated with EYE understanding of attachment-related constructs. This is particularly significant in the context of a graduate-led workforce by 2028, and theoretically informed practice.

2.3.5 Overall Summary and Conclusion of Chapter Two

This chapter introduced the National Curriculum Framework, Aistear (Government of Ireland, 2024) with regard to pedagogy, policy, and practice in ELC settings. In ELC, the term pedagogy can be understood as the way teacher's knowledge and educational practices are applied through the curriculum using different theoretical approaches. Reviewed in this chapter also was the concept of a slow relational pedagogy. Slow relational pedagogy is important because child development research shows that the social context influences early emotional development in early childhood at a time when the early foundations for social and emotional development are being laid. Whilst reform has sought to improve structural and pedagogical quality across the sector, questions still remain regarding the extent to which they explicitly address the relational and attachment needs

of BTT children attending ELC settings. Therefore, a key issue for the present study is not simply whether attachment-related constructs can be identified within early childhood qualifications, but whether they are afforded sufficient conceptual visibility and pedagogical significance.

As demonstrated in table 2.1, whilst relational constructs are embedded within modules such as “Communication & Relationships”, and “Professional Practice”, they are not sufficiently foregrounded as the central pedagogical basis of the curriculum. This implicit positioning may limit the extent to which students develop a full understanding of attachment-related practices as foundational to relational pedagogy. Consequently, while training may meet minimum qualification standards, the absence of explicit engagement with relational concepts across training pathways raises questions regarding their preparedness and presence to enact relationally informed practice. To address this issue, the next Chapter explores the theoretical framework selected to underpin relational concepts.

Chapter Three: The Theoretical Framework

3.1.1 Introduction

This Chapter explores the theoretical framework selected for the current programme of research. Two models of human development were considered as a framework that could help develop the a priori research question. The two models were the Transactional Model of Development (Sameroff & Fiese, 2000), and Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model of Human Development (Bronfenbrenner 1979, Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). The Transactional Model of Development and Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model of Human Development can both be understood as models which centre on the role of the social environment in shaping human development, and the role played by interpersonal interactions (Bronfenbrenner 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Sameroff & Fiese, 2000).

Explored in this Chapter will be the central arguments regarding the Transactional Model of Development (Sameroff & Fiese, 2000), and the Bioecological Model of Human Development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Both were reviewed to explore the salient literature and appraised in terms of their support of the developmental processes involved in attachment mechanisms. A decision was then made to select one framework for exploring the topic of attachment with a sample of EYE (EYE) and Early Learning and Care (ELC) centre managers, working with children in the birth-to-three (BTT) age group, in busy ELC settings in the Republic of Ireland (RoI).

Section One of this Chapter discusses the Transactional Model of Human Development (Sameroff & Fiese, 2000), and evaluates its usefulness in support of attachment theory (Bowlby 1969). This will be followed by an exploration of Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model of Human Development

(Bronfenbrenner 1979, Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) to also evaluate its usefulness to the current programme of research.

3.1.2 Transactional Models of Development

The Transactional Model of Development is defined as comprising elements which are continually in flux due to their interaction with one another (Sameroff & Fiese, 2000). The Transactional Model proposes that development is less of a nature versus nurture argument, rather, development is continual, due to the interaction of nature and nurture (Sameroff & Fiese, 2000). Sameroff and Fiese (2000), describe how developmental outcomes are closely associated with the individual and their context. Important elements in terms of how components of an interaction produce social experience are a dominant feature of this model. These include the effects of relationships, and relational centeredness in all the personal interactions a child has in the course of daily living (Sameroff & Fiese 2000).

According to the transactional model, developmental outcomes are not solely determined by one factor, instead development is the product of the transactional interplay between the natural characteristics of the person, and the context (Sameroff & Fiese, 2000). In Transactional Regulation Theory (Sameroff, 2010), the child acts on the environment and the environment acts on the child. Thus, highlighting how environmental factors can and do modify biological aspects of development (Sameroff & Fiese, 2000). This underscored the importance of understanding bidirectional influences between children and their main caregivers, where developmental outcomes are induced by bidirectional influences.

Bidirectional influences were discussed in the theory as experienced in the context of the child's family. Therefore, this included teacher influences on the child's, namely attachment relationships in ELC settings. The concept of bidirectional influence was also taken up by Sameroff (2010) to explain how the child and the environment are constantly changing and influencing each other.

Again, with relevance to this study, Sameroff (2010), highlighted the role of adults such as parents and teachers who contribute to shaping the child's development. As discussed by Sameroff, recognition of this dynamic adaptation required flexible transactional thinking with regard to child development, where "successful socialization and particularly good education is based on fitting experience to the developmental status of the child." (Sameroff, 2010, pg. 16). The focus in this kind of dynamic was again on relationships, where the influence of the back-and-forth interplay between the natural characteristics of the child and the context was key. Whilst the components of an interaction which produces social experiences were a dominant feature of Transactional Regulation Theory (Sameroff & Fiese, 2000), there was another model which offered a similar perspective on human development, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model of Human Development (Bronfenbrenner 1979). Like the Transactional Model of Development, Bronfenbrenner also observed the influence of the interplay between the natural characteristics of the person and the context (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) which the next section reviews.

3.1.3 Bronfenbrenner Theory of Human Development

This section sets out Bronfenbrenner's theoretical model of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Bronfenbrenner's model was of interest to this review because it is based on interactions. Bronfenbrenner's model helped the researcher to understand the essential nature and importance of relationships in the environment, and their interconnections both in childhood and over the lifespan (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This underpinned a focus on the relationship between the developing child and the environment.

Whilst exploring the developmental processes of the concept of attachment remained the subject under study, Bronfenbrenner's model helped in developing further the a priori research question by providing an understanding of the influence of interpersonal interactions in adult/child relationships. As discussed, this is applicable to practice in ELC settings because as will be seen, a

key aspect of attachment is the quality of the relationships and interpersonal interactions children have with adults (Bowlby, 1969). In addition, Hayes, O'Toole, & Halpenny (2017), highlighted Bronfenbrenner's model as being particularly relevant to EYE. This perspective played an important role in addressing the issue of attachment from a biological standpoint, as will be discussed later in Chapter Four.

Bronfenbrenner describes human development as a process involving complex interactions between humans and the environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). At the time, this was considered a broad perspective of human development, because up until then, research regarding human development had tended not to focus on the environmental influences. Bronfenbrenner was concerned with the processes through which relational structures and linkages could affect the system of human development. He defined the ecology of human development as, "the scientific study of the progressive, mutual accommodation, throughout the life span, between a growing human organism and the changing immediate environments in which it lives, as this process is affected by relations obtaining within and between these immediate settings, as well as the larger social contexts, both formal and informal, in which the settings are embedded" (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p. 514).

Bronfenbrenner discussed the different levels of influence in human development. The relevance of different levels of influence lies in how important interpersonal interactions highlight the unique importance of human connection and attachment. The next section sets out the different levels of influence. As will be seen, the discussion provides testimony to the usefulness of the theory, as it indicates the significance of human connection in attachment relationships. Bronfenbrenner's model describes five levels of influence, the micro, meso, exo, macro, and chronosystems, which the next section will set out individually.

3.1.4.1 The Microsystem

The first of the five systems is the microsystem. Bronfenbrenner describes the microsystem as "a pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given setting with particular physical and material characteristics" (1979, p. 22). The microsystem is where the individual interacts directly and indirectly with the environment through daily activities, social roles, and the interpersonal relationships in their lives (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The microsystem had relevance to this research study, as in the case of children, these would include the influence of different levels of interactions with parents, carers, friends, and teachers.

3.1.4.2 The Mesosystem

The next level of influence is the mesosystem. Bronfenbrenner defined the Meso system as, "a system of microsystems" (1979, p. 25). For example, within the mesosystem interactions incorporate the links between the child and other settings, such as the family, school, or the child's friends. The mesosystem relates to the microsystem through multiple relations and connections and the relationships these have between settings and experiences. The mesosystem is also influenced by the extent of knowledge and attitudes that exist in one setting about the other (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This was also relevant to this research study through the attitudes and knowledge acquired by early years EYE with regard to training. Training contributes to the environment when working with children aged birth to three (BTT), due to its influence on daily practices in the microsystem.

3.1.4.3 The Exosystem

This consists of settings the child is not directly in, none-the-less it exerts an indirect influence. The exosystem consists of parents' workplace, education institutions, neighbourhoods, community, and political structure. Bronfenbrenner discussed the view that the exosystem affected children's lives indirectly with regard to policy and governance (1979). The exosystem had relevance to this study

with regard to policy and governance, for example things like inspections, authority, and autonomy, within the ELC sector. In addition, ratios, staff wages, and work conditions can Affect early years' teachers' mental health and well-being. These had relevance to this programme of research due to the potential to affect children through interpersonal interactions, and the way in which early years' educators operationalise attachments and close relationships through micro-system interactions.

3.1.4.4 The Macrosystem

The fourth system, the macrosystem, involves social and intellectual influences, such as religion and culture. Whilst it is widely accepted that the microsystem influences child development, the macrosystem affects the micro, meso, and exo-systems because it reflects the values, beliefs, and laws of the child's culture. Again, relevant to this study, the macrosystem was of great importance to this research. This was because, as discussed in the Introduction Chapter, cultural and traditional thinking exists in the macrosystem in Ireland with regard to early education, and this has overshadowed Government policy because of traditional notions about childcare (Urban, 2022,). This added to the argument of this research that care for BTT children in the ELC sector in Ireland faces outdated ideas on practice and pedagogy and inequality in policy (French, 2022). The issues in the macrosystem are related to practice, pay, pensions, policy, and professional recognition for ELC in the Republic of Ireland and are therefore directly related to this programme of research.

3.1.4.5 The Chronosystem

The chronosystem is the fifth level of influence, which was added in 1989 to the theory because Bronfenbrenner recognised the effects of time in a person's development. The chronosystem reflects the influence of time over the lifespan of human development, and the things that impact this, such as historical events, advances in technology, new knowledge, and new inventions. Bronfenbrenner became interested in how events and time affect a person's development over the lifespan (Bronfenbrenner, 1989).

However, Bronfenbrenner was limited by the Chronosystem of his day. Throughout his research it was not technologically possible to assess the neurobiological processes that he discussed. These were known only from a theoretical perspective. Towards the end of the 20th century, research in this era was marked by the decade of the brain (Jones & Mendell, 1999), where the mechanisms of socialisation as theorised by Bronfenbrenner and Bowlby (1969) were explored using animal studies (Meaney et al., 2011).

These studies offered findings consistent with both Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), and Bowlby's Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969), which added to the relevance of Bronfenbrenner work to this programmes of research.

This research is also motivated by the conviction that further advancement in the scientific understanding of basic intrapsychic and interpersonal processes in human development is required. This is to help articulate the environment in which young children may not live, but none-the-less spend a great deal of their day. The mechanisms of socialisation, such as interpersonal interactions, affect the course of child development, directly and indirectly as seen from figure 3.1 below.

Figure 3.1

Bio-ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006)

As can be seen, within the microsystem, there are many relational influences. These according to the model are called proximal processes (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Proximal processes shape the course of psychological growth, and highlight relational influences in the environment which exert meaning in social interactions. The next section will introduce proximal processes and discuss their relevance to this programme of research.

3.1.5 Proximal Processes

Whilst all the layers in Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model of Human Development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), influence child development to some degree, this study did not utilise all of the five subsystems. The theoretical framework focused on the microsystem, because of its emphasis on interpersonal interactions and proximal processes. Proximal processes are

person-to-person interactions which exert influence on human development. This section introduces the concept of proximal processes because they usefully informed the development of the a priori research question, and provided a deeper understanding of EYE and ELC manager's attachment relationships with BTT children. Proximal processes are proposed by Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) as;

Especially in its early phases, but also throughout the life course, human development takes place through processes of progressively more complex reciprocal interaction between an active, evolving biopsychological human organism and the persons, objects, and symbols in its immediate external environment. To be effective, the interaction must occur on a fairly regular basis over extended periods of time. Such enduring forms of interaction in the immediate environment are referred to as proximal processes. (2006, p.797).

Bronfenbrenner's model highlights those aspects of an interaction that are close and developmental. Proximal processes play a crucial role in regulating children's emotions through adult-child interpersonal interactions (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Proximal processes are the building blocks of the entire Model, where interactions are said to be "elements of activity" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 22), via the factors that influence interpersonal relations. For instance, activities such as feeding, comforting, or playing with a child, group, or individual play activities, reading, learning, caring for others in distress, problem solving, planning, performing complex tasks, and acquiring new knowledge, all play a critical role in the maintenance of proximal processes (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). This is wholly relevant to early education, as the adults provide attachment and meaning for the children through these activities and interactions.

Bronfenbrenner's theory holds the view that proximal processes lead to particular kinds of developmental outcomes. He proposed that they are "the mechanisms through which genetic potentials for effective psychological functioning are actualized" (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994, p. 568; Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000, p. 118). This included personal characteristics, such as

“differentiated perception and response, directing and controlling one's behaviour, coping under stress, acquiring knowledge and skills and for establishing and maintaining mutually rewarding relationships, and modifying and constructing one's own physical, social, and symbolic environment” (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994 p. 569).

In other words, Bronfenbrenner observed that interactions between people in their immediate environment enabled the development of human behaviour, depending on the interaction. Proximal processes are important to this study because they are considered predictors of human development (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). For this reason, proximal processes provide an insight into adult-child interactions, and the factors influencing the child’s personal characteristics.

The importance of proximal processes or the consequences of a lack of these processes can be illustrated by the case of Genie. Genie was a young girl, found in 1970, at the age of thirteen in a house in the United States with no language or physical skills. It emerged that she had been kept in a room tied to a potty chair For all of her thirteen years. Genie was at the mercy of her parents, who themselves suffered with mental health disorders (Rymer, 1994). Genie’s life consisted of isolation and abuse, where she suffered a total lack of stimulation, love, or socialisation of any kind. Because of this treatment she had extreme personality and social difficulties. The effects of this could only be partially reversed by therapists and researchers (Rymer, 1994).

Bronfenbrenner’s theory offers one explanation of how the treatment Genie received from her parents damaged her psychological and social and emotional development. This is because the fundamental principles of social, emotional learning are dependent on the relational influences. According to Bronfenbrenner, these take place between the developing person and their social contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Overall, Genie’s case supports Bronfenbrenner’s view of the dynamics of the microsystem. Although at the extremes of neglect, the case of Genie demonstrates

the influence of a lack of proximal processes in the microsystem, and the effects of social isolation in humans (Cacioppo et al., 2011).

Having set out proximal processes, the following section discusses four properties, process, person, context, and time (PPCT), within proximal processes, which are also influential across the various systems of the Model.

3.1.6 The Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) Model

Proximal processes are developed through four properties, these are; process, person, context, and time (PPCT). The PPCT model of Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological theory, as discussed by Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006), is the theory's research design model for conducting research. Whilst proximal processes influence personal characteristics, attention is also given to developmental outcomes. Positive or negative outcomes are enabled through these four properties, which either initiate or sustain proximal processes. These properties actively influence change through interpersonal and environmental dynamics (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). For example, Hayes, O'Toole, and Halpenny (2017) also relate Bronfenbrenner's PPPT model to EYE' reciprocal interactions with children in early years' education.

Reciprocal interactions are an important feature of early learning and care for BTT children, and as discussed by Hayes et al., (2017), these are the proximal processes of ELC settings. In this research, proximal processes are also important driving factors for exploring the attitudes, understanding and implementation strategies of a sample of early years' educators and centre managers in developing relationships with children aged birth-to-three, in ELC settings in the Republic of Ireland.

For BTT children, both in laying the foundations of healthy emotional development and in their importance to later psychological trajectories, interconnectedness is achieved through the Process, Person, Context, and Time model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Describing these will help the researcher and the reader to know the usefulness of the process, person, context, and time (PPCT)

account of how interactions shape social and emotional learning. This is because The PPCT model involves consideration of the child as the person. For instance, teacher-child interactions make the process of interpersonal interactions. Context is the early learning and care setting, and time is the influence of these reciprocal interactions on the child's development. The PPPT model creates the emotional availability of the adult as established by attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969). In attachment research, reciprocal interactions and emotional availability create shared attention, and shared attention is a major area of interest within the field of child development research, highlighting the importance of the concept of sustained share thinking.

The PPCT model shows how the properties of an interactions impact on development. These four properties actively influence change through interpersonal and environmental dynamics, forming the elements proximal processes (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). The Bioecological theory conceptualises developmental dynamics between these four elements of development, and links it to improved cognitive and executive function skills for children (Bernier et al., 2012; Hayes et al., 2022).

3.1.7 Conclusion

This section described the five layers of influence on the developing person in Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model of Human Development (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006), and the Transactional Model of human development (Sameroff & Fiese, 2000). Both theories are similar to one another, with regard to the multifaceted proximal developmental outcomes. However, after careful consideration the Transactional Model (Sameroff & Fiese, 2000), was ruled out in favour of Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This was because Bronfenbrenner's theory is broader than the Transactional Model (Sameroff & Fiese, 2000), as it not only takes account of the immediate and distal influences which impact the person, but also the policy, and culture which indirectly influence the person.

Additionally, the evolution of Bronfenbrenner's Model into a bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), was helpful in developing the a priori research question. This was because, when viewed together, the contribution of biology and social ecology in Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological iteration of the model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), gave rise to a broad, integrated, biological view of human development. As such, this broader view was more appropriate to the development of the a priori research question, as the study sought the developmental processes of attachment in children aged birth-to-three. The next section sets out the framework in greater detail, particularly with regard to its use in this programme of research.

3.1.8 Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model and Developmental Science

3.1.9 Introduction

As discussed in Part One, Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model of Human Development (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006), was selected as the theoretical framework for the current programme of research. Having set this out, attention now turns to part two of this Chapter. The focus of Part Two is on mapping the Bioecological Model of Human Development on this programme of research with respect to developmental science (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000).

The centrality of developmental science the within the wider literature of Bronfenbrenner's framework, is a consensus by Bronfenbrenner and Evans (2000), on a scientific understanding of interpersonal interactions. Explored here is the central argument made by Bronfenbrenner and Evans (2000), that developmental psychology was evolving into developmental science. As will be seen, since that time other researchers have highlighted similar descriptions of how social interactions and environments influence development at a neural and genetic level (Cozolino, 2015; Schore, 2016; Siegel 2011). These empirically support Bronfenbrenner's theory, offering support

for developmental science, and the need to include the biopsychological development of the child as a guide for thinking about relational influences.

3.1.10 Bronfenbrenner and Early Learning and Care

Bronfenbrenner mentioned that particular attention to the mechanisms of socialisation in human development, such as reinforcement and role modelling, would not be given much attention to in his Ecological Theory of Human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Rather, he was interested in the basic intrapsychic and interpersonal processes of human development, and motivated by the conviction that advancing a scientific understanding of these phenomena requires investigation into "the actual environment, both immediate and remote in which human beings live" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 12).

This task demanded the construction of a "theoretical schema" to permit a description and analysis of these environments, to outline their intrapsychic and interpersonal properties. This was enabled via the field of Developmental Science (DS), and made possible by Bronfenbrenner situating his Model in the field of DS (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000). By combining biology and ecology, Bronfenbrenner underpinned a scientific iteration of the influence of relationships on child development (Rosa & Tudge, 2013). It is this later iteration of his theory, which had relevance to this programme of research as Bronfenbrenner discussed the influence of relationships in developmental outcomes sought through "scientific endeavour" (Bronfenbrenner and Evans, 2000, p. 2).

Bronfenbrenner was an advocate of early years' education, and he understood the importance of early intervention. He was also a leading figure and co-founder in the creation of the Head Start programme in the United States (Association for Psychological Science, 2005). Head Start is a free, federally funded programme of early education and early intervention, that is designed to promote the social and emotional well-being of infants, toddlers, and pre-school children from low-income families (Department of Health and Human Services, 2023).

From its inception in 1965 to the present date, Head Start programmes have reached forty-million children and their families (Department of Health and Human Services, 2023). According to a recent programme evaluation, children who enrol in Head Start programmes are more likely to graduate from high school and attend college, have improved social, emotional, and behavioural development, and are better prepared to be parents themselves, than children who did not attend Head Start (Department of Health and Human Services [HHS] 2023).

In addition, there is also Early Head Start. which caters for pregnant women and families with children in the birth-to-three age group (Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Centre, 2023). This is Bronfenbrenner's legacy. The recognition of the crucial early years of development, and his understanding of the influence of relationships for future development. Bronfenbrenner's vision was for early childhood intervention programmes and policy decisions to consider the environment in the early care and education that children receive. Bronfenbrenner's belief in the power of the preschool environment to produce immediate and long-term effects, was primarily because he saw the early education environment as a distinctive ecological setting (Bronfenbrenner (1974).

Bronfenbrenner's advocacy for early years' education was evident in his tribute to EYE's working in the sector. In a discussion on the comparisons between the behaviour of children in Russia and United States, he expanded on the values and joys of the school experience for children entering kindergarten for the first time (Bronfenbrenner, 1970). Bronfenbrenner's reflections on the attitude of the children and indeed society towards early years' teachers, state that it should be one of "affectionate respect" (Bronfenbrenner, 1970, p. 26). This example tells us something of the importance of Bronfenbrenner for early education because he too placed a value on teacher-child interpersonal relationships.

3.1.11 Bronfenbrenner and Developmental Science

As discussed, Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory of human development evolved over time. As the theory evolved from 1980 to 1993 (Rosa & Tudge, 2013), this phase paid attention to the role of biological influences, linking relational influence and the developing person's own biology. The theory was then renamed the Bioecological Systems Theory of Human Development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

Bronfenbrenner defined the bioecological model as "an evolving theoretical system for the scientific study of human development over time" (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006, p. 793). This iteration of the model reminded us of the need to include the biopsychological characteristics of the developing child as a guide for thinking about relational influences.

As discussed by Cacioppo et al., (2011), developmental science is currently an interdisciplinary scientific field that synthesises perspectives from biology, psychology, and sociology in order to understand the behavioural and psychological aspects of human development. DS is defined by Bronfenbrenner and Evans (2000) as;

The systematic scientific study of the conditions and processes producing continuity and change over time in the biopsychological characteristics of human beings, be it over the life course, across successive generations, retrospectively through historical time, or prospectively in terms of implications for the course of human development in the future (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000, p. 117).

Within a DS framework, Bronfenbrenner and Evans (2000), discussed proximal processes in the bioecological model as energy. Bronfenbrenner believed that energies get transferred in both directions, between the developing human being, and the immediate environment (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000). For example, with regard to the mechanisms involved in interpersonal interactions, the Bioecological model proposes that through these interactions "genotypes are transformed into phenotypes" (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000, p. 5). This is similar to contributory research from developmental science, where studies discuss how genetic traits can

be observed as behaviours through gene-environment interaction (Fox, 1985; Hane & Fox, 2006; Nelson & Bloom, 1997).

Bronfenbrenner claimed that "from the scientist's perspective, perhaps the most important function of a review of existing knowledge in a particular area is to identify promising directions for future investigation" (1986a, p. 734). Therefore, the aim of this study is to identify directions for future investigations in the area of attachment using Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), with the goal of contributing research from the field of developmental science to pedagogy for BTT children in continuation of Bronfenbrenner's legacy.

3.1.12 Summary

This Chapter has set out the theoretical framework for the current programme of research. The framework adopted for the study was Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Theory of Human Development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). As discussed, Bronfenbrenner's theory holds that human development is influenced by both the environment and the individual temperament and characteristics of the person. The microsystem is the most influential context on the developing person, which is also influenced by other layers in the ecological system. The relevance of Bronfenbrenner's model to this research is because Bronfenbrenner believed child development is influenced by how children are treated by others, and that in turn, this is influenced by the environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

The bioecological model gave Bronfenbrenner's theory an important place in this programme of research with regard to attachment, and was in alignment with Bowlby's Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969). This can be seen via a consensus that attachment is influenced by continuous dynamic exchanges that take place between the child and the adult, within the context of the setting. Additionally, the adult's responsiveness can support attachment mechanisms or conversely neglect can exacerbate insecure attachment (Bowlby, 1969).

A third alignment was reflected in how Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Theory of Human Development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), helped us understand how attachment evolves over time and whilst cultural-specific, was also vulnerable to external factors in the wider social context. As can be seen, interactions were a central necessity for the programme of study, and these were found in what Bronfenbrenner referred to as proximal process (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). Therefore, selection of the bioecological iteration of the theory was helpful in that it prompted us to think about not just the places where child development occurs, but also how developments occur through adult-child interactions. Additionally, Bronfenbrenner acknowledged that proximal processes were mutually influenced by a persons' characteristics and by their environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This perspective emphasised the influence of interpersonal interactions on the biology of attachment and socioemotional development. Recalling that Bronfenbrenner stated that the child's biology and the environment both play a role in development, underpinned the development of the a priori research question, and ultimately our choice.

3.1.14 Conclusion

The focus of this section was on the selection and description of the theoretical framework for the current programme of research. Discussed here were the Transactional Model of Development (Sameroff & Fiese, 2000) and Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model on human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner and Evans, 2001; Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). These models of human development were reviewed in order to help select a framework for the study, and also to help develop the a priori research question.

Explored were the central arguments in both models regarding human development, however, the bioecological framework of human development was chosen because it helped further concepts of emotional regulation and intrapsychic and interpersonal adult-child interactions are central to attachment. These are the dynamic adult-child relationships and proximal processes as discussed

by Bronfenbrenner, which shape the biology of young children's attachment through interpersonal interactions. Therefore, Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory underpins the theoretical framework of relational pedagogy. The next Chapter evaluates Attachment research starting with literature on the seminal work of John Bowlby and moving into a more contemporary view of attachment relationships through research on Attachment Science.

Chapter Four: The Literature Review

4.1 Introduction

The focus of this Chapter is on attachment. Attachment can be understood as the close bond between an adult and a child, which creates a sense of relational safety and a felt sense of security in order to support the social and emotional well-being of the individual. The centrality of attachment research is due to a consensus on attachment as the foundation of early childhood mental health, which relies on attachment mechanisms. Explored here through salient literature are the central arguments regarding these specific attachment mechanisms.

In this chapter, attachment research will be reviewed chronologically to explore how Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969). The area of attachment research has progressed from a theoretical hypothesis to a scientific construct involving the influence of caregiver-child interactions on early brain development. The use of attachment research is a suitable area of study for this investigation, to explore its meaning to the current programme of research, and its relevance in answering the a prioiri research question. The initial a priori question asked; what are the developmental processes of attachment, and what behavioural and environmental factors influence these processes and impact socioemotional learning and development in children aged birth-to-three? This question guided the investigation of attachment research. Before the chapter explores this topic, the next section briefly explains how the chapter is structured, with a brief overview of each section to come.

4.1.2 The Structure of the Literature Review

The Literature Review is divided into five sections. Section One begins with a critical and analytical review of the literature regarding Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969). This section also introduces the work of Ainsworth (Ainsworth et al., 1978), Main (Main et al., 1985), and other attachment theorists, who expanded Bowlby's seminal ideas on the nature of attachment.

Section Two presents continues the discussion of Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969). This section sets out a review of attachment styles, caregivers as safe havens, and internal working models of relationships which act as attachment templates. This section discusses criticisms of attachment research studies.

Section Three presents research on the links between attachment and the early developing social brain to discuss how relational interactions shape early brain development. This section discusses the research which maps attachment mechanism onto social and emotional development. This includes how early attachments are formed primarily at a stage in child development which is non-verbal. The relevance of early brain development to attachment research is because brain development in the BTT years is happening at a time when the neural foundations of attachment and socioemotional learning (SEL) are laid. This section discusses these early non-verbal mechanisms, and highlights the relevance of these to early learning and care for birth-to-three children.

Section Four continues the focus on early brain development and explores the research on neuroplasticity. This section reviews salient research on how social interactions can change the brain's structure and neural connections, explaining how attachment is influenced by interpersonal interactions. This section discusses how attachments can and do change in response to different people and experiences. This offers a developmental account that associates the growth of attachment with the development of implicit memory and social expectations in infancy. This is owing to the malleable nature of the early developing social brain. This process of change offers a perspective of relationships that is congruent with Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model of development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) because it underpins the view that adult-child social interactions influence the development of attachment through a deeper, biological mechanism. The relevance of including neuroplasticity in a review on attachment, is because of the important

links between neuroplasticity, implicit memory, non-verbal communication, learning and development, and the links these have to attachment mechanisms.

These micro-factors support attachment development, such as experience-dependent and experience-expectant processes which support self-regulation, attention, autonomy, exploration, curiosity, and learning. These factors are discussed from a neurodevelopmental perspective which looks at facial expressions, listening, looking and vocalisations. These are the micro-factors that lay the foundation for social and emotional learning (SEL). The discussion explores this process to help develop the a priori research question, both as an important construct in socioemotional learning and a key concept in attachment.

Section Five explores the effect of neglect on attachment mechanisms. This section looks at adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), early years' mental health, play and its protective factors. ACEs can be understood as traumatic experiences which result in development of the set points for stress responses, leading to over-activation of the stress response system (Felitti et al., 1988). The literature on critical or sensitive periods in brain growth, and the consequences of neglect are also discussed, including the development of set points for stress activation and the effects of toxic stress.

The research selected and presented in the Literature Review has relevance to education, particularly to the field of early learning and care (ELC) and early intervention (EI). This is because EYE who may be working with BTT children, may also be working with children with special educational needs or disabilities (SEN/D). Taken together, all five sections are relevant to advance a priori research question and the chapter closes with the development of the main research question and sub-questions. To begin, Section One first presents an overview of Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969).

4.1.3 Introduction to Attachment Theory

Attachment is defined as the development of close emotional ties with others (Bowlby, 1946, 1969/1982, 1973, 1980, 1988). Close positive relationships formed in early childhood with a main caregiver go on to influence children's interaction style and attachments with others throughout their life (Ainsworth et al., 1978). This idea makes attachment an important consideration in the care and early learning of birth-to-three (BTT) children in ELC settings.

Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1996), spans many decades, dating back to the 1940's. The theory describes how the foundations of personality occur in the early years of child development due to the close relationship that develops between a child and their main caregiver (Bowlby, 1969). The idea of attachment was first brought into social awareness by the psychiatrist John Bowlby, in his book Forty-Four Juvenile Thieves: Their Characters and Home-Life (Bowlby, 1946), as a mechanism for developing a sense of safety and security. The central tenet is that our early relationships influence our view of people and the world, and this impacts on our interactions style with others (Bowlby, 1969). The attachment bond is also said to influence the development of social and emotional traits in personality development (Ainsworth et al., 1978).

4.1.4 Affection as the Foundation of Security

Bowlby argued that infants and young children innately seek closeness to a primary caregiver for safety and security, and that the quality of this early relationship has long-term effects on their subsequent social and emotional development (Bowlby, 1946). This belief originated from his study of forty-four young criminals. These were children, both male and female, aged between 6 and 16 years of age, who were in juvenile care owing to offences such as stealing. Bowlby believed that ruptures in their maternal attachment, as reported by some of the children, affected their ability to form close secure attachments with others in subsequent relationships. Bowlby later termed these affectional bonds (Bowlby, 1979), and maintained that disruption in the relationship with the

mother figure during a critical period in early childhood development, contributed to later delinquency (Bowlby, 1946). In writing his conclusions, Bowlby noted “had it not been for certain factors inimical to the healthy development of the capacity for object love, certain children would not have become offenders” (Bowlby, 1946, p. 53). Bowlby found support for his theory, mainly from animal studies, which the next section looks at.

4.1.5 Critical Period for Attachment

Bowlby was influenced by the studies being conducted at that time by Konrad Lorenz. This involved the study of imprinting in geese (Lorenz, 1935). From Lorenz’ research came the idea of a critical period for attachment (Lorenz, 1935, in Hess, 1958) which supported Bowlby’s theory. He was further supported by other studies making the case for critical periods for attachment, for example, studies which looked at the issue of nurturing, and not food, for attachment.

Harlow and Zimmermann (1959) had looked at the issue of love and affection in attachment, through an experiment which involved monkeys raised with a wire framed substitute mother figure, and a soft cloth-covered substitute mother. Although both substitute figures still provided nourishment, the monkeys favoured the soft feel of the cloth-covered mother. Harlow concluded that comfort was a key predictor of emotional attachment, and that affection was linked to attachment in order to create a sense of security, and not just the offer of nutrition (Harlow & Zimmermann, 1959).

These experiments also exposed monkeys to frightening stimuli and observed that they choose the cloth figure for safety, even though it had no nourishment to give at that time (Harlow & Zimmermann, 1959). As a consequence, the monkey’s behaviours both physical and emotional were noted as abnormal. For example, as they matured, they exhibited behaviours which took the form of staring blankly, remaining in social isolation, exhibiting group disinterest, and heightened anxiety (Harlow & Zimmermann, 1959). It appeared that deprivation of affection had yielded long-term consequences for the socioemotional development of the monkeys (Blum, 2000).

In essence, what Harlow's research concluded was that without close affectionate bonds and attachments, the monkeys did not develop the ability to relate to each other socially or emotionally. The findings from these experiments helped shed light on the concept of attachment. Bowlby's conclusions about attachment behaviour was that attachment was characterised not only by protection from danger, but also by emotional cues of safety and reassurance, offered through the proximity or emotional availability of the adult (Bowlby, 1988).

However, there were differences and similarities between human beings and the young of other species. These differences were in how other species sought shelter and safety, for example in places such as burrows in the ground or high treetops (Bowlby, 1988). However, human infants seek safety in the form of emotional availability from another person. With this idea, attachment theory proposed that physical closeness is represented by emotional availability, and the proximity of the adult to the child (Bowlby, 1988). Attachment theory thus became centred on the early developing stages of socialisation. The idea of a critical period for attachment is important to this review because early childhood, and in particular the age from birth-to-three, is according to Bowlby (1969, 1988), a critical period for attachment formation. Therefore, it is critically important that adults prioritise the development of consistent, attuned and responsive relationships. Drawing on Attachment Theory, particularly the work of John Bowlby, early emotional bonds provide the foundation for the development of internal working models that shape children's expectations of self and others. These relational experiences are further understood through the concept of attunement as outlined by Daniel Stern (1985), whereby caregiver sensitivity to children's emotional states supports the development of self-regulation and intersubjectivity. In the absence of such relational consistency children may experience disruptions in socio-emotional development with potential implications for learning, behaviour, and well-being. This is particularly significant for younger children for whom relational experiences are not supplementary to learning, but constitute the primary context through which development and learning occur.

4.1.6 Conclusion

This first section introduced attachment theory based on the work of John Bowlby (1969, 1988). As can be seen, attachment is considered foundational to children's healthy development. Therefore, with regard to this programme of research, this idea is important because it highlights the need for consistency, responsiveness and emotional availability as part of the role of working with EYE. The next section will focus on the work of Mary Ainsworth and colleagues, in developing Bowlby's original theory, and exploring attachment styles. and internal working models.

4.2 Section 2 Attachment Styles

As reviewed in the above section, the idea of emotional availability in caregiver-child interactions is an important element in attachment research. Emotional availability as a factor in attachment, led to the classification of caregiver interaction styles. This next section discusses the empirical research, that in turn, led to the documentation of different attachments styles in children, which was based on the construct of emotional availability, which led to caregiver interaction styles.

Attachment styles and patterns of relationship expectations were discovered by Ainsworth et al., (1978) through research which set out to test Bowlby's original theory. According to Ainsworth et al., (1978) relationship expectations develop in the child as a result of the emotional availability of the adult, where styles of interpersonal interaction in relationships could be predicted to remain long into adulthood (Ainsworth et al., 1978). An experiment called "The Strange Situation" (SS) was designed by Ainsworth (Ainsworth & Wittig, 1969), whereby twenty-six mothers and their infants, with whom Ainsworth had conducted observations in their home over the previous year (Ainsworth, 1970), were recruited.

The SS experiment began with infants being present with their mothers and presented with opportunities to explore a toy-filled laboratory room. Two separations of the mother leaving the room and a stranger entering the room in mothers' absence, were conducted. The infants were

observed during these times and hypotheses were formed about their reactions to the mother leaving. The first hypothesis was that the children who were previously observed the year before as being 'secure' would (a) explore freely with their mother present, (b) become distressed on her departure, and (c) quickly recover on her return.

The second hypothesis was that the infants recorded as 'insecure' would be very upset at being separated from their mother. Ainsworth recorded the difference in how the infants reacted to the separation from their mothers, and made the startling discovery that the differences lay in patterns of communication (Ainsworth et al., 1978). Ainsworth concluded that it was differences in caregiving which was of paramount importance for forming an attachment model, such as the nature of the caregiving the infants had received. This, according to Ainsworth et al., (1978), this style or relational expectation, would become a template for all other relationships. This template was inferred through relational expectations called Internal Working Models (IWM), which will be discussed in more detail in a later section.

In classifying attachment behaviours, Ainsworth developed the concept of attachment styles, which she subsequently classified as; secure, anxious (ambivalent or preoccupied), and avoidant (dismissive) (Ainsworth et al., 1978). According to the theory, these different attachment styles lead to different behaviours in relationships. For example, children with a secure attachment show signs of feeling safe and secure, and they explore their environment. They have learned to trust that their caregiver is available and responsive to their needs. They may be distraught when their caregiver is unavailable, but are quickly soothed by the caregivers return (Ainsworth et al., 1978).

Children with an anxious attachment style on the other half, show no confidence that their caregiver is reliable or available. They do not seek comfort from them because they have learned the caregiver does not provide responsive care consistently. They mistrust the caregiver, and become independent and self-reliant. They may have difficulty trusting others and later developing close relationships. Children with an avoidant attachment style avoid or reject contact with their

caregiver when they are upset, and are often not very dependent on their caregiver. They show no distress when their caregiver is unavailable, and even avoid eye contact when their caregiver returns. This also leads to later difficulty forming healthy relationships (Ainsworth et al., 1978).

Disorganised Attachment was a fourth classification of attachment style, identified by Main and Solomon (1986), in their protocol, which was similar to Ainsworth's SS protocol. They identified that children with a disorganised attachment style have usually suffered frightening experiences with their caregiver. They exhibit conflicting behaviours, such as not knowing whether to approach their caregiver for comfort or to stay away. They display avoidant and resistant behaviours and may have difficulty regulating their emotions and behaviours (Siegel et al., 2017). The classification was expanded later to "sometimes, brief, out-of-context, unexpected, or inconsistent behaviours, which suggested disorientation, fear in relation to the caregiver, or a high level of conflict about approach to the caregiver" (Duschinsky & Solomon, 2017, p. 524). In short, disorganised attachment style was the one which carried the greatest threat to the child's emotional development as no safe haven could be found either in the caregiver or themselves, which the next section will discuss.

4.2.1 Caregivers as the Safe Haven

Ainsworth built on Bowlby's notion of emotional availability, and added caregiver sensitivity (Ainsworth et al., 1978) to his theory of the caregiver as a safe haven (Bowlby, 1969). By positioning the focus on the caregiver, this re-positioned the caregiver and put the focus on non-verbal aspects of caregiving behaviours. The classification of attachment style thus prompted a belief that the representation of the caregiver as a safe haven, not only determined emotional security, but also the child's approach towards him or herself, others, and his own feelings of trust, going forward into adulthood (Bretherton, 1992). This was received by society and the research community, as attachment being dependent on patterns of communication, and the behaviour of the caregiver (Bretherton, 1992). This meant Bowlby's original theory (Bowlby, 1946), moved from an emphasis

on proximity seeking in children, to a greater focus on caregiver behaviours and communication styles, from which the child generated their own understanding of relationship security (Ainsworth et al., 1978).

Consequently, it was feared that children carrying an attachment disorder into later life, would unconsciously be influenced in their own attachment style in relationships and behaviour with friends, teachers, and parents. If this was a relationship which instilled a felt sense of safety, this would lead the child to curiosity and exploration of the environment due to feeling secure. However, if an attachment disorder existed, this could act as a defence mechanism for the child, leading the child to develop a defensive stance to maintain distance and thus safety (Thompson, 2006).

Caregivers as safe havens is an important construct to this research. This is because EYE become representative of relationships formed through their interpersonal interactions with the children. In the context of primary (parent) and secondary (EYE) caregiver roles, these representations become internalised as a working model of a relationship. In the ECCE context, patterns of staff attrition within the ELC sector take on particular developmental concern. The concept of caregivers as safe heavens is grounded in Attachment Theory as articulated by John Bowlby (1969). Within this framework, primary caregivers typically parent's, serve as the child's principal source of security, while EYE in ECCE settings function as secondary attachment figures, providing additional sources of emotional security through consistent, responsive and attuned interactions. While these relationships do not replace primary attachments, they none-the-less operate as safe havens, during periods of non-parental presence. This is because EYE become representative of relationships formed through their interpersonal interactions with the children. These representations become internalised as an internal working model (IWM) of a relationship. Therefore, the formation of a secure IWM is contingent upon the quality of the adult-child interaction, which the next section will discuss.

4.2.2 Internal Working Models

The focus of this section is on the notion of an internal working model (IWM) of attachment. An IWM can be understood as a relationship template or a guide. The centrality of an IWM in the wider literature on attachment, is the debate around the issue of whether IWM of attachments can change with different people, and with different relational experiences. This section will first discuss IWM's through extending the notion of relational expectations.

How children interpret relational experiences is an underpinning construct in relationships. Bowlby believed these become established very early in childhood with these interpretations became internalised through internal working models (IWM) (Bowlby, 1988).

IWM are another important construct for the a priori research question to explore. As discussed, Ainsworth believed that childhood attachments styles became an IWM of relationship expectations, and that the non-verbal aspect of infancy meant that these expectations became embedded non-verbally in caregiving interactions (Ainsworth et al., 1978). Bowlby believed that IWM's existed as static attachment-related beliefs that affect subsequent expectations of emotional availability in later close relationships (Bowlby, 1980). IWM are based on the child's expectations of the availability and responsiveness of the caregiver, and ultimately influences how they behave in relation to those expectations (Thompson, 2006). Researchers have built on this formulation by offering a developmental account that associates the growth of IWM with cognitive development in early childhood (Main, 1991; Thompson, 2006). Bretherton's and Munholland (1999) took the view that IWM are not static, as opposed to Bowlby's original thinking. Rather, IWM are conceptualised as being related to mental schemas (Bretherton & Munholland, 1999), and because they are linked to memory, they can merge into self-concepts and interpretations of how one sees him or herself (Bretherton, 1992).

Thompson (2006) explored if IWM could be changed, and offered an account that associates the growth of IWMs with development of implicit memory and social expectations in infancy.

Thompson linked these to the emergence of theory of mind and autobiographical memory in the preschool years, and the development of specific social cognitive skills later in childhood. As explained by Thompson, (2006) "When a developmental understanding of IWMs is linked to encoding, representation, and memory of social experience, the growth of attachment related working models can be conceptualized more precisely and studied in relation to children's cognitive growth" (pg. 2). Thompson concluded that IWM, regardless of their unconscious influences as suggested by Bowlby and Ainsworth, are based on cognitive processes that change with development. However, it is interesting to note that the influence of positive IWM's may not be enduring, unless the actual attachment is maintained (Thompson, 2006).

Having an expectation of availability and responsiveness in caregiving contexts is important in this programme of research. This is critical in the context of staff working with BTT children in the ELC sector in Ireland. It suggests that workforce stability has direct implications for children's socio-emotional development, particularly for BTT children, who are more reliant on consistent relational experiences. This is because emotional availability plays an important role in fostering secure attachments, which influence the creation of trust as a template for children's future relationships into adulthood, which the next section will discuss.

4.2.3 Adults' Internal Working Model of Attachment

Mary Main, a previous student of Ainsworth, looked at how non-verbal interactions with the caregiver are registered in the child's memory. Main theorised that the non-verbal interactions identified in the SS experiment, formed mental rules for interpreting experiences and social cues. This was in relation to making sense of an event or an experience, and in the way, individuals think about, remember, and act on the memory of a caregiving experience or event. Main's argument

drew attention to the importance an individual ascribes to an event in their recall, or narrative of the care they received as children, and how attachment experiences made them feel.

Like Bowlby and Ainsworth, Main situated attachment as a survival system. Her research developed the work of Ainsworth (and by association Bowlby's theory), by expanding their idea of attachment as a survival or defence mechanism, into a form of representational systems (Main, 1995). Along with two graduate students, Main developed the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) (George, Kaplan & Main, 1985) which looked at the verbal responses and the words adults choose to describe their childhoods. She also looked for coherence in the narratives of the relationships they described in the present-day relationships with their own parents and children. These narratives she later described as the individual's capacity to place a coherent and reflective attitude towards attachment experiences.

Main's fourth attachment style called disorganised attachment highlighted the importance of the capacity for reflection (Maine and Solomon, 1986). This was based not just on a person's own childhood memories, but also on their capacity to adopt a reflective stance towards their experiences. Main upheld the idea that they could achieve this through reflective functioning (Maine and Solomon, 1990). They claimed reflective capacity helped adults to come to understand many alternative perspectives in assessing their relationships with their own parents or caregivers (Main, 1995). As such, according to Maine's analysis, nothing predicts an adult's caregiver sensitivity and capacity to form a secure attachment better than the attitude taken towards their own personal history of attachment and caregiver experiences (Main, 1995).

4.2.4 Conclusion

The focus of this section was on internal working model (IWM) of attachment. As discussed, an IWM is the notion of the development of relationship templates or guides. As explored, the central argument in the literature regarding IWM is regarding relational expectations that, according to the

researchers, become embedded non-verbally from caregiving interactions. Also reviewed here were salient literatures to explore the idea that an IWM of relationships can change.

This is important to this review because with relevance to EYE working with BTT children in an early education setting. For example, the child's IWM of relationship expectations would be good if the educator/child relationship in the setting is secure, but damaging if the caregiver interactions are hurried, inconsistent or passive. Furthermore, if the practitioner is stressed or consistently preoccupied, the attachment relationships in these circumstances are at risk. In this way, the child's sense of security and their internal working model of the caregivers' emotional availability, is influenced by the EYE' interactions.

Therefore, the constructs within Attachment Theory, such as emotional availability (Bowlby, 1969), caregiver sensitivity (Ainsworth et al., 1978), and internal working models, are relevant to BTT children in early education, and are another important process of attachment, and a clear aspect of the behavioural and environmental factors which influence and impact socioemotional learning and development in children aged birth-to-three.

4.2.5 Criticisms of Attachment Theory

As with many theories, attachment theory has been shown to have criticisms that have varied over time. The most pertinent ones for this research include claims that attachment concepts are a typically western notion of white middle-class origin, and one which only underpins the values of one particular culture (Tronick, 2007). In addition, some prominent child development researchers such as Kagan (1978) question the methodology used in establishing the Strange Situation (Ainsworth et al., 1978). These were not just of the time, contemporary claims with important relevance for this study include Fitzgerald (2020) who argues that Bowlby's work saw no evaluation of pre-existing conditions in the children that Bowlby originally assessed.

4.2.6 Developmental Disorders

As highlighted by Fitzgerald (2020), special educational needs were not considered when referring to the children as "affectionless" (Bowlby 1946). In addition, Fitzgerald discusses how concern about the loose and vague way that attachment disorders are diagnosed, runs the risk of overlooking other conditions such as ADHD and ASD disorders. He points out that Bowlby's idea of specificity (Bowlby, 1979), of the mother/child bond is not sustained, and that the problems in mother/child relationships which Bowlby believed led to specific attachment disorders, are not supported by these alternative considerations (Fitzgerald, 2020).

4.2.7 Differences in Culture

Further criticism relevant to this research rejects fundamental assumptions of attachment theory. These are viewed as differences in culture. For example, Rothbaum et al., (2000) notes that in Japan, sensitivity and secure base are viewed very differently, and call into question the Strange Situation protocol. Kagan also calls into question the protocol of the Strange Situation, and maintains that Ainsworth's design is simply not a reliable methodology (Kagan, 1998).

In his book, Three Seductive Ideas (Kagan, (1998) criticises attachment theory as "infant determinism". The seductive ideas he refers to are, Abstraction, Infant Determinism, and Morality, and within these he focuses his argument on false beliefs and incorrect assumptions concerning human development and attachment. Kagan asserts that early relationships do not determine lifelong patterns of relating, because the idea would negate a person's capacity for resilience and adaptation (Kagan & Herschkowitz, 2005).

This is plausible given that IWM's can change in response to different relationships. Other criticism of attachment theory called for broader interrogations of the construct of maternal deprivation (Rutter, 1972). More recently, Edwards et al., (2015), maintain Attachment Theory positions

mothers as “architects of their children’s poverty and deprivation (p. 17). They refer to the potential pressure it brings to parents who are already struggling under low socio-economic conditions. From a socio-political perspective, Edwards et al., (2015) claim that attachment theory redefines the parent–child relationship in biologised, instrumental, and dehumanised terms and that the idea of only forming an attachment to one caregiver positions mothers as architects of, and responsible for their children’s deprivation. This they claim, justified race and social inequalities by allowing the British Government at the time to shirk their responsibilities in addressing the social and political determinants of health. In addition, the researchers claim that a biological emphasis on mothers being attuned to their infants, also embeds a gendered focus on caregiving.

In other words, what is criticised is the implication of attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969), to have a tendency towards a continuous primary caregiver relationship, and this has been the subject of a long-standing debate for positioning the mother as the principal determining factor for attachment outcomes. This idea overlooked broader social, cultural, and contextual influences on attachment. Subsequent research challenged this deterministic view of caregiving. For example, Hodges and Tizard (1989) found that children raised in residential nursery settings were capable of forming multiple attachments, and did not necessarily experience long-term socioemotional deficits when separated from a primary caregiving figure. Their findings highlighted the role of consistency and quality of care, rather than exclusive maternal attachment as critical factors in children’s socioemotional development, asserting that attachment relationships are more flexible than Bowlby originally thought.

Criticisms have also extended to the biographical influences underpinning Bowlby’s theoretical position. As later discussed by Tizard (2009), Bowlby’s own early experiences of separation and loss, such as the loss of an adored children’s nanny at age four, and starting boarding school at age seven, have been argued to have shaped his emphasis on maternal deprivation, raising questions regarding the extent to which his theory reflects his own personal interpretation. While such

critiques do not invalidate attachment theory, they highlight the need for more understanding of caregiving influences.

4.2.8 Summary

Despite the criticisms, it would seem that the construct of attachment remains a constant theory in developmental psychology research. Bowlby established attachment as an innate behavioural system which ensured the survival of the species. As discussed in this Chapter, Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1946, 1969. 1980, 1988), suggests that children who grow up receiving negative or passive adult-child interactions fail to form stable attachments to adults. In addition, attachment style describes the development of patterns of expectation in close adult-child relationships, in relation to the self. Attachment Theory also discusses how an individual's way of managing fear and anxiety over the lifespan is formed in relation to early attachments, and a felt sense of security and emotional capacity (Bowlby, 1969). Attachment theory as first postulated by Bowlby (1969), has remained a constant in child development studies, and researchers such as Mary Ainsworth firmly situated testing the theory in child development empirical research. Her findings suggest that the attitude and disposition of the adult towards the child is of paramount importance, not just in setting up an attachment styles and patterns of relating but also is important to the child's sense of security (Ainsworth et al., 1978). Main's research suggested that the adult's patterns of relating have long-term previous links to how they themselves were parented, and she sought to investigate the effects of their own attachment style, on caregiving practices with regard to emotional well-being and healthy psychological development (Main, Kaplan, and Cassidy, 1985).

Main et al., (1985) concluded that as a general rule, the more reflective the caregiver is as regards their attachment experiences, whether positive or negative, the more resilient and capable they are thought to be in creating or encouraging the development of secure attachments in children, and the less likely they are to meet 'like with like' behaviours. The influence of internal working

models (IWM) was identified by later researchers on internalised models of security and found that these are as changeable and malleable in response to caregiving (Thompson, 2006), where IWM set up expectations of relationships. These are unconscious patterns of behaviour and beliefs that remain with the individual and over time, which influence subsequent expectations of emotional availability in later close relationships.

Research suggests that these patterns have long-term effects for emotional well-being and healthy psychological development, and even consequences for forming close relationships in adulthood. They provide theoretical foundations which supports the idea of how early relationship experiences in childhood influence human development and inform decision we make from this research on attachment relationships with children in the birth-to-three years of age, which emphasises emotional availability.

4.2.9 Conclusion

The focus of this section was on attachment theory. As discussed, attachment is the notion of close emotional ties with others. As explored, the central argument in the literature regarding attachment is that caregiver behaviours must consist of adult availability, both emotional and physical presence. Reviewed here were the salient literatures to explore the idea of emotional availability or "presence" as central to attachment relationships. As can be seen, emotional availability and presence of the caregiver in adult-child relationships children are among the environmental and behavioural factors which influence the developmental processes at the heart of attachment. This research is important to this review because reviewing these conclusions helps to address the concept of attachment for the a priori research question. As will be remembered, the a priori research question asked; what are the developmental processes of attachment, and what behavioural and environmental factors influence these processes, and impact socioemotional learning and development in children aged birth-to-three?

As identified in this section, the emotional presence of the caregiver is among the factors involved in the influences which impact children's developmental processes through relations systems. Consequently, emotional availability and presence provide an important aspect of relationships with the caregiver positioned as a safe haven for promoting secure attachments. The next Chapter synthesises contemporary attachment research, highlighting the uniqueness of early emotional development through an evidence-based neuro-relational perspective, using a translational lens (Westfall et al., 2007), which can provide a vehicle for how this research can be translated.

4.3 Section Three:

4.3.1 Attachment Science

Having set out the theory of attachment, attention now turns to the contemporary attachment literature at the intersection where attachment theory meets developmental theory. As previously mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the research at this intersection can be understood as Developmental Science (DS). This field of research has been built on Bowlby's (1969) Attachment Theory, but is influenced by contemporary research from the field of developmental neuroscience, developmental neurobiology, psychotherapy research, and developmental psychology. DS research has progressed attachment research, and is now focused on topics such as relationships, early brain development, personality development, and social and emotional development. This is important in child development research because it has led to more contemporary thinking on the influence of interpersonal interactions, and on the neurobiology of attachment (Schore, 2016; Siegel, 2012).

Whilst this programme of research does not measure the neurobiology of attachment, the work of developmental scientists has been a notable influence on the literature concerning development of attachment and socioemotional learning. This reflects a contemporary scientific view of emotional brain development. This has relevance to this study because, drawing on Lebedeva's notion of a "neuro-relational" framework (2018, p.21). This is similar to the concept put forward by

Lillas & Turnbull, where relationships are “the dominant influence for the developing brain” (2009, p. 39). Hence a neuro-relational pedagogy for social and emotional development is recognised by this as relevant to relational pedagogy in the context of ELC for BTT children.

The focus of this section therefore is to discuss the central arguments and key topics in relation to Developmental Science using a translational lens to explore Attachment Science and its meaning to relational pedagogy. To begin, the construct of a translational lens is first presented.

4.3.2 A Translational Research Lens for Interpreting Developmental Neuroscience

Translational Research (TR) explains basic science discoveries quickly and efficiently into practices (National Centre for Advancing Translational Sciences, 2025). The goal of translating scientific research is to support and promote transdisciplinary approaches and collaboration from across different disciplines, and to identify a space for the translation of research (Crosnoe, 2012). According to the National Institutes of Health (NIH), TR is defined as research which is aimed at enhancing the adoption of best practices (NIH, 2023).

Consistent with Crosnoe (2012), TR provides this programme of attachment research with a model to translate developmental neuroscience to benefit early education policy and practice, and for research in Early Intervention (EI). As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, the reason why translating developmental science is necessary for this programme of research is because research on the neurobiology of attachment is at the cutting edge of contemporary attachment research to date, and the link between attachment and early brain development has gained considerable attention in the literature in the last two decades. Therefore, this research can be explored for potential outcomes that directly support early education and early intervention pedagogy.

4.3.3 Early Brain Development

Before any discussion of attachment science can take place, a synopsis of early brain development is presented first. This is necessary as early brain development is part of the contemporary literature on attachment. Therefore, before beginning this section, the reader is directed to Appendix 1 for a brief outline of the principles of early brain development, synthesised from the fields of developmental neurobiology and developmental neuroscience.

4.3.4 Brain as a Social Organ

4.3.5 Introduction

The focus of this section is on how the environment influences socioemotional development through the early formation of structures in the developing social brain. The concept of the social brain highlights how adult - child interactions enable the integration of the psychological and biological attachment system, through implicit memories (Siegel, 2012). Whilst these interactions reside in memories, for the BTT child they are outside of conscious awareness, and they create real and lasting memories of connection through nonverbal communication. These can be communicated to the child as an emotional state from the adult, and transmitted to the child for better or worse.

A felt sense of security is important for the foundation of early years' mental health (Pomeroy & Sanfilippo, 2015). This is because adult-child interactions, are embedded in non-verbal communication. Therefore, explored in this Section are the early, non-verbal stages of development for BTT children. As will be seen, these are important constructs to include because at this age, language and communication are often still at the non-verbal stage for BTT children. To begin. The Section discusses the links between attachment and socioemotional development.

4.3.6 Attachment and Early Social and Emotional Development

As previously mentioned, traditionally it was the work of Bowlby (1969) and Ainsworth (Ainsworth et al., 1979), which generated many hypotheses about early relationships and psychological well-being in early childhood. Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969) is still considered the dominant model explaining human emotional development (Baylin & Hughes, 2016; Schore, 2016). However contemporary research regarding attachment has linked it to socioemotional learning (SEL) (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2014; Schore, 2016, 2003a). The last two decades of attachment research have seen the influence of early social interactions receive further increased attention, especially in terms of early brain and social development. The conclusion is that social and emotional learning (SEL) is built on attachment because these mechanisms form at a time of rapid brain growth (Davids et al., 2003). This rapid growth has consequences for developmental outcomes. SEL skills are likely to be underdeveloped among children whose attachment is at risk (Mustard, 2002). Social interactions with adults are of special importance for the developmental processes of attachment because emerging socioemotional capacities influence social transactions in caregiving, through the one-to-one interactions children have with their primary caregivers (Schore, 2003b). Within this perspective, the developmental process involved in attachment is described by means of the neurobiology of functional areas of the brain, and more importantly by neurohormones, the building blocks of brain architecture. These are produced in response to social encounters with others, which exert an influence on the child's emotions and behaviours (Mustard, 2002).

Previous studies which looked at SEL issues include, intervention programmes (Navsharia, et al., 2020), bullying (Bradshaw, & Waasdorp, 2020), academic achievement (Mutepfa, 2013), socio-economic status (Blair & Raver 2012), and parenting practices (Soenens et al., 2010). However, for the purposes of this research, SEL competencies lay the trajectory for all learning to come (Davids et al., 2003; de Haan & Gunnar, 2009). This growth is said to facilitate the development of core

capacities which motivate emotional development, and psychological well-being in social relationships with others (Fox, et al, 2012; Israelashvili et al., 2020; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2007, 2006). Therefore, attachment in early childhood supports social and emotional learning, as another developmental process through which children acquire the skills necessary to understand emotions, regulate behaviours and create meaningful relationships with others. This has relevance to this programme of research because birth-to-three (BTT), is a critical period for establishing neurological foundations for psychological, emotional and relational functioning for emotional well-being, which the next section will discuss.

4.3.7 Attachment as a Regulating Mechanism of Affect

In recent times some psychotherapy researchers have yielded substantial links between neurobiology and emotional well-being. The shared links between psychotherapy, attachment, and neurobiology had been previously heralded by both Bowlby (1988) and Schore (2003a), as an integration of both fields through a focus of attachment as a mechanism essential in healthy emotional development in infancy (Schore, 2016; 2003b). Schore asserts that attachment is a regulating mechanism of affect (Schore, 2016), and as such the influence of attachment is emotional regulation (Schore, 2016). Schore's concept of affect regulation is built on Bowlby's original theory of attachment (Bowlby, 1969). However, Score's research goes further and posits attachment as an organiser of early brain and emotional development, with the attachment system operating as a component of social development and emotional self-regulation (Schore, 2016).

The central tenets of Schore's work describe the neurobiological foundations of socioemotional development in terms of cognitive development, including psychological and neurological maturity (Schore, 2016). He links biological structures in the infants developing brain with attachment mechanisms. According to Schore, this contemporary view expands the concept of attachment to a psychoneurobiological model of early emotional development, in which socioemotional learning

is the product of neurobiological and neurochemical mechanisms, enabled by attachment relationships (Schore, 2016). Schore discusses how the child acquires the skill of managing emerging emotions by way of the caregiver modelling self-regulation for them, until they learn to regulate themselves (Schore, 2003b). This is similar to research on self-regulation by Shanker (2012), who posits that self-regulation modelled by adults through attachment experiences scaffold children's future mental health through the foundations laid for emotional regulation and social development.

Within a developmental neuroscientific paradigm, Schore (2016) asserts that emotional processing operates non-verbally. For example, when a young child looks at his or her caregiver's smiling face, he or she is able to see and register a very definite bodily-based signal that conveys joy and pleasure. This message of enjoyment in the social engagement is said to be contained in the caregiver's eyes and smile. These social communications inform the child on a nonverbal unconscious level, that the carer's sympathetic nervous system has been activated (Schore, 2016). Schore describes "a visible sparkle" (2016, p. 74), in the caregiver's eyes, which is unconsciously registered by the child as a flash of light reflected off the caregiver's retina. He suggests that these social communication signals conveyed within the positive expressions of the caregiver, are implicitly understood by the child as interest and attention. According to Schore, these bodily signals lay down neural circuits for processing social and emotional information (Schore, 2016). Within adult-child interpersonal interactions, eye contact and the smiling face of the caregiver indelibly imprint onto the child's neurological structures, producing hormones such as oxytocin, vasopressin, and dopamine. In response, the child's nervous system activates and replies in kind with the production of dopamine (Schore 2016). This two-way interaction triggers a reciprocal bio-chemical response in both the child and the adult's nervous system. Oxytocin, vasopressin, and dopamine, sometimes called "happy hormones" are among a group of neurohormones opioid chemicals called endorphins (Kandel, 2000). Schore contends that the production of dopamine

influences the child's emotional response, including the type of response, the intensity, and duration of the interaction (Schore, 2003b).

Within a psychotherapeutic paradigm, Schore argues that emotional processes operate non-verbally, and beneath levels of consciousness. These capacities are said to influence to a profound degree, the organisation of an integrated, stable and adaptable emotion processing system, and ultimately the formation of mental health (Nelson et al., 2014; Schore, 2016).

Similarly, Gerhardt (2015) also claims that these forms of communication are understood implicitly by the child as an indicator of joy, pleasure, and interest. According to Gerhardt (2015), this social interaction stimulates attachment mechanisms that are essential for the maturation of an area of the brain called the orbitofrontal cortex (OFC), which prompts a further increase in positive emotions in the child. These are then reciprocated back to the caregiver in an interactive nonverbal conversation (Gerhardt, 2015). During these positive communications, endorphins nourish the brain, soaking it in a nutritious flood of nutrient hormones (Gerhardt, 2015). This is what enables neurons to grow and extend their connections across other regions of the brain (Kuhn, 2011). In return, the brain doubles its weight in response to these neurochemicals, which are thought to produce feelings of reward and motivation, and which facilitate a sense of emotional well-being, and a desire to repeat the experience (Schore, 2016).

Social encounters such as this are emotionally rewarding and regulating. Hofer (1994) refers to the caregiver in these interactions as a hidden regulator of children's physiology, and maintains that this is due to the adult's mature nervous system influencing the child's immature nervous system. Schore's research maintains that activation of neural activity during an interpersonal interaction is reported to create a memory trace of the caregiver's face, through a continuous feedback loop (Schore, 2016). It is repetition of this activation through a feedback loop which releases the neurohormones dopamine, and other neurohormones. Dopamine production continues to influence neural activity, nourishing neurons and determining which motivational system will be

activated, and which emotion-specific behaviour will be extended, in answer to the caregiver's interaction (Schore, 2016).

Describing the anatomy of an interaction is important to this research because as can be seen, brain development is experience-dependent, and shaped by caregiver interactions. This is important because it forms the basis or template for later attachment relationships based on pre-verbal thought. Having discussed the link between attachment and socioemotional development, the next section will discuss the link between attachment and the development of pre-verbal thought.

4.3.8 Attachment and Nonverbal Communications Attachment and Attunement

The type of communication as discussed by Schore (2016, 2003b), is similar to Davidson's (2010), discussion of attachment mechanisms. Both researchers agree that when this particular type of information is transmitted, it is always nonverbal. During nonverbal communications these interactions become embedded in the neural circuitry of the child's developing nervous system (Davidson, 2010). When adult and child are interacting and influencing each other, both are said to be 'attuned' (Davidson, 2010).

Attunement provides the kind of influence that either further enhances growth and maturation of the nervous system or conversely, if there are relational difficulties, disrupts the early forming of brain structures (Schore, 2003b). The influence of the adult's mature nervous system is exerted via the emotion-regulating neural circuits discussed previously, which are formed in response to close relational experiences (Baylin and Hughes, 2016). As socioemotional circuits and neural pathways are formed primarily at a time in a child's life when communication is mostly non-verbal, these interactions become psychobiologically embedded through the experience-reliant mechanisms that are already present and awaiting activation in the neural structures of the child's developing brain (Schore, 2016).

The inclusion of children's pre-verbal thought as being organised by attachments is important to this study. This is because infants are primed for social communication. They form representations of what is to be expected from adults. The next section will explore the research which discusses other non-verbal communication which is part of the behavioural and environmental influences on attachment processes.

4.3.9 Attachment and Body Language

In practical terms, emotion-regulating actions specifically apply to the behavioural, cognitive, and emotional processes in adults that facilitate or enable emotional self-regulation in children. As observed by Schore, these are traditionally considered to be under the conscious control of rational thinking (Schore, 2003b). However, he attributes the ability to regulate emotions to nonverbal communications received in positive socioemotional interactions. Schore suggests that within moment-to-moment interactions and non-verbal exchanges, biopsychosocial processing of the interaction occurs unconsciously or 'non-consciously' (Schore, 2003a) beneath conscious awareness.

Other attachment mechanisms are similarly activated due to the ability of the adult's mature nervous system to influence the child's immature nervous system which in turn further activates motivational and reward circuits (Schore, 2003b). While BTT children primarily communicate through non-verbal means, caregivers engage in verbal and non-verbal ways of interacting., using language to interpret, label and extend children's communication skills. Through these repeated interactions the development of pre-verbal thought and social understanding, including the recognition of emotions through facial expressions, is communicated (Rolls, 2006).

This exchange of emotional states produces a mental representation of the adult's facial expression (2003b). This image is then compared to previously scanned images of the caregiver's face, which are held in memory via the hippocampus, in response to earlier experiences with the caregiver

(Rolls, 2006). Schore believes a particular type of information is transmitted in these nonverbal communications between both individual via their nervous systems, which becomes embedded in the dynamic of the relationship. The mature nervous system of the adult acts as a role model and external regulator of the child's nervous system and provides the kind of support that further enhances growth and maturation of the OFC via the emotion-regulating neural circuits forming in the child's developing brain in response to the social exchanges (Schore, 2003b).

These mind-to-mind, brain-to-brain connections which facilitate and enable emotional regulation and attachment, are thought to be embedded through "experience-expectant" mechanisms awaiting activation in the child which influence the brain structural systems that will come to dominate and regulate all future socioemotional and psychosocial abilities (Schore, 2003b). This forms the nonverbal communication and unconscious messaging children receive every day during adult-child interactions, which although they involve personally meaningful interactions, largely exist under the radar (Schore, 2003b). Therefore, scanning faces for smiles, paying close attention to the tone of voice and tracking eye contact, enables the child to interpret nonverbally the meaning behind these human expressions of emotion.

These nonverbal forms of communication are important to this programme of research because nonverbal cues and facial expressions such as tone, prosody of voice, and eye contact are central to interpersonal interactions between adults and young children and therefore central to a relational pedagogy in supporting EYE attachment relationships with BTT children. The next section discusses how nonverbal forms of communication become embedded into the child's developing attachment system through implicit memories.

4.3.10 Children's Attachments and Pre-Verbal Memory

In early childhood the ability to remember and the function of memory is only just beginning to develop. As discussed by Sweeney (2009), it is through social experiences that the brain's structure is altered. This is by either the maintenance and strengthening of existing neural connections, or by

creating new ones. The end result is said to be similar for both processes, where neural connections are either created, eliminated, or strengthened via social interactions with learning and memory (Sweeney, 2009). Learning and memory are dependent on neuroplasticity and vice versa (Siegel, 2012).

According to Hayne & Scarf (2015), early childhood memory formation and consolidation, is reliant on the maturation of specific circuits within the region of the hippocampus. In infancy and toddlerhood, memory development begins with a form of implicit memory. Implicit memory is formed from perceptions, emotions, social and sensory events, which the child experiences (Hayne & Scarf, 2015). These experiences are built upon by the child, whereby they construct "schemas" which in terms of cognitive development, is sometimes referred to as an early system of classification similar to the construct development by Piaget (Piaget, 1953). Schemas are a critical component of implicit memory, however they also support the development of explicit memory (Bauer & Fivush, 2014).

According to Bauer and Fivush (2014), explicit memory includes factual (semantic) and autobiographical (episodic) memories. This second form of memory is distinct from implicit schemas because the hippocampus is implicated in coding explicit memory (Bauer & Fivush, 2014; Hayne & Scarf, 2015). The process is entirely dependent on implicit memories already laid down via attachment schemas (Bauer & Fivush, 2014). This is important to this research because the development of children's learning originates out of attachment schemas which are stored as implicit memories, yet are out of conscious awareness for the child, leading to the familiar experience of childhood amnesia (Bauer & Fivush, 2014). Childhood amnesia is the inability to remember events or experiences which occurred before the third or fourth birthday in childhood (Hayne et al., 2015). This process is thought to be due to schemas and form part of the reason for the common experience of childhood amnesia (Hayne et al., 2015).

The reason why this is important to this research is because researchers argue that this demonstrates how in early childhood, our "life story" is built upon, not by explicit memories, but through implicit memory, which they claim, forms the child's early sense of self (Nelson & Fivush, 2004). This point is taken up by Siegel who adds that, owing to the mechanisms involved in childhood amnesia and non-conscious implicit memory, a negative sense of self can exist without clues as to its origins from past events or ruptured attachments (Siegel, 2001).

The reasons why attachment schemas, memory function and neuroplasticity research are important to this review is because it draws attention to the distinctive aspects and vulnerability of SEL in BTT children. Children may never recall an event or explicitly know what happened to them as infants, yet their emotional experiences will continue to exert an influence on them because of implicit memories. Therefore, it is important that implicit memories developed in ELC are derived from quality experiences as connections quickly develop new neural pathways for better or worse.

Taken together, these studies support the notion that in early child development, experiences with adults involve attachment and implicit memory schemas via the vulnerable process of neuroplasticity. Hence, individual differences in attachment styles appear to be related to the way in which SEL is enabled via relationships. Having discussed how non-verbal memory becomes embedded as implicit schemas, the next section explores how this process happens through the developing child's ability to adapt and change in accordance with the interactions in the environment. This ability is referred to as neuroplasticity, which the next section explores.

4.4 Section Four: Attachment and Neuroplasticity

4.4.1 Introduction

This section introduces the mechanisms of neuroplasticity. Neuroplasticity exerts a great deal of influence on all mechanisms of SEL in infancy (Siegel, 2012) and it is implicated in the brain's ability to build new connections and change in structure in response to the environment (Kolb, 2010).

This ability to change in light of new information is referred to as neuroplasticity (Kolb, 2010). The conceptual name plasticity is used to describe the malleable nature of early brain formation. It is this ability to change in response to the environment which justifies neural plasticity research in this review. Neural plasticity is a key concept in child development, and should be considered a key principle of SEL in early neurodevelopment. Explored here are the central arguments regarding the important links between neuroplasticity, implicit memory and attachment. The next section will discuss the links between attachment and the developing limbic system as a key component of neuroplasticity.

4.4.2 Attachment and the Developing Limbic System

As set out in Appendix 1, the limbic system is a region deep within the inner structures of the temporal lobes. It houses the four main processing stations which contribute to behaviour and decision-making procedures (de Haan & Gunnar, 2009). The hippocampus, amygdala, basal ganglia, thalamus, and hypothalamus are parts of the brain collectively thought of as the limbic system (Swanson, 2008). Briefly in terms of function, the thalamus is charged with integrating sensory information from the environment, conveying it to the hypothalamus. Other regions, the hippocampus, and the amygdala convert experience to memory, and associate the memory with an emotion (Sweeney, 2009). These regions are also concerned with social behaviour and the expression of emotion (Society for Neuroscience, 2018). In adults, these processing stations jointly regulate our emotions, motivations, behaviours, and drives (Swanson, 2008; Sweeney, 2009). However, in early childhood healthy development of this area plays a key role in social, emotional, and behavioural well-being. These areas are an important focus of this review on SEL WITH BTT children. This is due to the central position within the limbic system of these developing areas and the large number of neural connections maturing and extending outward to many other regions from the limbic system (Society for Neuroscience, 2018).

Whilst not leaving aside other areas of the brain entirely, the reason why the limbic system is of particular interest to this research is because it is a system capable of great change and resourcefulness owing to the capacities of neuroplasticity (Schore, 2016). This is an underlining principle that will be returned to frequently in this review, because in postnatal development, the work of adjusting to environmental conditions, and developing a system that can adapt to the particular set of circumstances is already rapidly under way as the developing social brain prepares for what it biologically considers is the environment and its future life (Doidge, 2007).

According to Hill (2015), between 16-18 months of age, a neurological growth spurt takes place in the limbic system. During this time circuits develop that connect the limbic system first to the sympathetic nervous system, and then the parasympathetic nervous system (Hill, 2015; Schore, 2016). With these new connections the child now has a functioning system for appraising bodily-based feelings and socioemotional information, which is linked to regulating emotions (Schore, 2016). Emotion-system development at this stage is important because how the system is organised will dictate how it operates now and, in the future, (Gerhardt, 2015). This process depends on the child's regulating experiences with adults (Hill, 2015). Any presence of stress in the caregiver is likely to produce stress in the child. High levels of cortisol, a stress hormone, was found by Field et al., (2006), to be a strong predictor of negative SEL outcomes, where stressed caregiving led to reduced levels of serotonin in the infant's developing brain.

4.4.3 Attachment, Neuroplasticity and Early Experiences

The influence of neural plasticity on attachment mechanisms and its link to attachment relationships is discussed by Panksepp's (2001) by drawing on research of how early developing emotional systems come to operate, and the process of merging emotion with memory is explained via the following mechanisms. According to Panksepp (2001), infants gradually come to see their environments as either fundamentally friendly places, or uncaring and threatening places, depending on the association. These become linked because the neural systems that control the

emotions of joy or sadness, also share the same neural circuitry as fear circuits in the amygdala and are involved in the processing of information in the environment for signs of threat (Panksepp 2001; Schore, 2016). Panksepp claims that managing relationships and modulating fear, become one task, simply due to their close proximity to one another in terms of neural location (Panksepp, 2001).

Panksepp's (2001) discussion on how the social environment comes to influence early brain, and emotional development is further complemented by Cozolino's (2014), discussion of how relationships become biological structures. Both researchers discuss how joy or sadness share the same neural circuitry as fear, because fear circuitry and the social brain share core structures of the amygdala (Cozolino 2014; Panksepp 2001). Likewise, Siegel's (2012) discussion of neural site integration is along the same lines as Panksepp's (2001) account. Siegel maintains these are the circuits which don't get pruned away, because firing together strengthens neural circuits and connections between one area and the next and neurons that fire together, wire together (Siegel, 2012).

According to Siegel (2012), and Panksepp (2001), one of the aims of healthy SEL development is to integrate these circuits, i.e. connect the emotional brain with regions which process higher-order thinking skills. This is the neural basis of mental health, as opposed to having conflict between emotional and cognitive experiences (Siegel, 2012). This is the idea of integration, and it means that regions which are in proximity to one another, such as those located in the emotion-processing centres of the limbic system, have close connections to one another (Siegel, 2012). Social information entering those regions forms close associations with nearby structures, such as the fear processing circuits of the amygdala. When an emotionally meaningful event such as a social interaction is laden with fear, these circuits are stimulated and fire together, and thus an association is made (Panksepp, 2001). Continual firing of these circuits together will then create neural pathway through the dynamic process of neuroplasticity, and a memory will be created.

This view is supported by Mikulincer and Shaver (2019,) who write that positive social interactions essentially create the biological foundations of early emotional regulation capacities via attachment systems in the developing brain. They note how the neural correlates of attachment are associated with the neural structure of brain regions implicated in emotion regulation and show how insecure or disorganised attachment styles can lead to less-than-optimal emotional regulation, which in their opinion, remains consistent over the lifespan (Mikulincer and Shaver, 2019).

Where patterns of relating have become disorganised due to stress, the malleable nature of neuroplasticity in early brain development means that these can also be replaced with new connections. Indeed, Field et al., (2006), claim that there is every chance for negative outcomes in early developing systems to recover, through the process of neuroplasticity because of the nature of childhood memory. To examine this, the next section will briefly discuss childhood memory, and explore its involvement in the process of neuroplasticity and attachment

4.4.4 Attachment Experience-Expectant and Experience-Dependent

Although the neuroscientific literature is clear that not all neurons are viewed as the same, as regards neuorplasticy, two main views have emerged; neuroplasticity is both experience-expectant, and experience-dependent. The section that follows will discuss both of these separately in more detail in terms of their effects on early brain development either by environment-facilitated or adult-facilitated experiences.

As discussed earlier in Appendix 1, the early developing brain is malleable and self-organising (Shonkoff, 2011). It is also experience-driven. Being experience-driven means that connections in the brain are only formed based on exposure to certain experiences in the environment (Swanson, 2008). The brain expects to experience input and rapidly mobilises processing mechanisms which are already on standby (Swanson, 2008). Experience-dependent plasticity refers to adaptations in

neural connections. This is important as early childhood is a time when the brain is at its most malleable (Sweeney, 2009).

As a function of being experience-dependent, being malleable enables the child to absorb, remember and learn from experience using what is repeated. Social information is learned and retained in this way, to enable the child to become fully accustomed to whatever particular environment or culture he or she is born into (Nelson, 2000). This is also the underpinning reason why the perspective of a neurobiological basis for early intervention can be scientifically reliable and evidence based.

Having discussed the relevance of neuroplasticity to attachment processes, the next section discusses the influence of neuroplasticity on socioemotional development.

4.4.5 Neuroplasticity and Socioemotional Learning

The various stages regarding early brain development established how neurons, or brain cells, play an important role in regulating how early neurodevelopment occurs. As discussed in Appendix 1, the progression of cell proliferation, cell migration, differentiation, axonal and dendritic growth, synaptogenesis, and neural pruning, influence how the brain organises and absorbs information from the environment. It then uses these mechanisms to process information and change in response to new learning.

When developmental scientists refer to adult-child interactions having the potential to “change the brain”, they are referring to the processes of neuroplasticity (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2007). While neuroplasticity is active across the lifespan, due to the rapid growth seen in early brain development, it is considered especially malleable throughout the early years of child development (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). This this also makes the brain vulnerable (Nelson, 2000), it also holds great potential for early intervention (Phillips, 2012).

The developmental process of changing the brain is well described by Siegel (2012). He illustrates it by explaining that whatever we focus our attention and interest on specifically, activates the brain in both structure, function, and neuro-hormonal release (Siegel, 2012). There is a change in the architecture of neural connections as a consequence of the release of neurohormones, and when this occurs, it is understood as a reaction at the level of neural activity (Siegel, 2012). Again, this is an account of how attention produces neurochemicals which nurture brain growth, similar to the accounts given by Schore (2016) and Gerhardt (2015).

Neural plasticity is considered by developmental scientists as a key principle in the developmental processes of attachment. Among the environmental factors which impact SEL in BTT children, neural plasticity is a key construct. Therefore, the following sections further explore the environment in terms of experience-expectant and experienced-dependent neuroplasticity, and highlight how experiences which the brain needs to develop, are reliant on the adults in the environment.

4.4.6 Attachment Schemas and Neuroplasticity

As established, early experiences with adults are important for socioemotional well-being. Environments which are rich in supportive, encouraging, and caring relationships stimulate neural circuitry into a state which is conducive to learning. Cozolino (2013) highlights how the ability to change the neuro-circuitry of the brain throughout life is what gives us our incredible ability to absorb information and learn. Connections which are laid in early brain formation determine the ways in which the brain functions in the present and in the future (Cozolino, 2011).

As already established, early experiences with adults are internalised by the child, for example, as hypothesised in the attachment styles documented by Ainsworth (Ainsworth et al., 1979), and the attachment representations originally identified by Bowlby (1969). In Cozolino's view, he refers to these as attachment schemas (Cozolino, 2014). Similar to the ideas put forward by Attachment

Theory (Bowlby 1969), attachment schemas echo early interpersonal experiences with adults by the biological act of changing physical energy into a neural impulse or desire (Cozolino, 2014). Cozolino claims these impulses make their way into neural structures also via the process of neuroplasticity. This is the cellular building of attachment systems, which become established early in life and can create patterns of reacting, particularly as a response to social interactions (Cozolino, 2014). This is important to a review on attachment research because it lends weight to the idea that attachment styles as identified by Ainsworth et al (1979), can and do in some cases remain consistent over the lifespan, informing a predictions of other people's behaviour. Cozolino's work discusses how disorganised attachment schemas become imparted without conscious awareness, embedded within the structural architecture of the early developing social brain (Cozolino, 2014). He points out that, "the sensory emotional and behavioural systems influenced by early attachment experiences shape our brains in ways that make the past a model for creating the future" (Cozolino, 2014, p.154). This provides a neurobiological perspective on how attachment experiences create a model for future emotional behaviour through the developmental processes of neural plasticity, resulting in attachment styles. The next sections will further explore the influence of plasticity on attachment and its link to caregiving relationships.

4.4.7 Attachment and the Role of Caregiving

As previously discussed, Bowlby's original theory of attachment and later the field of infant research and observations of mothers with their children, generated many hypotheses about early relational experiences and adult-child relationships. However, as can be seen from the previous sections, attachment theory has become focused on emotional well-being and emotional self-regulation in childhood. These links to children's socioemotional learning have relevance to their emotional development now and to their future well-being, therefore, this next section discusses self-regulation in the context of caregiving and attachment.

As seen in the previous section, the progression of attachments as a neural pathway in response to these interactions is described by Panksepp (2001), and is similar to that proposed by Schore (2016), who has gone further in describing the process. Emotional regulation is conceptualised as the process through which adults teach children to understand the causes and consequences of their own and others' emotions, and to appropriately express these emotions in order to have their needs met (Eisenberg, & Mussen, 1989). According to the theories and research reviewed for the neurobiology of attachment, templates for SEL are formed during interpersonal interactions. Schore (2003a) positions the child's early environment and the relationships therein as building the foundations of the OFC through the neurobiological and neurodevelopmental structures discussed earlier. He believes these underpin social engagement, socioemotional learning and ultimately self-regulation through secure attachment to the adults in the environment (Schore, 2016). self-regulation is considered a by-product of secure attachment and personality development which the next section will discuss.

4.4.8 Attachment and Self-regulation

Self-regulation is a higher-order cognitive processes that is important for the ability to manage feelings and behaviours (Israelashvili et al., 2020; Wesarg et al., 2020). Fonagy and Target (2002), claim that attachment is necessary for self-regulation and SEL, as SEL takes place within attachment relationships. According to Fonagy and Target attachment formation is necessary in facilitating the child's psychological and biological self-regulatory mechanisms, and it is the foundation of personality development (Fonagy and Target, 2002).

Attachment and personality development is also outlined by Davidson (2012), in a shift in traditional child development research, which has paved a move away from the notion of children having conscious control of thought and consciousness, to the idea of self-regulation as an antecedent of personality development (Davidson, 2012). This view emerged from looking at the deeper subconscious regulatory functions of early implicit attachments, particularly those involved in

nonverbal, moment-to-moment, unconscious communications between a child and a caregiver through the mechanisms of neuroplasticity (Davidson, 2010).

4.4.9 Conclusion to Section Four

The development of socioemotional well-being and attachment within early developing structures highlights how adult-child interactions enable the integration of the psychological and biological attachment system, through implicit memories. As was seen, in doing so, a felt sense of security is created which acts as a regulator of emotional well-being and behaviour. This transmission of security or conversely, a felt sense of insecurity, is important to EYE in the context of adult-child interactions, whilst these interactions reside in memory outside of the child's conscious awareness, they nonetheless create real and lasting memories through nonverbal communication. These can be communicated as an emotional state in the adult, and transmitted to the child for better or worse. These early, non-verbal states of being are important to include in this review because at this age, language and communication are often still at the non-verbal stage of development for BTT children.

This is important because the research reviewed so far proposes that the child's early social and emotional environment, and their relationships with adults builds the foundation of the neurobiological structures of emotion and self-regulation. This has fundamental relevance to EYE in their relationships with BTT children in particular for children whose attachment relationships at home may be under threat. As will be seen in the next section, it is the link between adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), and critical periods for attachment development that makes the interaction between the adult and the child so important.

4.5 Section Five: Attachment and Adversity

4.5.1 Introduction

The focus of this section is on the impact of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), on critical periods for attachment development. ACE's refer to a spectrum of potentially traumatic or chronically stressful experiences occurring in childhood, encompassing not only direct forms of abuse and neglect, but also wider dimensions of discrete traumatic events to include relational and environmental conditions that may disrupt children's sense of safety and stability (Felitti, 2014). The centrality of ACEs in the wider literature on attachment, is the strong association between childhood stress and a wide spectrum of adult health outcomes, correlated with the number of adverse experiences the child experienced. This suggests that for children with ACE's relational stability within ECCE settings may function as a protective factor, whereas repeated disruptions in caregiver relationships may exacerbate already existing developmental risks. This section discusses the literature on the consequences of neglect, include topics such as the stress response, stress set points, and toxic stress. These issues will be discussed, along with the links these have to critical periods in attachment development.

4.5.2 Adverse Childhood Experiences ACE's

In terms of socioemotional development in early childhood the study of childhood adversity has advanced a deeper understanding of the effects of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) on children's psychological well-being. In describing the effects of adverse experiences, attention is drawn to what developmental scientists call toxic stress. Toxic stress is the protracted activation of the stress-response system, which can lead to long-term changes in the set-points laid down for stress activation (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2014). These become established and developed early in childhood from the neural connections which make up these

regions in the young developing brain, beginning their formation in infancy (Centre on the Developing Child, 2016). ACEs exert an influence on these systems when they are in development and at a time when they are at their most vulnerable in early childhood (Anda, 2014). ACEs are described as ten categories of traumatic events which are an underlining cause of overwhelming activation of the stress response system (Felitti et al., 1998). Among the experiences described are severe neglect, child maltreatment, sexual abuse, physical abuse, and exposure to violence in the home to name but a few.

Where there are issues such as adversity, toxic stress and dysfunction, researchers estimate that there tends to be multiple stressors and multiple types of adversity, that occur during early childhood and adolescence (Anda, 2014; Boyce, 2011). Drawing on attachment theory (Bowlby, 1967) such early adversities may compromise the formation of a secure IWM, shaping children's expectations of caregiver availability and responsiveness. For children who have experienced ACEs, the role of EYE as secondary attachment figures may be particularly significant in contexts where primary caregiving relationships have been inconsistent or disrupted. Therefore, stable and attuned relationships within ECCE settings may serve a compensatory or protective function. However, this potential is contingent upon relational presence. ACEs highlight the importance of considering workforce instability which may have disproportionately adverse effects on children already experiencing relational disruption.

4.5.3 ACE's and Early Childhood Mental Health

Researchers involved in the ACEs study traced adult health outcomes to the number of abusive experiences in childhood and showed where there is more adversity, there is also more comorbidity and co-occurring of social, emotional, and behavioural problems which become progressively worse, leading to the adoption of health risk behaviours and substance abuse (Anda, 2014).

The outcomes identified in adulthood included addiction, depression, and heart disease, are understood as environmental or socioemotional experiences that are said to be the consequences of adverse experiences which derail healthy development (Felitti, 2014). ACEs scores were not just correlated to addiction and mental health issues in adulthood, but also to cardiovascular disease through long-term elevation of inflammatory pathways (Danese, 2014). Felitti (2014) suggests that the link between ACEs and the adoption of health risk behaviours such as overeating and substance misuse, is due to addictions.

Ha and Granger (2016) note that in young children toxic stress can lead to an over-production of neural connections in the brain region referred to as the amygdala, a region currently thought to be involved in surveying the environment for danger, producing vigilance, fear, and anxiety (Bick & Nelson, 2016). This affects both hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) activity, and the child's sympathetic nervous system (SNS) (Society for Neuroscience, 2018). At the same time, neural connections in the brain dedicated to planning, reasoning and behaviour regulation become fewer in number (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2014). This disruption and uneven distribution can result in a system reinforced for stress activation, setting stress reactions to trigger at lower thresholds which places a heavy burden on socioemotional well-being (Ha and Granger, 2016).

In looking at other mechanisms underlying toxic stress, socio-demographic stressors, such as poverty, single-parent family households, and parental stress was identified by researchers as placing a heavy burden on children's SEL (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2014). Similar to the ACE score, associations between socio-demographic stressors, parental stress and children's behavioural outcomes are also indicated in future adult mental health (for review see Perry and Conners-Burrow, 2016).

In terms of children's education over-activation of the stress response carries risks in the areas of cognitive development, impulse control, and socio-emotional development (Ha and Granger,

2016). Problems in early socioemotional development are therefore likely to induce cognitive and developmental changes also (Perry and Conners-Burrow, 2016).

As highlighted by Cozolino, when anxiety, stress or heightened fear are present, this makes learning problematic, and children are likely to suffer from low social skills, poor play skills with peers, and low attainment as a result (Cozolino, 2013). In addition, they may struggle to interpret accurately the social cues of other children (Perry and Conners-Burrow, 2016; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2014).

Whilst it is not inevitable for children living with socio-demographic stressors or those who are experiencing poor attachments to go on to develop mental health problems, it is argued that where four or more risk factors to their well-being cluster together, these can result in negative outcomes for SEL, with a knock-on effect for health in later life and lifestyle related diseases (Felitti et al., 1998). Indeed, where these problems coexist with other issues, such as violence in the home, drug or alcohol abuse, and poverty, developmental experts agree that a clusters of these issues where ACE's pose the greatest threat to early mental health, and where the greatest threat to SEL exists (Anda, 2011; Burnham et al., 2006; Chatoor & Khushlani, 2006; Kapilinsky et al., 2006; Rockhill et al., 2006; Stafford & Zeanah, 2006; Steinhoff et al., 2006).

To address the issues posed by dangers to children's emotional well-being and mental health, recent research successes in the field of early childhood mental health (ECMH) studies suggest that young children's biological stress systems are malleable and sensitive to positive changes in the social environment (Ha & Granger, 2016). It appears that young children struggling with ACE stressors can be buffered by the presence of one good adult (Shonkoff et al., 2009). The concept of one good adult as articulated by Shonkoff et al., (2009) emphasises the protective role of a stable supportive relationship in buffering children against the effects of adversity and toxic stress. This perspective aligns closely with the ecological framework of Bronfenbrenner (1979), who conceptualises development as occurring through proximal processes. These are reciprocal

enduring interactions between the child and significant others within their immediate environment (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). From this viewpoint, the presence of a consistent and responsive adult within the child's microsystem is essential to healthy development. When considered together, these perspectives highlight that the one good adult is not an abstract idea, but is realised through sustained relational interactions within everyday contexts, such as the home or the ELC setting.

In addition, similar to the neurohormones discussed earlier, other neurohormones have emerged as important in stress management and attachment. Among them, the production of oxytocin is identified as being particularly important but also vulnerable to stress. According to Sanchez & Pollak (2009), ACE's cause persistent decreases in oxytocin levels. This finding has been confirmed by evidence that showed individuals with histories of childhood maltreatment had lower levels of oxytocin than controls (Heim et al., 2006). Low levels of oxytocin were also negatively correlated with the severity of their experience. Commenting on the findings from Heim at al., (2006), Sanchez & Pollak (2009), claim that low oxytocin could have a detrimental effect on behaviour, and produce stress-vulnerability as a consequence of early adverse experiences.

With relevance to this concern, a study carried out by Gunnar & Vasquez (2001), showed higher levels of saliva cortisol, a stress hormone, were detected in children who had experienced ACE's as also compared with controls. Findings showed that oxytocin plays a critical role, particularly in negotiating stress (Gunnar, 2011; Gunnar & Vasquez, 2001). In reference to the protective effects of oxytocin, Nelson & Panksepp (1998) propose that oxytocin along with dopamine create a sense of heightened positive emotions in caregiver-child interactions. These are identified as specifically activated by attachment mechanisms, and are part of a cascade of feel good neurohormones that flood the brain as a consequence of positive attention. Additionally, according to Siegel (2012), this activates the genetic machinery in the nucleus of the neuron, leading to the production of proteins which in turn, switch on genes that enable structural changes to be made to the brain (Siegel, 2012).

Hence, positive attention creates a neurobiological process which is changing or strengthening neural connections, thus learning is a product of attention, neuroplasticity, and neurohormones which underpin interactions. (Siegel, 2012).

4.5.4 Summary of Section Five

The focus of this section was on early years' mental health. As discussed here, the central issues regarding early years' mental health are the risk factors to children's well-being. These risk factors cluster together, which can result in negative outcomes for SEL development. As can be seen from an early learning and care perspective, these findings argue strongly for greater awareness of early years' mental health, and also training and support for early years' teachers in buffering or counteracting adverse experiences. Adverse experiences not only threaten children's present emotional and behavioural well-being, but moreover are likely to affect their long-term mental health. This has important implications for the role of EYE who serve as key regulating figures within the child's microsystem. These findings suggest that ELC settings could potentially develop the capacity to influence emotional regulation in young children through the opportunities afforded to them via their daily contact with children and may help to normalise adjustment problems (Ha & Granger, 2016). However, as discussed in the previous chapter, the capacity for such relationships to function as protective factors is contingent upon workforce stability and continuity, which raises concerns in the form of staff attrition within the ELC sector. In the next section, the detrimental effects of socioemotional neglect on early forming brain architecture is reviewed. This is done through the lens of critical or sensitive periods in early brain development. Therefore, the section that follows discusses the stress response, stress thresholds, and toxic stress. These will be reviewed and links made to early brain development through the lens of attachment development.

4.5.5 Critical Periods in Early Brain Development

The focus of this section examines critical periods in early brain development, and explores links to socioemotional well-being. The focus of the discussion sets out the central arguments in the area of critical developmental periods in early brain development and explores both sides of the argument to addressing the a priori research question.

As previously established, early brain development is malleable and vulnerable to the effects of the environment. Therefore, another focus of the literature in this Chapter presents what is known about socioemotional neglect. As established, developmental scientists and attachment researchers know that early childhood is considered to be robust in the formation of neural connections, and for this reason, early brain development is referred to as a prolific period of neural growth, particularly for socioemotional development and attachment processes.

As noted by Coan (2016), much of what is known about early brain development and social experience is from studies on neglect. From the research reviewed for this study however, it is clear that the question of the early developing brain going through sensitive periods in childhood has not to date been answered definitively. Nevertheless, Kandel (2000) makes the point that certain experiences can be seen to facilitate different brain circuits, and that this can be observed in overall behaviour and functioning.

Commenting on sensitive periods, Kudsen et al., (2006) argue, “adaptation continues throughout life, human abilities are formed in a predictable sequence of sensitive periods, during which the development of specific neural circuits and the behaviours they mediate are most plastic and, therefore, optimally receptive to environmental influences” (p. 10).

As will be remembered from a discussion on proximal processes in Chapter Three, Section 3.1.5, Genie was a young girl whose case offered one explanation to suggest a critical period for language

and social development, where caregiving deprivation yielded long-term consequences on socioemotional development during the early stages of childhood.

In discussing the case of Genie, Kandel (2000), makes the point that there is a critical period for early language development, similar to the critical period for vision (for a review see Hubel and Wiesel, 1964). Kandel (2000) suggests that a critical period may also exist for social development. He points out that it was the social and emotional aspects of Genie's neglect which was the most damaging because she did not develop the ability to relate emotionally, after being deprived of nurturing and affection herself.

Critical or sensitive periods in early social brain development are also put forward by Chugani et al., (2001), who, when investigating Romanian orphans after the fall of the Ceausescu regime, interestingly found that the children who had been closed off from making social connections and attachments, exhibited a complete lack of neural development in these areas of the brain. The most striking effects could be found in the orbitofrontal cortex, which as previously stated is widely considered to be specialised in socio-emotional development (Boyce, 2010). On a return trip to the same children, the research team found that even after six years post adoption care, these children still had abnormal brain connectivity in this area suggesting that the critical period window of opportunity had closed (Eluvathingal et al., 2006).

While these researchers point out the effects of critical or sensitive periods on perceptual and cognitive skills, they also note that the same principles for social and emotional development hold true. This is because sensitive periods operate in a hierarchy, and the properties of social and emotional neural circuits are particularly sensitive to the shaping experiences of early life (Knudsen, et al., 2006). Any adaptations of change in architecture occur because the nervous system has altered its circuitry because each level of development depends on information from lower levels to accomplish their functions (Knudsen, et al., 2006). Researchers point out how this underscores the importance of early experiences for the development of socioemotional neural circuits, as an

impoverished early emotional environment results in a reduced capacity to regulate emotions making is difficult or impossible to remediate at a later age (Knudsen et al., 2006).

Because the sequencing of early brain development is hierarchical, in some respects the overarching conclusion on critical periods is that remediation at a later stage is perhaps more difficult but not impossible (Meaney, 2010). This is an example of how neural architecture is shaped by experience in early development and as a consequence, how early learning with nurturing adults is essential for BTT children.

Other researchers investigating the effects of the caregiving environment and early genetic development of emotional resilience, suggest that positive caregiving can intervene and change behavioural and emotional capacities, which have been derailed at the level of gene expression (Turecki & Meaney, 2016). However, the good news with regards to the early development of the attachment system, is that some research studies reported that exposure to positive enriching interactions reverted the effects of adversity (Meaney, 2010).

The focus of this Section was on how early deprivation can disrupt critical periods in early brain development. The reason why this is important to this study on attachment processes is because of the connection between social development and caregiver interactions. The findings above stress the importance of the social environment in shaping early brain development and behaviour, particularly in the case of abuse or neglect. Likewise, childhood experiences significantly influence brain development and attachment processes, affecting emotional and cognitive outcomes throughout life. This is because attachment to caregiver's act as a protective buffer to early social, emotional, and attachment encoding. Thus the focus of the next Section is on protective factors that can ameliorate the effects of neglect and ACE's on children's development.

4.5.6 Risk and Protective Factors

The focus of this section is on the protective factors in early brain development. Explored here are the arguments and studies investigating the protective ability of play. The centrality of play in the wider literature on attachment considers that relationships in early childhood become key elements in the psychological well-being and social-emotional development of the child. These findings have advanced the a priori research question, as will be discussed next in the next section on play.

4.5.7 Socioemotional Development and Play

Similar to the research on attachment processes and the neural mechanisms of secure attachments, Gold (2018), believes that emotionally regulated children feel safe and secure, and this is enabled by cues of safety and security, via attachments transmitted by adults through play. Gold (2018) describes a contemporary and overarching model of social and emotional learning (SEL) achieved through play. She too believes in a scientific view of attachment and SEL, which she discusses as enabled through neurobiological processes involved in play. According to Gold, SEL is realised through during play through interpersonal interactions with adults. She proposes that the influence of interpersonal interactions happens at a neural and biological level, and this makes social experiences enjoyable (Gold. 2018).

This neurobiological view of play is based on these foundational biological processes where positive social interactions are part of a neurobiological necessity for personality development. As explained earlier in this Chapter, neurological networks are pathways of neural communication which are forged in early brain development, and mediate all learning and behaviour (Sapolsky, 2018). The link is that neural networks of socioemotional development are also created in response to playful adult-child interactions of a kind which engenders an emotional attachment bond within the

caregiver-child relationship. This relationship will come to shape the child's developing neurobiological structures and attachment processes (McCain et al., 2007). This again adds to the template of relationship expectations, where, as noted by Stern (1985), the dynamics of both the child's and the caregiver's interactions influence each other's responses, to continuously shape the formation of the relationship. The relationship template is important to this review. This is because these templates become embedded in the child's implicit memory.

Within an exploration of the developmental process of attachment, and the behavioural and environmental factors which impact socioemotional learning in children aged birth-to-three, it is necessary to acknowledge that play carries a central role in relationships. As also recognised by Tronick (2007), this is also via the process of neuroplasticity. As discussed earlier, neuroplasticity is the brain's ability to adapt and change in response to learning and experiences (Kandel, 2013).

Within early play experiences, the interaction between adult and child also operates as the dynamic relational process. As outlined by Tronick (2007), seemingly simple games such as peekaboo involve complex patterns of contingent reciprocal interactions, often described as serve and return exchanges. In these interactions, the child's gestures, vocalisations, and gaze are met with timely and attuned responses from the adult, creating a predictable rhythm of engagement (Tronick, 2007). These micro-level exchanges are central to the development of attachment relationships through repeated connection. Children soon begin to form expectations of adult availability and responsiveness, contributing to the development of internal working models (Bowlby 1969; Thompson 2006). In this dynamic, play is not merely entertaining, but constitutes a primary context through which attachment relationships are enacted and reinforced. Importantly these processes also have a neurological dimension. Schore (2016) highlights how such interactions support the organisation of neural systems associated with emotional regulation and social processing. The predictability and contingency embedded within play interactions enables the child to anticipate the adult's responses, regulate affect, and interpret social cues, including facial expressions and

emotional gestures (Schore, 2016). Over time, play contributes to the development of emotional regulation skills and social understanding.

4.5.8 Summary of Section Five

This section explored how interpersonal relationships are important foundations for healthy emotional development. The literature highlighted the dynamic interactions between children and adults emphasising the influence of EYE in their work with children and families. The research discussed in Section 5 provides a useful lens through which children's experiences can be understood as situated within interconnected relationships and structures. This perspective informs this current study by supporting an exploration of the contextual factors that shape children's attachment development and socio emotional well-being.

4.5.9 Conclusions on Section Five

This helps answer the question regarding the vulnerability of early emotional well-being, and how important an understanding of this information is to the role of the EYE in their work with children and families. This section also highlighted the neurobiology, involved in emotional regulation, which is vulnerable to emotional neglect. Moreover, it would appear that the central argument is the sequencing of early brain development. The overarching point is that this makes remediation at a later stage more difficult. This is important for early intervention research. Another key point is that socioemotional capacities are developed in conjunction with adults who act as the catalyst to attachment mechanisms and psychological well-being. The continuous relationship between early brain development and socioemotional well-being is embedded in attachment mechanisms. In addition, from considering the research on emotional neglect, it would seem that socioemotional development and the capacity for self-regulation, do not simply emerge and unfold as the child grows and matures. Rather, they are a product of adult-child interactions which create favourable environments for neural structures to connect and develop.

4.5.10 Chapter Summary

This chapter critically examined the literature relating to attachment and its role in children social emotional and developmental outcomes. The discussion began with an overview of attachment theory and attachment styles before considering key criticisms and debates within the attachment literature. The chapter also explored advances in attachment neuroscience including the relationship between attachment experiences, early emotional brain development, and neuroplasticity. Have finally attention was given to the impact of adversity and neglect on attachment process is and developmental outcomes. Taken together, the literature suggests that attachment remains a significant framework for understanding children's relational and emotional development. While the theory has been subject to criticism regarding X, the evidence continues to highlight the importance of early caregiving Relationships in shaping children's internal working models, emotional regulation capacities, I'm social functioning. Contemporary developments in neuroscience further extend this understanding by demonstrating the ways in which early relational experiences may become biologically embedded through developing neural systems and the process of neuroplasticity. The literature additionally highlights the potential consequences of attachment disruption, adversity, and neglect during early childhood. However the evidence also suggests that developmental comes are not predetermined. Rather, children's trajectories appeared to be influenced by the dynamic interaction of relational experiences, environmental contexts, and opportunities for recovery and adaptation. This perspective supports an understanding of development as both vulnerable and malleable recognising the potential for resilience and change across the lifespan.

Overall, the literature reviewed in this chapter underscores the importance of examining attachment within a broader developmental and ecological context. The findings suggest that attachment relationships present one important mechanism through which early experiences influence children's emotional well-being, behaviour, and development. These insights provide a

conceptual foundation for the present study and informed the interpretation of children's experiences.

4.5.11 Chapter Conclusion

When synthesised together, attachment has fundamental relevance to early years' educators, yet there is a paucity of research on how EYE in ELC settings operationalise attachment relationships. Therefore, the conclusion drawn from this review is that there is a need to explore the views of EYE, with regard to their role, as demonstrated by the literature in this chapter. Given this research synthesis and the conclusions drawn from this review, the following research questions were developed.

4.5.12 Research Questions:

What are a sample of early years' educators' and managers lived experiences of attachment, with children aged birth to three years of age, in the early learning and care settings in the Republic of Ireland?

Sub-question 1: What are the barriers to attachment relationships with children aged birth to three years of age in ELC settings?

Sub-question 2: What are the facilitators to attachment relationships with children aged birth to three years of age in ELC settings?

Sub-question 3: How does contemporary attachment research compare, and can it co-exist with current practices in early care and leaning settings?

The following Chapter sets out the methodology used to obtain answers to these questions.

Chapter Five: Methodology

5.1.1 Introduction

The focus of Chapter Five is to set out the methodology to answer the research questions that were identified from the literature in the previous chapters and to set out the justification for the study along with demonstrating the credibility of the research. The methodology chosen to answer the research questions is Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith et al., 2009). IPA can be understood as a qualitative research approach, which allows the researcher and research participants to explore the lived experiences of a particular phenomenon, and draw meaning from it (Smith et al., 2022). The centrality of adopting this approach from the wider literature on methodology, is due to IPA research having the ability to sensitively capture the lives of participants, as it relates specifically to their personal and professional experiences (Engward & Goldspink, 2020). Explored in this Chapter are the central steps regarding how IPA was chosen, and also how the empirical research for this study was carried out within an IPA framework. This Chapter also outlines how other decisions were made in relation to the research, including ethical approval, study design, sampling procedure, data collection, and data analysis. A description of the research design is provided, followed by an in-depth review of the methodological choices, and decisions made by the researcher in collaboration with the research supervisor. Also attended to are important measures regarding reliability and validity, with regard to the positionality of the researcher, and the actions taken to ensure that the data analysis was as unbiased as possible.

5.1.2 The Structure of the Chapter

This chapter is organised into Part One and Part Two. In doing this, careful attention is directed towards validity, which according to Smith et al., (2009) is seen in how the chosen methodology links to the research question. In Part One, a discussion of ethics is foregrounded. This sets out the

measures employed to ensure all ethical requirements were observed and granted before any research began. Following this, the research approach is described, and the journey of how the research questions became more nuanced, focused, and aligned with the literature is documented.

Part One also discusses the research design and introduces Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as the chosen research methodology, whilst also providing a rationale for this choice over other methodologies. Part Two discusses the empirical steps taken to collect data, analyse data, decide the sampling frame, the inclusion and exclusion criteria, the interview schedule, and the justification for verbal consent. Part Two also discusses the process of data collection, including the chosen data collection instrument, and rationale for its choice over other data collection instruments.

Additionally, Part Two sets out the steps taken to analyse the data using IPA data analysis principles and discusses the pilot interview, plus what was learned and applied to refine the interview schedule from conducting the pilot interview. This section then discusses the researcher's experience of conducting an IPA study as a novice researcher. To begin this chapter, a discussion of ethics is foregrounded to demonstrate that all ethical requirements were identified, documented and ethical approval granted.

5.1.3 Ethics

The researcher applied to the Research Ethics Committee of the School of Education, Trinity College Dublin on the 18th of November 2021. A Level 1 application for ethical approval for this research project was submitted. There are three levels for conditions requiring ethical approval. Decision on how to treat applications depends on the risk level of the research project. Level 0 risk means that the level of risk is low because the research does not involve human and will not be processing personal data or recruiting participants. Level 0 is a low-risk method such as desk-based research

or systematic literature reviews (Trinity College Research Ethics Application Management System (REAMS) (2025).

Level 1 approval is for research that carries little or no risks to participants other than that experienced in everyday life. Level 2 is moderate to high-risk research, where the research is carried out with vulnerable people, where the risk or discomfort is more than usual as encountered during daily life and where identifiable information could have detrimental, legal, or social consequences (Trinity College Code of Practice Research Ethics 2019; Trinity College Research Ethics Application Management System (REAMS) 2025).

The ethics application for the present programme of research provided details to the Ethics Committee on the proposed research methodology, and included sample research questions and research instruments. In addition, details about the selection, recruitment, and consent of participants, and relevant ethical issues were provided. Ethical approval for this study was given on 15th December 2021 by Trinity College Dublin, School of Education, Research Ethics Committee (see Appendix 2).

5.1.4 Ethical Research Procedures

Researchers must reflect on the ethical implications of their studies as a duty of care to participants. Ethical considerations serve to maximize potential benefits to the participants (Comstock, 2013). Likewise, the views of research participants in this study are paramount, in order that we may first know the topic from their perspective. With regard to ethics this researcher was guided by procedures provided by the University's policy on Good Research Practice (Trinity College Code of Practice Research Ethics, 2019) and also the Psychological Society of Ireland Code of Professional Ethics (2019). In research, ethical considerations also demand that respondents be treated with confidentiality and autonomy in a just and fair way (Burns and Grove 2006). Protecting participants is central to this research and as mentioned, this researcher also abides by the ethical guidelines

provided by the University's policy on Good Research Practice (Trinity College Code of Practice Research Ethics, 2019). These are set out below.

5.1.5 Confidentiality and Anonymity

Oliver (2010) recommends a detailed plan which explains fully the confidentiality procedures in place to allay any concerns participants may have regarding confidentiality. In this study, respondents were provided with assurances that their data would be anonymised at source, protected under a pseudonym coding system, and destroyed in accordance with Trinity College Regulation on the retention of data and the procedure for storing and retaining data. Management of data was carried out to prevent readers linking data to respondents' names. Respondents were told that only the researcher, the research supervisor and the examiners had access to the information they provided. In the Participants Information Letter (PIL) (Appendix 6) and invitation letter (Appendix 3) the participants were assured of the best endeavours to ensure anonymity.

5.1.6 Freedom to Withdraw from the Study

In research, ethical considerations demand that respondents have the freedom to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences (Burns & Grove, 2006). Participants were informed of this in the participant information letter, and again reminded of this at the start of the interview.

5.1.7 Beneficence and non-maleficence

With regard to what Polit and Beck (2001), advise, it is ethically necessary to address the risk of participant's data being breached and their identity being revealed. However, whilst it is good ethical practice to make participants aware of this, the participants were assured that the risk was very small, and that every precaution would be taken at every step of the research to prevent this happening. Precautions included removing the participant's name immediately after our phone call

interview and applying a pseudonym whilst also holding a master list on file in a double-encrypted computer.

Another important aspect of the study for the researcher was to take a courteous approach. Therefore, the following principles from the Psychological Society of Ireland Code of Professional Ethics (Psychological Society of Ireland, 2019), guided the research throughout. These are set out below.

- Informed Consent and Freedom of Consent
- Ethical Awareness,
- Sensitivity to the needs, current issues, and problems of society when determining research questions to be asked, services to be developed, information to be collected, or the interpretation of results findings.
- Promotion of the highest standards of integrity in their research.
- To conduct research in a way that is consistent with a commitment to honest, open inquiry.

5.2 Section Two: Stages of the Research Question

5.2.1 Introduction

The focus of this section is on the development of the research questions. The development of the research questions can be understood as the questions changing as more was learned from the literature. The centrality of including the development of the research questions in the wider context of the methodology, is the initial “a priori” research question which guided the review of the literature. Therefore, explored here is the a priori research question, and how it influenced development of the research questions.

5.2.2 The A Priori Research Question

The “a priori” research question emerged in relation to the researcher's positionality and an interest in the field of infant and early childhood mental health. While this field is closely related to early childhood social and emotional development, it is important to distinguish between these two concepts. As outlined by Tusla (2022), in the Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health (IECMH) framework, socioemotional development refers to the process through which children develop the skills necessary for emotional regulation, social interaction, and relational engagement. Whereas infant and early childhood mental health represents the broader construct of children's overall emotional well-being, and capacity to form secure relationships. Within this framework early relationships are identified as the critical pathway through which social and emotional development contributes to the development of early years’ mental health.

This initial interest led to research of the salient literature from attachment research. Different perspectives of attachment and new fields of research in child development studies began to emerge. The work of attachment researchers led the review to fields such as developmental neuroscience, developmental neurobiology, developmental psychology, psychoanalytic literature, and studies in trauma-informed care, and also animal research. As the literature review grew into a contemporary iteration of SEL, it became evident that attachment was a key driver of SEL, and that the theory of attachment had evolved from a theoretical construct, into a neuroscientific discussion of the affect-mediated aspects of children’s psychological health. It was evident that attachment research had moved into a new field of research, to include the proposal that secure attachment is an organiser of early brain and emotional development in infancy (Schore, 2016, 2003a, 2003b). The research in this field is referred to as Developmental Science (DS), and as discussed previously in Chapter Four of this thesis its topics advance the original and central tenets of Bowlby’s (1969) Attachment Theory. From this literature synthesis, overlapping areas with relevance to the a priori research question was identified.

5.2.3 Development of the Research Questions

As these topics began to overlap and converge with one another, research questions emerged in relation to the literature on emotional development in BTT children. In particular, it was identified that the links between attachment as a seminal theoretical construct, and a more contemporary theory of attachment science, was situated in the field of developmental neuroscience, which focused largely on early brain development.

Developmental neuroscience topics with their foundations in attachment were identified as, early brain development, early socioemotional development, the effects of emotional neglect, the effects of early stress on the developing brain, and early years' mental health. These and more, carried a constant theme of attachment as discussed by leading contemporary researchers in attachment studies. As can be seen from the previous chapter, as the literature on infants' emotional development expanded, so too did the research questions in line with the literature. The focus grew from children's emotional development to a deeper understanding of the necessary facilitating conditions, and conversely, possible barriers to their psychological well-being. It became clear that the many aspects of social and emotional learning (SEL) in infancy and toddlerhood hinged on adult-child relationships, and according to the researchers, these happened in the context of emotional availability and adult emotional "presence", as first described by Bowlby Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969). The focus then expanded from understanding how young children's SEL develops, to a focus on adult-child interactions. Based on a growing body of literature and a full understanding of the wider neurobiological, but contextual literature that was of importance to attachment and children's SEL, attention turned to attachment relationships with adults as the key to SEL well-being.

With this new literature, the research questions became more focused on adult-child interactions, and in particular, early years' educator's (EYE), and their relationships with infants and toddlers. Given the newer iterations of the research, the researcher wondered how EYE operationalise

attachments for socioemotional and behavioural well-being in early learning and care (ELC) settings. Thus the research questions became;

- What are early educator's beliefs, understandings of, and implementation strategies regarding attachment in ELC settings?
- Do early educators have concerns for children as regards attachment in ELC settings?
- What are early educators' views on their training in the socialising of young children in group ELC settings?

Exploring the affect-mediated and attachment-facilitating aspects of adult-child attachment relationships soon became the over-riding direction of the research, and a contemporary theory of attachment became the overarching conceptual framework to describe the importance of adult-child relationships for infants and toddlers' attachment and socioemotional development. However, there was a paucity of research looking at the attachment experiences of EYE. In addition, the age range of birth-to-three children became more important because according to the research, the early years are marked by great cognitive, emotional, social, and physical development where social experiences lay the foundation of attachment systems for a lifetime (Bullins et al., 2017; Delahooke, 2017; Gerhardt, 2015; Gold, 2017; Schore, 2016; Seligman, 2014; Tronick, 2007).

Subsequently, with reference to contemporary attachment research, the questions became narrow, more technical, and positively focused on EYE and infants and toddlers' emotional well-being. As discussed in Chapter Two, given that 96% of all eligible children aged 2 years 8 months to school-going age, were registered for participation in the ECCE programme in 2024 (Government of Ireland, 2025), their attachment relationships with EYE in ELC settings in the Republic of Ireland (ROI), became important to explore. Thus, from the a priori research question, which originally led the investigation, the research questions were finalised on the third iteration with one main overarching question followed by three sub-questions.

5.2.4 Main Research Question

What are a sample of early years' educators' and managers lived experiences of attachment in the care and early education settings for children aged birth to three years of age, in the Republic of Ireland?

1: Sub-question 1: What are the barriers to attachment relationships with children aged birth to three years of age in ELC settings?

2: Sub-question 2: What are the facilitators to attachment relationships with children aged birth to three years of age in ELC settings?

3: Sub-question 3: How does contemporary attachment research compare with EYE lived experience of attachment in early care and leaning settings and how can they co-exist?

The research questions were informed by the literature review, but they are also tightly linked to the theoretical framework which draws on attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969) and the Bioecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). The main research question reflects a focus on the lived experience of attachment within early childhood education settings. This aligns Bowlby's (1969) conceptualisation of attachment as a relational process, shaped through everyday experiences and internal working models. Sub-questions one and two which explore barriers and facilitators to attachment relationships, are situated within a broader ecological perspective recognising that such relationships are influenced by contextual factors operating in the environment. Sub question three seeks to bridge theory and practice by examining how contemporary attachment research aligns with or diverges from the lived experience of forming an attachment with BTT children in ELC settings.

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5.3 Section Three: The Research Method

5.3.1 Introduction

The focus of this section is on the research paradigm. The research paradigm in which this study is situated is Interpretivism. Interpretivism can be understood as a perspective that highlights understanding human behaviour and social phenomena, through the lived experiences and interpretations of individual's specific circumstances as it gives emphasis to human meaning-making (Scauso, 2020).

5.3.2 The Research Paradigm

Guba and Lincoln (1994) define a paradigm as a basic set of beliefs or worldview that guides research action or an investigation. A research paradigm reflects the researcher's beliefs about the world and denotes the beliefs and principles of the researcher (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). This shapes how the researcher views and interprets the world. The research paradigm in which this study is situated is Interpretivism. This is because the researcher's views and interpretations stem from her observations over twenty-five years in early education, of how EYE interpret and construct their practices through social and emotional interaction with the children. At the same time, the children construct their learning through social and emotional interaction with others, and their environment also. This researcher therefore believes that knowledge is socially constructed and thus identifies with the social constructivist paradigm or Interpretivist view of the world (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

5.3.3 Ontology and Epistemology

According to Guber and Lincoln (1985), research paradigms are characterised through four key dimensions: ontology epistemology, methodology, and axiology. Ontology concerns the nature of reality and what can be known while epistemology addresses the nature of knowledge, and how it

can be generated. Kivunja & Kuyini (2017) describe ontology as relating to beliefs about existence and reality. From an ontological perspective, this research is underpinned by the assumption that reality is subjective and socially constructed. This reflects the study's focus on the lived experience of attachment, where understandings are shaped through interpersonal interactions and individual interpretations. As such there is no single objective reality of attachment within ELC settings, but rather a range of realities constructed through experience. With regard to epistemology, this study adopts an interpretivist stance, recognising that knowledge is co-constructed through interaction between the researcher and the participants.

Rather than seeking to produce generalisable findings, the research aims to generate a rich contextualised understanding of how attachment is experienced and enacted in ELC practice. This positions the research participants as active meaning-makers, and acknowledges the epistemological role of the researcher in interpreting their experiences. Together these ontological and epistemological positions align with the study's qualitative methodology, and support an in-depth exploration of relational practice within ELC settings. As also discussed by Kivunja & Kuyini (2017), these assumptions and concepts help orientate the researcher in understanding the research problem, devising an approach in answering the research questions, and contributing to a solution. Thus with the research questions defined, attention then turned to the research paradigm and the methodology which would enable the research questions to be answered. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was chosen as the most suitable approach to answer the research question. A more detailed account of IPA follows later in the chapter at section 5.3.6.

Although previous attachment studies (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Nugent, 2015; Siegel, 2023; Sroufe, 2016; Trevarthen, 1979; Weatherston, 2001), recognise the importance of attachment relationships, these were mainly in parenting literature and situated in parent-child relationship studies. Moreover, where attachment research studies had focused on early educators' relationships with infants and toddlers, they used measurements of socioemotional learning and

classroom climate (Melnick, et. al., 2017). For example, Jools Page uses questionnaires and surveys to gain EYE thoughts on how close attachment interactions with infants and toddlers are realised and interpreted by early years' professionals as "professional love" (Page, 2015).

However, having reviewed previous work in this area, which had been of a quantitative nature, the researcher sought to contribute to the topic by exploring the issues from a much-needed qualitative perspective. Additionally, in keeping with IPA methodology, the researcher also explored "the essence" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 15) of attachment relationships for EYE and to investigate how attachments with infants and toddlers were experienced by EYE.

The researcher wanted to qualitatively investigate the phenomena of attachment relationships as experienced by EYE in their role. Therefore, an appropriate methodology was needed to achieve this, one which could create a safe space where EYE could openly discuss their experiences of attachment relationships, which the researcher herself had experienced as a naturally occurring phenomena in her role with infants and toddlers. Additionally, Smith and Eatough (2008) note that IPA is particularly suited to studying subjective experiences, for example, how people experience relationships. Therefore, IPA was suitable for studying attachment as a subjective experience. Consequently, qualitative measures were chosen. This was because a qualitative approach could provide data that could usefully add to the researcher's understanding of early educators lived experience of attachment and extend the knowledge of the researcher. The section that follows discusses the journey of selecting a suitable approach.

5.3.4 Focus Groups

Focus groups were considered as a way to hear EYE views. Cresswell (1998) states that focus groups are advantageous when the interaction among interviewees will likely yield the best information. However, focus groups were not a suitable approach to hearing EYE personal experiences. The researcher had been an EYE for most of her career, and she understood the sensitive and often labour of love (Moloney, 2011) concepts that early year's educators hold with regard to their

practices. The researcher felt focus groups would inadvertently silence those quieter members of the group, when in fact what the researcher wanted to achieve was to give overlooked members of the workforce (such as infant/toddler teachers) an opportunity to tell their lived experience of attachment relationships with BTT children. For that reason, focus groups were eliminated as a data collection instrument suitable to answer the research questions, and semi-structured interviews were selected as the data collection instrument

5.3.5 Phenomenology

A qualitative research approach suited this study because it gathered data on the phenomena of attachment. In this study, the phenomenon was attachment relationships. This situated the study in the field of phenomenology. Phenomenology is a philosophical approach that reveals the lived experience of a phenomena as unique, rather than situating it in general categories (Smith & Shinebourne, 2012). Crotty draws on Moustakas to define phenomenological study as the meaning of experiences of a phenomenon for several individuals, where the researcher reduces their experiences to a central meaning or the "essence of the experience" (Moustakas, 1994, cited in Crotty, 1998, p. 58).

As discussed by Mortari, revealing the nature of the phenomena under study is what the principal founder, Edward Husserl, started as a movement against quantitative positivism and as a meaning-making process in human lived experiences (Mortari, 2008). It was Husserl's student Heidegger who, whilst still upholding the meaning-making processes, preferred the approach of interpretation of human experiences to give a deeper level of understanding of the taken-for-granted phenomena by the interpretation of their experience (Heidegger, 1962) taken-for-granted concept is what phenomenology shines a light on because it "makes us thoughtfully aware of the consequential in the inconsequential, the significant in the taken-for-granted" (van Manen, 1984, p.36).

Phenomenology does not ask how individuals learn a particular thing or material, but rather, what is the nature of the experience, in order to better understand what the experience is like (van Manen, 1984). Therefore, Phenomenology was chosen as the approach to the research. This was because the central task of qualitative research, as opposed to quantitative which deals mostly in numerical data, is that qualitative research allows an account of human thinking, people's experience in their own words, and human behaviours (Creswell, 2012).

With relevance to this programme of research and with regard to the above point, attachment experiences from the adult's perspective may involve cultural contexts. Therefore, an attempt is made to understand the essential features of the phenomenon of attachment where ''explanations are not to be imposed before the phenomena have been understood from within'' (Moran, 2000, p. 4). That is why for this research, an ethic of delicacy (Mortari, 2008) needed to be given full consideration.

In phenomenological research, applying an ethic of delicacy means the researcher must adopt what Mortari calls, "cognitive postures" such as paying attention, emptying the mind, experiencing cognitive "placelessness", having empathy for the research participant, and caring for the participant" (Mortari, 2008, pg. 3). Subsequently, for this reason, Interpretative Phenomenology was chosen as both methodology and method (Smith et al., 2009), for gathering data. It was thought that an interpretive approach could reveal EYE lived experience of the phenomena of attachment in a sensitive and considerate approach. Therefore, Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis was selected so as to better understand what the experience of attachment is like or EYE, and to help the researcher appreciate how they make sense of and apply meaning to their relationships with BTT children. The following section provides an overview of the IPA methodological approach and the rationale for its use in also analysing the data.

5.3.6 Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is a methodology within Phenomenology (Eatough & Smith, 2017). The selection of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) for this study was chosen because of its close ties to phenomenology. This suited both the research questions, the research paradigm, and also the researcher's ontological beliefs. IPA is both a methodology, and a method of data analysis (Smith et al., 2009).

The origins of IPA lie in psychological research, and the approach was developed in response to dominance of qualitative research and numerical data in psychology. The approach of applying IPA to health psychology was first discussed by Smith (1996), for the contribution it could make to the field. Smith (2004) argued that an IPA approach could illuminate a qualitative and experiential account of a variety of peoples' experiences, with often personal and difficult issues, which would enable others to gain a deeper understanding of their lived experience of the issue. This is because as Smith et al., (2009) describe, qualitative research focuses on how individuals make sense of the experiences they have.

Although its name suggests that it is a data analysis approach, as mentioned IPA is an entire methodology, complete with its own approach to selecting a sample, preparing a schedule of questions, and conducting an interview (Smith & Nizza, 2008). IPA is concerned with trying to understand people's lived experiences and interpret how people make sense of their experiences. To date, IPA is not confined to health psychology, rather it is used increasingly in education research in areas such as exploring the teaching assistant's pedagogical roles (Clarke & Visser, 2017), early education (Holman, 2016) and teaching assistants (Angel, 2019).

In addition, there are many other areas where there is interest in "how the everyday flow of a lived experience takes on a particular significance for people" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 13). Additionally, Boniwell et. al., (2015) applied IPA to study the attachment relationships among mental health

nurses in a medium secure hospital, revealing the lived experience of their perception toward this construct. Hence IPA is concerned with conveying human experience and examining ways in which people make decisions based on their experiences.

5.3.7 Previous Use of IPA in Early Education Research

IPA as a research method and methodology, has been used before in the field of education research. The following three studies demonstrate the suitability of IPA for exploring concepts such as lived experience and meaning-making within an educational context. For example, Robinson (2020), used IPA to gain the personal perspectives of EYE with regard to their own spiritual beliefs and spirituality, in faith-based early learning and care centres. Brennan (2016), utilised IPA to understand the personal and emotional nature of the work of the EYE in infant care. The study interviewed four EYE in New Zealand and found that EYE framed their caregiving experiences within professional discourses, avoiding personal or emotional reflections. The EYE in this study struggled to express or acknowledge the emotional and personal aspects of their work. Their responses emphasised professional strategies of practice, rather than their own lived experiences. The findings suggest that professional training may inadvertently discourage personal emotions or discussions of lived experiences, which has the potential to impact reflective practices and teacher education (Brennan, 2016).

Corral-Granados et al., (2023) looked at the attitude to inclusion for BTT children through an IPA lens. The researchers interviewed seven EYE, made up of two classroom teachers, one special education needs coordinator, and four teaching assistants, working in a primary school in London. A total of four IPA interviews were conducted with each participant, alongside observations and artefact analysis for one academic year. Artefact analysis looked at photo-based diaries, children's evaluations, informal conversations, and conversations held with children and parents.

From analysing the data, the researchers identified several key findings regarding EYE experiences in promoting inclusive practices and professional development in ELC settings. The themes identified were, (i) workload and stress, (ii) personal development plans, (iii) cultures of self-determined learning, and (iv)parental involvement. With regard to workload and stress, these factors were found to be a challenge to their professional development. The EYE reported feeling overwhelmed by workloads which often extended beyond working hours with little time left for planning or research.

With regards to the EYE personal development plans, the participants reported feeling that these were supported by the school with help for pursuing formal training, tailored to their classroom needs, for example, autism courses or speech and language courses. The EYE highlights how these plans were useful as they allowed them to set training goals and reflect on their progress. This in turn fostered motivation, and they valued important learning opportunities. Another key finding was that EYE engaged in a culture of self-determined learning. This was where staff created a unique learning environment, motivated by respect for one another.

They also structured their time and resources flexibly to cater for the children's needs. Parental involvement and engagement were also key findings, with an emphasis on positive partnerships with parents. These were highlighted as creating and contributing to the continuance of a rich learning environment when the children were at home. In conclusion, the research highlighted the importance of collaboration, reflective practice, and tailored professional development in fostering inclusive practices. However, structural challenges such as heavy workloads hindered their progress. Despite this, the findings also showed that staff had remarkable resilience and pride in creating an inclusive and active learning culture, despite these challenges.

These IPA studies demonstrate the ability of IPA to elicit the lived experiences of attachment at a personal level, studying attachment as a subjective experience. However, despite, these attachments narratives and the aforementioned attachment studies which looked at relationships

with EYE in ELC settings, this researcher could not find IPA studies exploring attachment with BTT children in ELC settings in the Republic of Ireland. Hence this paucity of research makes this study a novel contribution to IPA research in the field of attachment and early education studies in the Republic of Ireland, while also being an appropriate methodology to explore EYE attachment relationships based on these previous studies.

As discussed, IPA is designed to capture people's thoughts, stories, and feelings in relation to the experiences which have meaning to them (Smith, 2019). It is a methodology which attempts to understand how these experiences are in turn understood and reflected on by people. Therefore, with regard to this study, it became clear that IPA was suited to the research questions, particularly on three very important points. Firstly, the study needed a sensitive approach in order to respectfully explore EYE relationships with BTT children. As IPA has what Mortari calls, "an ethic of delicacy" (Mortari, 2008), this means that the research is conducted with empathy and caring for the research participant. IPA's ethic of delicacy could meet the requirement for a sensitive and respectful approach. Secondly, the data gathered from the lived experiences of attachment for EYE could help answer the research questions, and thirdly, the researcher wanted to draw out from the participants the taken-for-granted (Van Manen, 1984) practices of attachments in ELC setting. As Smith at al., describe;

"At the most elemental level, we are constantly caught up, unselfconsciously, in the everyday flow of experience. As soon as we become aware of what is happening, we have the beginnings of what can be described as 'an experience' as opposed to just experience" (2009, p.7).

What this is referring to is the everyday unconscious experience of our lives. This can be, and is, for the most part, taken for granted by so many of us. However, by reflecting on an everyday experience, we become aware of it and begin to separate the experience from merely existing to actively reflecting on it. IPA is interested in those reflections as a way of understanding what the

experience is like for that person but also highlighting that which they experience normally as a phenomenon.

5.3.8 Photo voice

Photo voice (Wang & Buris, 1997) is a research methodology that uses photography to empower participants to reflect on their lived experiences and perspectives. Participants take photos related to the specific topic under investigation. They then select meaningful images and discuss them in focus group sessions, to enable understanding and communication. However, for this programme of research, the researcher wanted to ascertain how EYE operationalise attachment relationships with BTT children in ELC settings.

On reviewing Photovoice (Wang & Buris, 1997), it was clear the method of photography, whilst aligned to IPA, would not reveal the extent of knowledge of attachment and thus not answer the research questions. Additionally, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and in particular, Hyatt's Critical Literacy Framework (Hyatt, 2005), as a way to explore lived experiences, is more suited to policy texts and for enhancing a person's ability to become more aware of how policy affects them (Hyatt, 2005). This approach employs analysis of words at micro and also macro-level evaluation of a document. This would not reveal the lived experience of operationalising attachments in ELC settings.

5.3.9 Hermeneutic Cycle

IPA has been influenced by two theoretical principles hermeneutics and idiography. Hermeneutics is the method of interpretation that is used as a cyclical clarification between researcher and the research participant, and idiography is concerned with carefully emphasising each participant's unique experiences case by case, before making any generalisations (Smith, 2007; Smith et al., 2009). IPA methodology allows the researcher to interpret people's accounts in terms of the

significance the event holds for them. IPA is unique in that at the same time the person being interviewed is discussing the experience in a complex and multifaceted way, and reflecting on the experience in this way possibly for the first time. At the same, the researcher is trying to make sense of the experience (Smith et al., 2009). This process is referred to as the double hermeneutic (Smith, 2007; Smith et al., 2009), where the researcher is making sense of the participants, making sense of their experience, hence the term double hermeneutic (Smith et al., 2009).

5.3.10 The Idiographic Method

IPA uses an idiographic method. An idiographic approach is the opposite of the nomothetic approach, which focuses on generalisations (Smith, Harré, & Van Langenhove, 1995). Rather, the idiographic approach focuses on individual differences and individual experiences (Smith, 1999). IPA analysis looks for experiences that generate "units of reflections" (Dilthey, 1976). According to Smith et al., (2009), these "units" makes up the impact of the experience, and this is further made up of "smaller comprehensive units" (Dilthey 1976, in Smith et al., 2009, p 5). Smaller units make up "parts of a life" (Smith et al., 2009). Although these parts are "experiences" separated by time, they are also linked by a shared and common meaning among groups of people and also by differences in the group.

5.3.11 Rationale for a Qualitative Interpretative Approach

As discussed above, IPA was chosen because of its suitability to answer the research questions, because within the phenomenological tradition, Interpretative Phenomenology was selected not just to help the researcher build a phenomenological account of the interpersonal interactions and attachment relationships as experienced by the EYE. Another reason was that upon investigation into IPA as a suitable method, it became evident that IPA research has yet to investigate the lived experience of early years' educators' interpersonal relationships as proximal processes (Bronfenbrenner, & Morris, 2006), when working with children in the BTT cohort.

The IPA approach also aligned to the theoretical framework, which as discussed in Chapter Three, drew on Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). This is appropriate as Bronfenbrenner, in citing Lewin, reminds us that the way in which the environment is perceived by human beings says more about how reality is perceived in the mind or "psychological field" (Lewin, 1935), than how it exists in the objective world (Lewin, 1935, cited in Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 24). In other words, people's perspective is their reality. This aligns with the ontological position of the research in that it is this researcher's belief that an individual's reality can only be understood via knowledge of their own human experience.

These are the socially constructed meanings, which exist in and between minds, across time and space (Cozolino, 2013; Siegel, 2012). For that reason, this researcher believes that an individual's experience, while it exists in their mind, can also be understood and by others. Because Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory is also a theory of interpersonal communication and connections, it is best placed to give a flavour of "…the primacy of the phenomenological over the real environment in steering behaviour" (Bronfenbrenner 1979, p.24).

5.4 Phase Two: Empirical Research

5.4.1 Introduction

This section discusses the research participants, how they were selected, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and provides a justification for the small sample size. Following this, a discussion of data collection is presented. Part Two discusses the empirical steps taken to collect data, analyse data, decide the sampling frame, the inclusion and exclusion criteria for decision making, the interview schedule, and the justification for verbal consent.

Part Two details the process of data collection, including the chosen data collection instrument, and rationale for its choice over other data collection instruments. Additionally, Part Two also sets out the steps taken to analyse the data using IPA data analysis principles and discusses the pilot interview, plus what was learned and applied to refine the interview schedule from conducting the pilot interview. This section then discusses the researchers' experience of conducting an IPA study as a novice researcher, and the challenges but also the enjoyment of conducting IPA research.

5.4.2 Recruiting Research Participants

To answer the research questions, the most appropriate informants for the research were Early Years Educators (EYE) and Early Learning and Care (ELC) managers working with birth-to-three children in ELC settings in the Republic of Ireland. Therefore, they were chosen as the target population. The researcher drew up a sampling frame. A sampling frame is a mail or published lists of potential respondents in the population (Cresswell, 2009).

The sampling frame consisted of ELC services in the Republic of Ireland and was developed from both the Government of Ireland website National Childcare Scheme, and the Pobal website record of Tusla registered ELC facilities in Republic of Ireland. Pobal are an organisation who publish this record as part of their work on behalf of the Government. Their role is to manage EU Grants for local development (Pobal, 2022). Tusla is the Child and Family Agency, which oversees inspections and compliance in the ELC sector. Postal addresses and telephone numbers were not extracted from these databases, to minimise the amount of data held on these services in line with General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) (Data Protection Act, 2018).

5.4.3 Selecting the Participants

The name of each county in the Republic of Ireland was entered into these databases of the Government of Ireland website National Childcare Scheme, and the Pobal website record of Tusla registered ELC facilities in Republic of Ireland. The search engine function was then used to locate services fitting previously decided inclusion and exclusion criteria, which were required to partake in the research. The inclusion and exclusion criteria were decided on the grounds of what participants could tell us in answering the research questions. This decision was supported by IPA methodology, which advises that the aim is to find a reasonably homogeneous sample (Nizza et. al., 2021). These are set out on the following page.

5.4.4 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion criteria

- Early educators working with children aged 6 months to 3 years.
- Early educators and managers with more than six months' experience
- Early Learning and Care managers

Exclusion criteria

- Administration or accounting staff
- Auxiliary Staff (Cook, Cleaner etc.)
- Owners of ELC services where this is not their place of work or occupation.
- Afterschool Service
- Parents

From the inclusion/exclusion criteria, twenty-six services were extracted. Only one from each county was chosen in order to give smaller counties an equal chance of being selected. Selection was made by putting their names into a hat. All twenty-six services were invited to the study, however only one person replied to this invitation. After a period of 21 days had elapsed without receiving any other replies, a gentle reminder was sent to each of the twenty-six services in line with permission from the Ethics Committee. However, no replies were received. Invitation emails were then sent to service managers in the researchers' hometown, with whom the researcher had professional links. Recruitment via this route was more successful, and five more participants joined the study. Further recruitment was slow and piecemeal. The decision was then taken to send out invitations via the researchers' professional LinkedIn account. This yielded one response. The researcher then began recruiting participants by snowballing through professional contacts. As discussed by Parker, Scott & Geddes (2019), snowballing is a technique in qualitative research which starts with referral from already existing participants who recommend the study to other potential participants such as friends or colleagues. This approach yielded two participants. In total, nine participants took part in the research.

5.4.5 Sample Size

Smith et al., (2009) highlights that because IPA is an idiographic approach concerned with understanding particular phenomena in particular contexts, IPA studies are conducted on small sample sizes thus can offer a research project insight into a particular experience (Smith et al., 2009). Therefore, in an IPA study, participants are selected on the basis that they can grant access to a particular perspective on the phenomena under study. In IPA, the sample represents a perspective, rather than a population (Smith et al., 2009).

In total, nine IPA interviews were conducted with four community not-for-profit services, and five privately run services across different geographical locations in the Republic of Ireland. During the analytical process consideration was given to whether these contextual variables influenced the

participants' experiences and understanding of attachment. However, no consistent or clearly defined pattern emerged in relation to whether the service type was community or private. In light of the idiographic commitment of IPA, which prioritises in-depth exploration of individual lived experience before moving to patterns across cases, analysis was initially conducted at the level of the individual participant, focusing on their experiences and meaning-making processes. While cross-case analysis was subsequently undertaken to identify shared themes, these did not cluster along structural variables, such as service type, or location. Instead convergence across accounts appeared to be grounded in shared relational experiences, suggesting that understanding of attachment was shaped by interpersonal factors rather than by Organisational or geographical context. This reinforces the suitability of IPA for capturing both the nuance of individual experiences and the identification of patterns that transcend specific settings. Table 5.1 contains details of the participants.

Table 5.1 The Research Participants.

Pseudo-name	Qualification	Experience	Age range	Role		Gender
Leah	QQI Level 5 and 6. B.A. Education. Level 9 postgraduate certificate in Trauma Informed Practice	21 years	0-6	Manager	Community not-for-profit services	Female
Susan	QQI Level 9 master's degree in Early Intervention	7 years	0-3	EYE	Private	Female

Maeve	QQI Level 5 and 6	14 years		EYE	Private	Female
Carol	QQI Level 5 and 6. B.A. Sociology	15 years		EYE	Private	Female
Jean	B.A.Montessori teaching	30 Years		EYE	Private	Female
Niamh	QQI Level 5 and 6	25 years		Manager	Community not-for-profit services	Female

Olive	QQI Level 6. Recently completed training as a Special Needs Assistant (SNA).	18 years	0-3 YEARS	EYE	Community not-for-profit services	Female
Kate	QQI Level 8 B.A.Early Childhood Studies.	2 years	0-3 YEARS	EYE	Community not-for-profit services	Female
Sabrina	QQI Level 6	1 year	0-3 YEARS	Room Leader	Community not-for-profit	Female

5.4.6 The Research Participants

5.4.7 Materials

The invitation email to the study contained a consent form (appendix 5), the Participant's Information Letter (PIL) (see appendix 6), and the name and contact details of the researcher and the research supervisor. The Participant Information Letter (PIL) was attached to the invitation study. The PIL outlined the purpose of the research, informed participants of their rights, which included the right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence, and provided assurances that their details would remain strictly confidential. The rights of the participant were explained in line with Trinity College Dublin's policy, Good Research Guide (Trinity College Dublin, 2002).

5.4.8 Interviews

Ten interviews took place in the researcher's home by telephone between February 2022 and July 2022. The interviews lasted between 30 and 40 minutes. Conducting interviews from home had been a necessary step due to the COVID pandemic in Ireland. IPA interviews by telephone offer advantages and disadvantages. In a telephone, interview participants can enjoy the anonymity. However, pauses for reflection or thinking about what you are hearing, may some cases come across as not listening.

Following the interview process, the researcher ran into two problems. Firstly, on the morning of 2/08/2022, the researcher's computer wouldn't turn on. The researcher notified the Trinity College IT department and began liaising with them to identify the problem. The computer was couriered to the Trinity College Dublin (TCD) IT department, and they recommended that the hard drive be removed and sent to a data retrieval company. At the same time, the researcher checked the TCD

storage cloud to ensure that the interviews were safely stored electronically. However, it was then discovered that the files hadn't been saved to the cloud.

The researcher began to investigate why the files hadn't uploaded to the cloud and learned that it was due to having conducted the interviews via a wireless internet connection at her home. The internet package in the researcher's home was entirely adequate for family use, but a wireless connection was not sufficient to upload large file sizes. The file's large size, combined with a wireless connection, meant that OneDrive could not bring in audio files because they were over 250 Giga Bites (GB), and this exceeded the maximum file size.

After two weeks of waiting, the data retrieval company contacted the researcher to say that the data on the hardrive was irretrievable because the laptop did not have a BitLocker code to retrieve the data. The laptop was on loan from the TCD Disability Office, and as such was not allocated a BitLocker code. The result was that the interviews which were saved to the hard drive could not be saved either. The researcher returned the hard drive as requested by the IT officer in the Disability office for disposal. As no data could be retrieved, the risk of a data breach was not possible. The researcher then found herself in a perfect storm with data unsaved in the cloud and irretrievable from the hardrive.

To resolve this problem, the researcher purchased an Internet cable connection and ensured that this was installed promptly. This bandwidth was via an Ethernet cable going from her laptop directly to the internet modem. Investigating the issue, the researcher learned that the modem location was a major factor in the problem. She rectified this issue by locating the wired modem beside her computer on her desk, and not in the hall at the front door of her home, where the internet company had originally installed it. With the new location, she checked that audio files could be uploaded and saved securely.

After ensuring that the internet bandwidth was sufficient for research interviews, the researcher then emailed the research participants and explained the situation. She asked if they would

consider agreeing to do a second interview. Agreement was immediately reached by six participants, with four individuals unable to commit due to other obligations and time constraints. This was rectified when the researcher was able to recruit four new participants via a snowballing technique and via her professional social media account. a second round of interviews then took place. When nine participants (see Table 5.1 above for details of the participants) were interviewed, the research questions had been fully answered, and further recruitment ended. Within four months of the problem first being identified, new interviews were conducted and saved, and the issue was rectified.

The researcher has shared this experience with her research group, highlighting areas where colleagues need to be extra vigilant factors such as broadband and internet speed and capacity, manual checks regardless of computer notifications confirming that data has been saved when handling large files and sets of data and servers designed for home use only. Whilst losing data on both fronts was initially distressing, it was also a learning experience, which led to gaining valuable knowledge.

5.4.9 Justification for Verbal Consent

In Section 6 of the application for ethical application for approval from the School of Education (Code of Practice for Research Ethics Committee, 2019), paragraph 6.7 states that the researcher must provide a clear justification for why written consent may not be possible and why consent was sought verbally. For this study consent was sought by consent form and also verbally before any research took place (Code of Practice for Research Ethics Committee, 2019),

Hill et al., (2013) discusses the factors that affect response rates in research and advise reducing barriers as much as possible. Having experience of the low salaries associated with teaching in the field of early education, the researcher is cognisant that not all EYE may have access to a printer and scanner, which would be required to return a signed consent form. Research indicates that requiring consent forms to be posted back to the researcher, can reduce response rates and also

introduce bias (Hill et al., 2013), and that alternative approaches, such as verbal or opt-in electronic consent, can help reduce barriers to research participation. Participants were asked to give verbal consent, as well as ensuring they had read the participants information letter, before the interview began.

5.4.10 The Interview Schedule

The specific interview questions related to the scope of the research question with a view to staying true to the research questions (Polit & Beck, 2001). Polit and Beck (2001) advise that all questions in a semi-structured interview should be open-ended, well thought out, and non-judgmental to allow the interview to become an open discussion.

In this programme of research, the researcher found it helpful to refer to the interview in the participant's information letter as a "chat" and a discussion, more so than an "interview". This shifted the focus from the word interview, which may have negative associations for some people of an interrogation, rather than a discussion. This simple change in language set a relaxed tone for the interview, where the participants felt important and welcome.

In the current research programme, the questions tried to elicit descriptive answers such as "please could you tell me what you do in your job?" The researcher also wanted to gain a narrative from the participant with questions such as "Can you tell me about how you came to work in the ELC sector? Questions also sought contrast e.g. "What are the main differences between a good day and a bad day" and comparative reflections, i.e. "have you ever considered working somewhere else? (Smith et al., 2009). Each question directly related to the main research question and sub-questions by asking both the EYE and ELC managers openly about their lived experience of relationships with BTT children, and what attachment meant to the them. Prompts, such as "Can you tell me about this" and "how did that make you feel?" were also used when necessary. The participants appeared to welcome the opportunity to first reflect on how and why they came to be

EYE in the first instance, before moving on to reflect on their lived experience of attachment in practice. Overall, the questions were “a conversation with a purpose” (Smith et al., 2009, p.51).

5.4.11 Pilot Interviews

According to van Teijlingen & Hundley (2001) pilot interviews in research are a valuable tool. The researcher conducted a pilot interview to test the questions and allow her to practice building time management skills and confidence. This was also to improve the quality of the interview questions and prompts, and to ensure they allowed the research participants to “tell their own stories, in their own words, in depth and in detail” (Smith et al., 2022, p. 54). Firstly, the pilot interview tested questions until it could be reasonably estimated that the interview might last 30-40 minutes. The researcher felt it was important for research participants to know how long they will need to set aside for the research interview, and this was set out in the Participants Information Letter (PIL), as part of the ethical process. Secondly, pilot interviews were useful to single out questions that were directly related to research questions. However, as the pilot interview helped refine the final interview question, the focus always reflected the area of interest under discussion within the conversation, and they remained flexible enough to change direction with the conversation. According to Smith et al., (2009), this is considered good practice in interviewing as the researcher must go with what the research participant tells them.

5.5. Section Five: Data Collection

5.5.1 Introduction

The section that follows gives an account of how the research was carried out. It will describe in detail the procedures involved. It also provides a description of the data collection instruments and the rationale for the method of data analysis.

5.5.2 Selection of the Data Collection Instrument

Finding a suitable data collection instrument was the next task. As discussed, the approach of this study was Interpretative Phenomenological analysis (IPA), However, other IPA researchers have used artefact collections and diaries (Corral-Granados et al., 2023) as data collection instruments. Therefore, the section that follows briefly discusses the search for a suitable data collection instrument. Within a qualitative approach, other approaches were carefully considered. The data collection instruments for consideration were questionnaires, case study, and semi-structured interviews. The next section describes the journey undertaken in finding a suitable data collection instrument.

5.5.3 Audit Questionnaire

To begin exploring how the research could collect data, an Audit Questionnaire (Mc Guckin and Lewis, 2008), was considered. A draft questionnaire was prepared which was adapted from the Audit Questionnaire developed by Mc Guckin and Lewis (2008). An Audit Questionnaire is designed to provide research participants with the opportunity to provide qualitative responses in addition to Yes/No answers (Mc Guckin & Lewis, 2008). This was considered because EYE experience of attachment with BTT children in ELC settings is limited in the literature within an Irish context.

The researcher reached out to the Services, Industrial, Professional and Teachers Union (SIPTU). SIPTU are the official union of the early learning and care workforce, and their "Big Start" (SIPTU, 2021) campaign to recruit early educator's members has resulted in an extensive database of approximately 6,000 EYE, working in both community and privately run ELC settings throughout Ireland (SIPTU, 2023). SIPTU kindly offered to distribute the Audit Questionnaires to ELC members on their database of EYE.

However, on further reflection, the suitability of a questionnaire as a research instrument to elicit "the essence of the phenomenon" (Smith et al., 2009), came into question for the type of information required to address the research questions in this particular study. It was decided by the researcher that a questionnaire would not adequately answer the research questions. This was because despite the design of the Audit Questionnaire in providing an opportunity for qualitative and quantitative responses (Mc Guckin & Lewis, 2008), interviews were more appropriate for answering the research questions.

Additionally, staying in fidelity with IPA methodology as regards selecting a sample size, meant reducing the number of participants to around eight to ten participants (Smith et al., 2009). Therefore, it was felt that sending invitations to SIPTU members of approximately six thousand ELC personnel was too broad, and that the research sample needed to be more targeted. Hence the invitation from SIPTU to distribute the research questionnaires to its members was kindly declined.

5.5.4 Semi-structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were selected as the data collection instrument. The reason for this was because of its suitability to answer the research questions and provide the type of information needed from participants (Burns and Grove 2006). Nine interviews were conducted with three community not-for-profit services, and six privately run services. Seven EYE and two managers were interviewed via the telephone and recorded and transcribed verbatim. Telephone interviews were

chosen due to the presence of COVID -19. The interviews lasted approximately 40 minutes and sought to obtain in-depth and rich data in line with IPA on the complexities of experiencing a lived and personally felt attachment to BTT children.

IPA interviews by telephone offer advantages and disadvantages. In a telephone interview, the participants can enjoy the anonymity and the participants provided personal accounts of what their relationships with the birth-to-three (BTT) aged children meant to them. However, the disadvantage experienced by this researcher was that momentary pauses for reflection may come across as not listening. Farooq & De Villiers (2017), offer advice on using the telephone as a data collection tool, including using the interview questions in a flexible manner, to encourage participants with phrases such as “it’s okay” and “please take your time”. They also advise that after the interview the researcher thinks about ways of improving, for instance, asking questions in a different tone of voice, and the pace of the interview.

This last point is particularly important because in an IPA interview, time for reflection is essential, and very much required by the participant to mentally process the question and formulate their response. In the micro-minutes after the question is put to them, they are trying to think of examples that illustrate their experience, and to call on memory about how they felt at the time. This is a cognitive process, and as mentioned this cognition can be overshadowed by volumes of questions which leave little space for processing.

Interpersonal skills used in face-to-face interviewing, such as adopting an open and neutral body language, nodding, smiling, showing genuine interest and attentive listening, are more difficult to convey during a telephone interview. Instead, the skills of close listening, asking inquisitive questions, asking to return to a topic because of something very important that was said by the participant, and pausing to give the participant time to recognise that they are indeed being listened to, are more appropriate skills. The IPA focus was on collection of stories of that experience, and what aspects of the phenomenon i.e. the attachment, these accounts had on convergence and

divergence (Allan & Eatough, 2016; Moustakas, 1994; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012; Smith, 2011a; Smith et al., 2009).

As the researcher became more skilled at interviewing, she decided to conduct less structured interviews. According to Smith et al., (2009), this form of interviewing has a single core interview question which is asked at the beginning of the interview. This structure suited the researcher as the discussion, whilst still remaining on topic, depended entirely on how the participant answered the first question. The development of the interview questions is documented in Section Seven of this Chapter, and the interview schedule of initial questions can be found in Appendix 9. While the researcher starts with a research question and interview schedule, this is used very flexibly during the interview as the participant is asked about issues arising from the interview.

5.6 Section Six: IPA Analysis Procedure

5.6.1 Introduction

The focus of this section is on data analysis. Data analysis through IPA is carried out through a seven-stage process. Data analysis in IPA is an iterative and inductive cycle (Smith, 2007), which is influenced by two theoretical methods, hermeneutics and idiography. Hermeneutics can be understood as a method of interpretation that is used as a cyclical clarification between researcher and the research participant, and idiography is concerned with carefully emphasising each participant's unique experiences case by case, before making any generalisations (Smith, 2007; Smith et al., 2009).

The centrality of hermeneutics and idiography in the use of IPA is due to a consensus on gaining the lived experience of each individual and then looking for convergences and divergence across cases. Explored in this section are the seven steps in IPA analysis. As will be seen IPA does not generalise. Instead the method involves the researcher investigating the phenomena one-to-one, but then

interpreting the experience as a whole. As such, in IPA analysis there is no claim of generalisability, rather by utilising the hermeneutic and idiographic methods, IPA shines a light on phenomena (Smith et al., 2022; Smith & Nizza, 2021). To begin, this section will discuss markers of quality IPA study.

The following section sets out the steps of IPA in conducting the analysis of the data. Whilst no universal agreement exits on these steps, Smith et al., (2009) found this set of steps worked well for the novice IPA researcher, to provide a sense of confidence and competence which was likely to result in analysis which was "good enough" (p. 72).

For students embarking on an IPA study for the first time, the researchers advise that it is wise to work closely with their suggested set of steps. Only after some confidence has been gained by previously following the procedures for IPA analysis, should attempts be made to adapt them (Smith et al., 2009). Steps one to seven are set out in the next section following the procedure set out by Smith et al., (2022).

5.6.1 Step One: Reading and Re-reading the First Case

This was the initial step of reading the first transcription. Smith et al., (2022), refer to this as entering the world of the participant. In IPA, the primary concern is the lived experience of the participant, and the meaning they attribute to that experience (Smith et al., 2022). The result is in the analyst interpretation, which is always subjective (Smith et al., 2022). However, findings are not unrestrained, IPA is systematic and rigorous, and the first step in maintaining rigor is in the reading and re-reading of the participant's transcription. This is where familiarity with the transcript is created.

This researcher found it very helpful in the interpretation process to listen to the interviews again and again. In this process, nuances, pauses, and moments of realisation and reflection by the participant could be perceived, as they found meaning in the IPA question and reflected on the

answer. Another useful strategy found by this researcher was to play music in the background, while also listening to the participant's interview. This helped to unlock a deeper idiographic attention to their narratives, which in turn, led to deeper interpretations in the hermeneutic cycle. The researcher found the music of the pianist Jacob Ladegaard especially helpful for "entering the participant's world" (Smith et al., 2022, pg.78).

5.6.2 Step Two: Exploratory Noting

This second step examines the transcript for "things that matter to the participant" (Smith et al., 2022, pg.79). The questions asked of the transcription were "what are the concerns of the participant" and "what is it like?". Things such as, relationships, processes, places, events, values, and principles were the areas where this researcher found the participants "lived world" (Smith et al., 2022, pg. 83). With reference to this programme of research, exploratory notes focused on the EYE language, identical phrases that they used, similar assumptions, their use of soundbites and one-liners that were repeated across participants, and idiographic use of speech which helped the researcher understand the uniqueness of their individual behaviours (Reid et. al., 2005). These things revealed the participant's thoughts and prompted their meaning-making and reflections. They also demonstrated a "shared understandings of the given phenomena" (Reid et. al., 2005, p. 20). Exploratory noting is a fine balancing act between capturing the meaning of the phenomena to the participants (Reid et. al., 2005). and remaining unswayed by prior knowledge of the field of study. This is because "the inductive and iterative procedures of IPA are intended to help the researcher to develop an initial 'insider's perspective' on the topic" (Reid et. al., 2005, p. 22). This is the interpretive role of the researcher, which as pointed out by Brooks and Wearden (2006), is accepted as explicit recognition, yet unspoken acceptance of the responsibility of the IPA researcher.

5.6.3 Step Three: Constructing Experiential Statements

This is where the researcher begins to work with the exploratory notes from the last step, rather than the transcript itself, while also staying close to the participant's words and always in relation to their experience. Constructing experiential statements involved making a preliminary statement or comment on the analytic work, and this was where the researchers' perspective became visible (Larkin et al., 2006). This blend represented both the participant and the researcher. The researchers' task is to mirror the participant's feelings and reflect back to them a stable understanding of their narrative.

5.6.4 Step Four: Searching for Connections Across Experiential Statements

In searching for connections in the transcripts, it is acceptable that not all the experiential statements get included in the final analysis (Smith et al., 2009). The challenge therefore becomes what is relevant and what is not. A good organising principle is to map the experiential statements onto the research questions (Mc Guckin, 2025 in personal conversation). These statements were then moved around to fit related themes for the Findings Chapter (Smith et al., 2022).

5.6.5 Step Five: Naming Experiential Themes

Step five is where experiential statements become Personal Experiential Themes (PETS). PETS are named in line with the PET, to represent the personal and experiential (Smith & Nizza, 2021). This is because, as Smith and Nizza (2021) point out, they are at the level of the person and are directly related to the personal experiences of the participant. Naming PETS take on an "orientation towards something "(Smith et al., 2022, pg. 98). For example, in this research one of the PETS is "Affection Beats Adversity". This title represents the overall sense of busyness and distractions as conveyed by the participants, where attachment relationships were second to other demands

related to their role. This can be seen in the transcript where each participant has discussed demands on them. Therefore, the name of the PET brings their experiences together in a theme.

5.6.6 Step Six: Continues the Individual Analysis of Interviews

Step Six simply follows steps 1-5 for each participant.

5.6.7 Step Seven: Working with Experiential Themes to Develop Group Experiential Themes Across Cases

Step Seven in IPA analysis looks for similarities and differences across all PETS. Similarities and differences create Group Experiential Themes (GETS). GETS represent the "unique shared experiences" (Smith et al., 2022, pg.100), and highlight where there is convergence and divergence among the participants. Identifying GETS in this research was a similar process to Identifying and naming PETS. Like PETS, GETS are named with regard to what the participants said was their lived experience. However, the difference for GETS is that whereas PETS represent an idiographic account of their own lived experience, GETS represent convergence and divergence across participants' experiences. In this way, the participants reflect a shared quality.

5.7 Markers of Quality in IPA Research

5.8 Reliability and Validity

Nizza et al., (2021) have developed four quality indicators of good IPA, with the aim of helping researchers write good IPA research and papers, and to help reviewers assess IPA research for validity. According to Nizza et al., (2021), the four quality indicators are;

(i) Constructing a compelling, unfolding narrative, (ii) Developing a vigorous experiential and/or existential account, (iii) Close analytic reading of participants' words, and (iv) attending to convergence and divergence. When examined individually, each quality indicator helps the novice

IPA researcher to navigate the reliability and validity indicators for the method. For example, constructing a compelling, unfolding narrative gives the analysis a persuasive and coherent essence. developing a vigorous experiential and/or existential account means that it tells a story, and is built up through carefully selected extracts from the research participant's interviews. Close analytic reading of participant's words means that the focus is always on the meaning the participants' gives to the event or experience (the phenomenon under study), while attending to convergence and divergence across participants creates links or patterns of similarity and difference with their individual narratives.

In order to help remember these quality indicators, this researcher developed the acronym, "N = A C E D" adapted from Nizza et al., (2021) and Smith et al., (2022). The N represents the "narrative", which conveys the overall spirit of the participant's experience. The A is a reminder that the narrative must be a close "Analytic" reading of the participants words (Smith et al., 2009). The "C" reminds the researcher of the importance of "Convergence", and likewise, the "D" is there to prompt the researcher to be on the lookout for "Divergence". The acronym "N = A C E D", is also visually based on the "n =" symbol in research as a representation of the number of participants in a research study, and ACED simply helps the researcher's academic confidence in knowing the focus is on the "particular qualities that are the hallmark of high-quality IPA research" (Nizza et al., 2021, p.2).

5.9 Epoche

Within the field of phenomenological research, "epoche" is the term given to the process of setting aside assumptions (Moustakas, 1994). Epoche is a Greek word meaning to reserve judgement, or refrain from the everyday way of perceiving things (Moustakas, 1994). In other words, to "bracket" one's presumptions and beliefs. This usually involves the researcher examining their biases in order to allow them to fully include the views of each participant. To contribute towards demonstrating

reliability and trustworthiness of the findings, a reflexive journal was also used to record strategies of reliability (Ortlipp, 2008).

To help with this process, the researcher made a note in a reflective journal of any predispositions that came up. What was helpful about this activity was that it allowed the researcher to recognise and acknowledge her own past lived experiences and put them aside. This attempt to approach every aspect of the research as free and as unbiased as possible was necessary so that others' perspectives can be precisely described and understood (Moustakas, 1994). Identity for this researcher is one who considers herself broadminded and empathic. Discovering implicit biases was a wakeup call. These biases were due to frustration with how EYE still face poor societal value placed on their role.

5.10 Mitigating Bias

As a researcher, particular care and attention was taken in this programme of research to avoid as much as possible researcher bias. This meant keeping a reflective diary throughout the research process. However, in the interest of transparency, it is worth discussing here how the conversations that are brought about by IPA questions can very often reveal things that the researcher did not expect to hear. Sometimes these unexpected revelations can reveal previously unknown and implicit biases within the researcher. According to Greenwald et al., (1998), implicit biases can exist beyond conscious awareness and any occasion which identifies an implicit bias is to be warmly welcomed, simply for the opportunity it presents to confront bias and move past it (Greenwald et al., 1998).

In IPA research, due to its emphasis on the lived experience, it can very often highlight biases that nobody likes to admit to having. This can be an uncomfortable place to sit, as there can sometimes be a sense of dis-equilibrium when internal self-concepts differ from the reality. In this research programme, the researcher's reflective diary helped her identify and regulate her own implicit

biases. Occasionally narratives from the participants sometimes provoked frustration at a lack of knowledge on child development issues. However, she realised that the EYE who were taking part in her research were eager to learn. Taking such a reflective stance from reviewing her reflective journal highlighted the importance of researcher reflexivity and managing emotions during the research process.

5.11 Chapter Conclusion

The focus of this Chapter was on the chosen methodology for this programme of research, which was IPA. As discussed, IPA is concerned with getting to the lived experience of a phenomena for the individual in a sensitive and delicate approach. Reviewed here were the salient literatures to explore the IPA method, which as can be seen, is both a method and a methodology. As can be seen, data analysis using IPA has been influenced by two theoretical methods: hermeneutics and idiography. Hermeneutics is the method of interpretation that is used as a cyclical clarification between researcher and the research participant, and idiography is concerned with carefully emphasising each participant's unique experiences case by case, before making any generalisations. Therefore, explored here also were the central steps taken by the researcher, regarding carrying out an IPA study. The aim of IPA is to allow people to discuss their experiences and discover their common meaning. In IPA experiences are analysed in the context of a bigger event or happening, i.e. the overall prevailing experience, which the researcher investigates one on one, but then interprets the experience as a whole. In conclusion, IPA was chosen so as to reveal EYE lived experience of the phenomena of attachment, in a sensitive and considerate approach. This was important to an appreciation how EYE made sense of and applied meaning to their relationships with BTT children, which the Findings Chapter will examine next.

Chapter Six: Findings

6.1 Introduction

The focus of this Chapter is to set out the findings from the semi-structured IPA interviews. As discussed in the previous chapter, IPA research can be understood as a qualitative research approach committed to the examination of how people make sense of experiences (Smith et al., 2009). IPA is considered phenomenological, in that it is concerned with interpreting the lived experiences of individuals through the hermeneutic analytical process (Smith et al., 2022). The centrality of the hermeneutic process in IPA is based on understanding human experiences through a continuous cycle of interpretation of personal narratives. These are developed into Personal Experiential Themes (PETS) and grouped into Group Experiential Themes (GETS).

Therefore, explored in this Chapter will be the GETS and PETS regarding the lived experience of attachment relationship for early years' educators (EYE) and ELC managers in early learning and care (ELC) settings in the Republic of Ireland with birth-to-three (BTT) children. As will be seen, the themes from the research sample represent a fair, though small, cross-section of the lived experience of attachment relationships for ELC staff and management. To begin, the next section will set out an overview of themes in table format.

6.2 Overview of Themes:

Table 6.1. Group Experiential Themes and Personal Experiential Themes

Group Experiential Themes (GETS)	**Personal Experiential Themes (PETS)**
GET 1: Barriers to Attachment	• PET 1.1: Equality in Identity • PET 1.2: Perceptions of Paperwork versus Presence

	• PET 1.3: Not Everyone's Time Is Equal • PET 1.4: Early Intervention versus Challenging Behaviour • PET 1.5: Compliance versus Connection • PET 1.6: Temporal Aspects of Practice • PET 1.7: Stress and Cleaning • PET 1.8: Playing with Meaning
GET 2: Facilitators of Attachment	• PET 2.1: This is me • PET 2.2: Intuition versus Intellect • PET 2.3: Affection Beats Adversity • PET 2.4: Love Is All You Need

6.3 The Structure of the Chapter

This chapter is divided into two sections, each representing the two Group Experiential Themes (GET's) identified. In good quality IPA analysis, Smith et al., (2022) advise that the reader should be able to read Personal Experiences Themes (PET) as contributing to the Group Experiential Themes (GET). With this in mind PET's sit under the broader GET's to illustrate this relationship. However, the balance between the participant's voice (idiography) and the researcher's interpretation (hermeneutics) is prioritised.

6.4 Introduction

The focus of this section is on "Barriers to Attachment" which is the first of the two Group Experiential Themes (GET) identified. Barriers to attachment relationships were identified from the literature, and can be understood as anything that could potentially derail the adult's emotional availability, causing a misattunement with the child's emotional needs (Fonagy and Target, 2002). For that reason, explored here are the EYE and ELC manager's attachment relationships with BTT children for socioemotional learning, and co-regulation of emotions and behaviours. As will be seen, the participating EYE and ELC managers in this study face many challenges, and there are many threats which were identified as potentially creating barriers to their attachment's relationships with young children.

6.5 GET 1: Barriers to Attachment

For BTT children, learning to regulate emotions is a process learned through the adult (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2019; Porges, 2017). Additionally, Schore (2016), reminds us that the adult's mature nervous system regulates the child's immature nervous system through non-verbal body language. Therefore, with regard to the literature, it is reasonable to presume that the role of the EYE working with BTT children is to co-regulate the child's emotions and behaviours, until they can learn to

regulate themselves. This is important to attachment and socioemotional development, because as also discussed by Fonagy & Target (2002), self-regulation contributes to the foundation of social and emotional development. However, as the first GET suggests, there were many obstacles which thwarted the desire of the research participants to connect with the children. The next Section begins by setting out the Personal Experiential Themes (PET) from which the aforementioned main overarching GET connects its experiential meaning to the individual PETS below and how GET 1 was developed.

6.5.1 Personal Experiential Themes (PETS) within GET 1

The focus of this section is on the Personal Experiential Themes (PETs) that were identified from the participants lived experience. PET can be understood as "experience which is of particular moment or significance to the person" (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2022, pg. 27). The centrality of PETS in the idiographic analysis conducted through IPA, is a contribution to this programme of research by connecting the findings to the literature review. This is important because this helps shed light on "theoretical transferability" (Smith et al., 2022, pg. 32), which the reader can then examine from their own knowledge base and perspective. To provide context to their narrative, the first PET relates to the reasons why they became EYE in the first place.

6.5.2 Equality in Identity

"…they say the word "childcare" and I just go, stop!

The question of what might act as a challenge to their relationships with the children was put to each participant. Eight participants pointed out that they felt their role was still not considered a recognised profession and that this impacted their occupation and recognition. The theme of not having a strong occupational identity emerged for all the participants. Niamh said that regardless

of what improvements are made to the ELC sector, once they call it “childcare” she stops engaging any further.

Niamh: *“It drives me nuts if we're called childcare…it drives me insane. They talk about all they are giving us, and all this wonderful stuff…and then they say the word “childcare”, and I just go [think] stop! It's never going to change.”*

The strong sentiment expressed by Niamh is shared by Carol, who considered matters of identity to be linked with the matter of respect.

Carol: *“If you look at the amount of respect a primary [school] teacher will get, and the amount of respect we get. I mean…it's night and day. It's not fair because we're very highly educated. We're very highly trained. We're homing in on a big skill set. We're constantly developing, and continued professional development is consistent.”*

The term “childcare” annoys Niamh and Carol greatly because as Carol pointed out, the majority of employees are highly qualified, going into the ELC sector with degrees. Carol undertook a lot of study to qualify, however, she reports feeling treated as though she is still considered unskilled. Her use of the metaphor night and day reflected just how opposite she considers the occupational respect given to her, from that of a primary school teacher, even though the only difference in both roles is the age of the children. Carol and Niamh were not alone in believing this was a respect issue. Susan made a similar point, believing that respect is the preserve of those who teach primary school.

Susan: *“it's just primary and secondary [teaching] that have a certain level of respect attached to it. Early years and school age childcare doesn't really.”*

This is felt by Jean also.

Jean: *“As we understand child development studies more, it’s important that we are really being one-hundred percent present with that child. It has got a lot to do with the child being seen and*

given the time and the opportunity to explore the world, explore the developmental stages that they're at, and to really facilitate their exploration in a very kind and gentle manner."

Susan feels there is no respect attached to being an EYE. Her tone indicates a certain resignation to the status quo. However, Jean believes it may be due to society being stuck in outdated views of children's education. Jean is less concerned about identity, and more focused on how early education and the EYE role has evolved, and is now part of a much wider discussion on birth-to-three children's rights. Jean reflected on how, as she learned more about child development, her concern became a struggle for recognition of the child's identity and rights. Although not expressly said, this struggle reflected their own fight for identity, to be valued for the role and to be considered a professionally skilled person, with a right to be treated with respect. Niamh on the other hand, took the issue of identity into her own hands and took practical steps to address this issue.

Niamh*: "We made a conscious decision to change all the documents, all our communication with parents and anyone where we are called childcare workers. The girls are [now] called early years' teachers, and you wouldn't believe the change in attitude. Unknown to parents, it wasn't that they were doing it intentionally. It was unbelievable how they then interacted with the staff just because it's "teacher", it's 100% and it came down to everybody.*

Niamh described how a simple change in title, from childcare worker to teacher, helped with respect shown to the EYE. Like Carol, she too reflected on how the parent's perception of a teacher receives a different level of esteem to that of an EYE.

Niamh: *"I remember for me growing up, a teacher was so...[respected]. So now that is what the parents are seeing, they're seeing the girls as teachers. They talk to the children about their teacher. They are seen as teachers. There's a different respect there."*

Because Niamh saw how the professional profile of a teacher has a level of socially constructed esteem, she understood this would add confidence to how the EYE saw themselves, and this was linked to how they thought they were being perceived by parents. Although Niamh recognised that parents were not to blame for the identity crisis in the sector, it is clear that differences in semantics and titles show how historical names and concepts offend the EYE.

Niamh: *"It isn't that the parents were disrespecting them before, it just changed their attitude to how they actually see the girls. Little things…like these simple things, that's what needs to happen. We need to be seen as professionals, we're not seen as professionals when we're called "childcare workers."*

Maeve's identity was also linked to respect. However, there was divergence from the others in Maeve's experience, as she believed her identity was not a source of frustration, but rather a source of pride.

Maeve "*Our parents are quite good like that; they do understand what we do. I don't think they see us as childminders."*

Maeve's estimation revealed that she thinks parents have a "good view" of her, simply because she believes they do not think of her as a "childminder". The concept of being a child "minder" appears to have a negative inference for Maeve, and she infers "childminder" to a low occupational social standing. Although Maeve did not wish to link her identity to that of a "minder" or "caring for" children, she nonetheless placed her own occupational esteem on her identity. This is evidence of the ranking system emerging within the ELC sector, and Maeve's opinion is reflective of the emerging split system as discussed in Chapter Two Section 2.1.6 of this research.

The idea of identity affecting the EYE sense of respect and occupational identity has permeated the vocabulary of the sector itself. Although there is both divergence and convergence in the accounts of how EYE see themselves, "caring for" has a negative inference, yet being "caring", such as "being

a caring person" does not. It is clear that EYE don't wish to be called "minders." This is correct, as their role involves gaining qualifications, and they consider their practice as much more than just "minding" children. It is evident they are teaching them, guiding them, playing with them, facilitating them, and socioemotionally supporting the children. It is the term "minding" and the image that this word creates, that EYE in this study seem to take issue with.

For Susan, her identity was also linked to a sense of pride. She had strong views regarding the place of early learning for BTT children, and like Jean, recognised the importance of the birth to three years as an important stage in children's development.

Susan: *"If you have your first child, parents are really into it, but sometimes it's not translating, like they can get all the books and stuff like that. They know it's important, but I don't think it's translating how important that age is. I think it's more important than any other stage in education and learning…. it's just such a vital stage".*

Despite knowing how important and vital the BTT years of development are, unlike Maeve, Susan feels a sense of pride in her work is missing, and she reflected on reasons for this.

Susan *"There are people who have years of experience and then there are graduates, and I know as a graduate coming out of college you have all these ideas and excitement, but in reality, practice is not what you expect it to be, and then you lose confidence. They're not empowered to stand by their work, they feel 'what's the point' kind of thing."*

Susan drew similarities with her experience of being a newly qualified EYE just out of college with great ideas and enthusiasm, but quickly found that practice was not what she thought it would be. This is a clear articulation of the gap between practice and theory. Susan felt that EYE lose belief in their practice without a clear understanding of their occupational role and identity, and an understanding that practice will be different from college. Equally, Susan considers EYE's like herself, who are disempowered and disillusioned, just as much as newly qualified EYE. Susan's

frustration that EYE are not empowered is a reflection of her own discouragement. We see this in her description of the experience of other EYE. There is a resonance of Susan's own lived experience and her own disillusionment. There is a sense in Susan's tone that there is no point in trying because she feels nobody really cares. Moreover, her words "not empowered to stand by their work" suggests that she -and other EYE, are waiting to be empowered, yet she gives no indication as to whose empowerment or indeed permission, she is waiting for. So on one hand Susan asks what's the point of enthusiasm as a newly qualified EYE when there is resignation and self-doubt. Susan is not alone in thinking this. Kate felt that doubting herself was also linked to her identity, until she developed belief in her own abilities and decisions.

Kate: *"I came out of college, and I went straight into preschool work. I went into a role where I was second guessing every single thing that I did, because I wasn't sure how the other person was going to react. As I got older, I just kinda backed myself more because I knew I had my level 8 done, so I kinda was like, yeah, I do know what I'm talking about…I do know what I'm doing!*

The idea of fearing that they did not know what they were doing, and then later learning to back themselves in knowing what they were doing was right, was also expressed by Leah.

Leah: *"Looking at the degree and being able to share experiences and be able to call on the knowledge that I had in the background, with the theory behind it, made me kind of go "OK, actually, you do know what you're talking about here. You are good at what you do. And so I suppose it gave me confidence…it genuinely did. They're amazing. I love it and. I love being with children. I love being able to be person who gives them that quality.*

Like Leah, Kate also reflected on her evolving sense of competence, describing her thoughts, assurances came not from academic achievements, but from recognising her relationship with children.

Kate: *"When I went to school, I didn't feel that I had anything that I went towards academically, like science or business or anything like that. And so it was always that thing I kinda had in my mind, that practical side [that said] I am actually really good with kids and interactions and that. I love the kids, and just seeing anything that I did, or if I planned something, and they really loved it…I just seen the smiles on their faces, the way they reacted to it, and I just felt like I had a special connection with them because I get that. I felt that I get that wee bit extra, so I felt that I had these great relationships with these kids and babies that kinda…it outweighed the cons I suppose".*

Sabrina discussed how her father disapproved of her choice of career. Her father's disapproval reinforced wider societal misconceptions about early years work as "just minding kids" making her journey towards a professional identity even more significant. Similar to Leah and Kate, external judgments challenged her sense of professional identity until a realisation came over her the more she talked about it.

Sabrina: *"I remember when I even told my dad that this is the job that I was going to do, and he just couldn't understand it. He just couldn't understand why a young girl was going into this job, and [he questioned] you're going in to mind kids. It really makes me…I suppose probably…belittle me, and in the work that I do. I know I do a great job, and I know the benefits that these kids get from being in my care".*

6.5.3 Interpretation

Across these narratives, Leah, Kate, and Sabrina reveal a collective journey, moving from self-doubt towards confidence in their role and identity. At first, each grappled with uncertainty. However, what was evident, was how all three discovered a professional identity through relational connections, in this case with the children in their care. This underpinned their choice to stay in the sector, despite the negativity or self-doubt they had experienced. This process mirrors Bowlby's (1988) notion of earned security, as they developed confidence not from external validation, but through relational connections which led to a belief in their practice, and in themselves. Likewise,

in terms of contemporary attachment within a neurobiological view, their growing sense of competence reflected integration of emotional and cognitive regulation (Schore, 2016; Siegel, 2012), integrating emotions with intellect. Conversely, this is not true for Maeve, Carol and Susan, who on the other hand made their desire for external validation clear, yet rejected the components that make up their occupational profile, such as carer, minder, or the term “childcare”. This is a concern for role identity, which in turn, is a concern also for the ability to create and be proud of attachment relationships with the children.

The theme of occupational identity, which emerged strongly for all the participants, is one explanation for why the issue of equality within the Irish education sector resonated so strongly with EYE. Whilst this struggle is reflective of changes in the sector, EYE are not currently treated as part of the Irish education system by Government policy. As was established in Chapter Two Section 2.1 that while the sector has a clear educational function, its position within the broader Irish educational system remains contested (OECD, 2021). This has implications for the workforce, working conditions, and identity (Moloney, 2010), and also for pedagogical and relational practice.

This is a concern for this study because, in addressing the a priori research question which asked, what are the behavioural and environmental factors which can influence attachment, a persistent lack of identity is considered a behavioural factor with the potential to negatively influence agency and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997), and low self-efficacy is considered a behavioural factor with the potential to negatively influence coping mechanisms, such as stress reactions and emotional regulation (Bandura, 2008). These issues have also been found to link to an insecure attachment style in adults (Hazan & Shaver, 1990). Collectively these experiences exposed how the participating EYE report that they feel they must continually earn validity. Given these factors, it is clear that identity or lack thereof, is an aspect of practice that has the potential to interfere with the EYE’s ability to operationalise attachment relationships with BTT children in ELC settings. Attachment

work requires emotional investment, and emotional investment cannot be endlessly extracted from a workforce that feels unseen or expresses a lack of recognition.

To explore their lived experience of attachment relationships further, the EYE were then asked what other aspects of practice interfered with their ability to operationalise attachment relationships with BTT children.

6.5.4 Perceptions of Paperwork versus Presence

"The flow is broken…the intention is broken…everything is broken."

Paperwork was another PET that came up quite a lot. Documenting, observations, and record keeping were considered challenges for, and a barrier to attachment. Six out of the nine participants reported that they felt the administration interfered with their physical and emotional presence. In relation to paperwork being a barrier, this has relevance to this study because the emotional presence of the EYE is a key factor in implementing a slow relational pedagogy (French, 2019). This is important because attachment is linked to attention, eye contact, and the close physical presence of the adult (Schore, 2016). Therefore, this PET will discuss the ways in which paperwork was reported to interfere with their ability to operationalise attachment relationships with BTT children.

Sabrina: *It's very hard. So I normally come in a little bit earlier in the morning and I'll get the morning paperwork done. So we've room checklists, if we have kids in the room that have communication sheets, they have to be filled out as the kids move through their day…their snacks, the time they're [nappy] changed, different things like that. Then at one o'clock until half one, when we have that little bit of free time, we'll do any other room paperwork. We have Core Books and scrapbooks for each child, and that's separate to the actual room paperwork.*

Sabrina also equated paperwork with an intrusive thought. The words she used, i.e. Core Books, Scrapbooks, indicated the multiplicity of documentation tasks.

Sabrina: *"I think you're constantly in the background thinking…we do Core Books in here, so you're constantly thinking of certain kids, have you got enough in their Core Books? And if you don't have enough in their Core Book, when you're in the room with them, you're constantly thinking oh is that…can I get an observation now…can I get an observation of this child…can I get a learning story for this child now in this activity? So I think it's always in the background. I wouldn't say it interferes with your work, but I think it is…it is in the background yeah, there's a lot of paperwork."*

Through an IPA lens, Sabrina's experience can be understood as a continual negotiation between her intrinsic motivation to nurture the children, and her responsibility to record observations. There is a sense of rushing and hurriedness in her tone of voice as she describes the constant pressure to get an observation written down. This becomes a tension between paperwork and presence, caring for children while simultaneously having to show evidence of proof that she cared, through documentation and paperwork.

For Jean, her issues with paperwork extended beyond intrusive thoughts in the back of her mind. Jean divulged a hidden disability to help clarify the challenge she faces with paperwork.

"I'm dyslexic, so writing it down is…obviously I've got a big problem with writing things down. That chore of documenting things y'know, it takes away from the spontaneity. It's just in the back of your head all the time. "Oh, God, I better document it" or "I better take the photograph so I can prove it. For my service to be deemed good, that's shown by what I document. I just found it really stopped any spontaneity for me personally."

Jean describes documentation as "a chore", a word that encapsulates both the emotional weight and repetitiveness of a task. Her reflection "it takes away from the spontaneity" speaks to the wearing down of joy, and the need to prove her work through photographs and written records.

In Jeans' estimation she must choose between giving her attention to paperwork for the inspectors to deem her service good, or give her presence to the children. There is a struggle for her attention,

but there is also a sense of losing the battle with paperwork. Jean disclosed her disability in order to validate and support her argument. She did this because she is keen to be seen as a professional who accepts responsibility for implementing policy, even though the policy is not working for her.

Jean: *"Yes, for some reason the writing just takes away from the 100% presence that is needed, that we know that the child's brain needs. I think paperwork is causing a block y'know…some sort of screen between the living experience of being with the child."*

Jean likened paperwork to an obstruction, blocking her and taking her away from the children. Having to stop and capture a moment in time with a photograph for the child's Learning Story file, means she is missing out on the intersubjective moment between herself and the child. Whilst Learning Stories are part of the paperwork for recording children's development and learning, Jean fears that not much learning is taking place.

Jean: *"I'm looking at a butterfly [with the child] and I'm thinking "oh, I'd better get a photograph…where's my phone? I go to my phone, my camera, take the photograph and then re-engage with the child. The flow is broken…the intention is broken…everything is broken."*

As recognised by Jean, having to stop and document these micro, intersubjective moments are moving the child out of their joint attention with the adult. Her use of the word "everything" in describing what is broken, underpins how important these moments with the child are to her. Her relationship with the child means "everything" to her. To further convey the illogicality of the policy, Jean goes on to point out the fundamental contradiction of trying to capture the intersubjective moment in the child, when learning takes place.

Jean: *"Children are living with adults who only have a limited amount of attention on them before it's broken, and then we expect children to concentrate. Writing observations appears to be a good practice, in actual fact and in reality, it means they're not with the child and engaged with the child. Somebody watching them and writing down what they're doing is not the same as somebody being*

with them, and available to them to help nurture that growth. There is the pressure of being inspected at any moment and get all this [observations] written down. In reality, the child is being left to his own devices. Being present and presence are two very different things. There's a flaw there. A flaw is undermining the necessary documentation required."

As Jean discussed, she felt that her attention and engagement with the child was under threat with a perceived burden of paperwork and photographic proof of their moments of learning. Dyslexia was the central lens through which documentation was experienced by Jean, not just as an administrative duty, but as an emotional and cognitive burden. Her repetition of phrases such as "I better documented it", and "I better take the photograph so I can prove it" highlighted the internalised pressure she experienced to justify her professional competence through written evidence. This was also the lived experience for Carol, who voiced a similar challenge.

Carol: *"If I have a lot of paperwork to do -and at the moment we have the "Mo Sceal" for the primary school, which is a hell of an amount of work, I will tend to stay on a bit longer, I might take myself out and be there on my own time, it's the only way I can get paperwork done."*

The setting where Carol works recently started doing an activity similar to Learning Stories called "Mo Sceal". Mo Sceal is a record of the child's developmental progress in the setting. It is designed to help with the children's transition from preschool to primary school. Carol relates how she feels the paperwork for "Mo Sceal" is a lot of effort because she felt a deep personal responsibility to take great care with these reports.

Carol: *"I don't like to rush them because you are writing, you are summarising the child for posterity…it's down in black and white…you have to be extremely careful about how you word it. You want to get across the point. There may be some things that need to be taken into consideration, but you don't want to be damning the child."*

Because the child's *Mo Sceal* record was "*written down in black and white"* the words Carol selected to describe the child were chosen with care. This added to the time needed to complete the record. Carol believes this is necessary because consideration is needed if she is to avoid "*damning the child*". For this, Carol is willing to put in the extra effort because she cares. However, she articulates the toll it has placed on her.

Carol: "*You really want to be positive and look for all of the child's strengths, because ultimately that's what the teacher is going to need to work with, is their strengths and so it does…it takes a bit out of you, getting those done."*

Niamh also felt strongly about paperwork and administration, and used the example of a student teacher to help get this point across.

Niamh: *"I have a daughter who is training to be a teacher, and one of her peers in college, as part of their teacher training, came here on placement, and could not believe the paperwork, the planning that's done for these children, the strategies, the ABC [behaviour] charts…everything. She really saw what goes into those plans for these children, she could not believe it. She said, "Oh my God, the amount of planning and thinking, I never thought the early years was so dedicated, or so in tune."*

Niamh used the views of the student teacher to get her own message across. This reflected her own disbelief at the amount of paperwork she has. Whilst no doubt exists that the student said the words, it is interesting that Niamh felt the need to give voice to the words of someone else, when her own opinion, challenges and perspective was just as valid.

Olivia on the other hand, had very mixed feelings about paperwork. Initially she said it was important. However, there was a change of mind brought about by a deeper reflection on what paperwork actually meant to her in practice.

Olivia: *"It is tough, because you do have to keep up with records, em…but y'know, you can find five minutes to scroll down, and even you can keep notes on your phone these days…it's important I think to keep record but it's time consuming, and if there's a child that could be having a meltdown, and you need to give the time to them…if you feel under pressure that you won't have the time, that's going to affect you".*

There is divergence over the real meaning of paperwork for Olivia. Whilst she believed it is important, none-the-less she expressed that completing all the paperwork was challenging, and as she reflected further, she added a conflict with being able to give sufficient time to the children. The hermeneutic circle was at work here with Olivia's experience, as she thought about and made sense of paperwork.

This paradox existed for Leah also, who described the experience of the paperwork as a splitting of herself, between her previous role as an EYE, and recently becoming a manager with a lot of administration to do.

Leah: *"Sometimes it's very hard to get away from the paperwork and to really kind of, do the really strong quality pieces. I think the first year that I was doing it [managers role] I really struggled in terms of stepping out completely and into the admin. All the compliance…like it…it's really heavy, and it seems to grow legs. There's times that I just kind of go "right, OK goodbye computer" and I go in and I spend time in the classrooms because for me, I feel I need that as well."*

Leah's struggled with her expectations of the role of manager. Leah metaphorically described how she felt paperwork seemed to "*grow legs*" and she struggled to balance it growing and get bigger.

Leah: *"As a manager you [I] should be the person who's holding the quality of the Centre, and if you're not getting out from underneath the paperwork then… [trails off]. I have a girl for administration, so I have support. But if you don't have that support, how do you go about…. [trails*

off]. How do you monitor quality, and the quality pieces is where we should be? But I think that with this particular role as manager I can be lost in paperwork completely".

Leah's account highlights the tension between managerial administrative responsibilities and relational presence within the ELC setting while she positions quality care as fundamentally grounded in being emotionally present for the children, she also describes how paperwork requirements can reduce her capacity to engage within the relational environment with of the setting. From an attachment perspective, this is significant because the development of secure relationships relies upon emotionally available and responsive caregivers reference Bowlby (1969). The disciplines concern is therefore not solely operational but also relational in nature. This suggests that increasing administrative demands may indirectly affect the quality of attachment informed practice by limiting opportunities for attuned interaction observation and relational continuity. This finding also aligns with broader ecological understandings of practise whereby structural and organisational pressures influence the quality of proximal interactions occurring within the child's environment (Bronfenbrenner & Morris 2006). In this sense attachment relationships within ELC settings are not shaped by education disposition or knowledge exclusively but also by the structural conditions that either support or constrain relational pedagogy in practice.

Despite the presence of other staff who share the administration work for the ELC centre, Leah described "getting out from under" the paperwork, as though she experienced paperwork as a weight on top of her. More importantly, she believed her time could be better spent monitoring the quality of her staff's relationships with the children in the service, and not "lost" in paperwork. Leah justifies paperwork by reminding her staff of their importance, and of having those connections with the children, spending time with them, doing what she considers is meaningful to the children.

Leah: *"I know the girls [staff] get tied up in ribbons about paperwork, and I suppose my thing is always [to ask them] can we stand over how good we are in terms of our interactions, relationships, attachments?"*

6.5.5 Interpretation

Having relational connections with the children was important to the EYE in terms of spending time with them, but it was reported by five of the nine research participants that they were getting less and less time. This is important because it helps in addressing Research Sub-Question One which asked; What are the barriers to attachment relationships with children aged birth to three years of age in ELC settings?

Having reviewed the theme of Perceptions of Paperwork versus Presence, attention now turns to the personal experiential theme of "Time". Time with the children had deep meaning to the educators, however, a lack of time was a key PET which emerged from their lived experience of attachment with BTT children in ELC settings.

6.5.6 Not Everyone's Time Is Equal

It's all about having the time for them isn't it…for them to know that they're listened to, and they're understood, and they're important."

Time or lack of it was a frequent theme that came up for five participants. Lack of time was reported to be a barrier that interfered with their relationships and attachments with the children. This was considered important because as was discussed in the literature review, the key tenets of Attachment Theory are emotional availability (Bowlby, 1969), caregiver sensitivity (Ainsworth et al., 1978), and internal working models (Thompson, 2006). This is important because the child's internal working model (IWM) of relationship expectations become damaged if the caregiver interactions are hurried. Furthermore, if the EYE is preoccupied, the attachment relationships in these circumstances are at risk. This is important because the child's sense of security and their

own internal working model of caregivers' emotional availability, is influenced by EYE interactions. This theme came from five of the seven participants.

Kate compared her current employment to her previous employment, and the difference having time for planning activities has led to the challenges she has in this area.

Kate: "*It was hard in my other place because there was no time for planning within the day. so like, you spend another extra while after work thinking of ideas and stuff like that, that you're going to do the next day, or the day after. So like, work time didn't really finish at work time when it was supposed to. Whereas, in my new place now, I get that extra bit of time during the day to do my planning so when I leave, I'm able to kinda de-stress, and kinda take myself away from it."*

Time for lesson planning that is built into the working day allowed Kate to de-stress. Otherwise she would have to do lesson planning and paperwork on her own time. Olivia gives an experience of knowing the value of time.

Olivia: *"I can give an experience from when I first started working. It was a wee boy, and he wouldn't come in the door. He wouldn't interact with other kids. In Circle Time he was somewhere else, nappy change was a big thing for him, and I don't know…I just took the time with him. I just observed, I sat with him, I gave him the time. It's good to have a relationship with every child, and try to come across them the same as you should come across to the other child. You have to give as much time to the other children, you can't be seen to be focusing all your time and attention on one [child] y'know. It's all about having the time for them isn't it…for them to know that they're listened to, and they're understood, and they're important."*

Olivia's repetition of the word time suggests that to her time is not just chronological, but also relational. There is a sense of presence, patience, and attunement in her reflection, and also an awareness of professional self-regulation as she navigated the tension between giving focused attention to one child, and maintaining a level of supervision across all the children.

Similar to Olivia, other EYE reported finding equal time for each child was a challenge to their attachment formation. This sentiment was repeated by Leah, who reminded herself of the importance of time in meeting the children's different attachment styles.

Leah: *"If educators don't have time to have quality interactions, for some children it [attachment] might take a little bit longer."*

In this statement Leah foregrounds time as a critical condition for attachment formation. Her statement if educators don't have time to have quality interactions, highlights the perceived link between temporal resources and relational depth. The conditional phrasing "if" and emphasis on quality interactions suggest an awareness that not all time is equal. In this brief statement there is recognition that attachment requires meaningful emotionally attuned interactions and not just the presence of the EYE.

Maeve's view is very different from Olivia's and Leah's. She felt she had to make a choice in who she gives her time to.

Maeve: *"I think it's very time consuming on educators, you are trying to deal with the children's needs, and you are kind of leaving the other children to one side. Like for example, we have children who struggle with their emotions, and especially the younger children too, you tend to give them more attention. Whereas you tend to leave the other ones to…y'know, get on with it…"*

Maeve felt that children who are finding it hard to engage their emotions are time "consuming". In her room she has children who struggle with their emotions, and she tends to give them more attention, and feels she has no option but to leave the other children to "get on with it".

Maeve: *"I find parents don't tell you…don't inform you, if their child is going through such an emotional time, or they're not…they're not really providing any information. But you kind of know…you figure it out for yourself y'know. You'll go back to the parents eventually when you go*

through your observations, and you kinda have to say [to parents] "I'm noticing this and I'm noticing the other". It is a struggle yeah, in the room itself."

Maeve discusses her experience of managing time with children's emotions as a complex and demanding process, shaped by limited communication with parents, and the practical constraints of practice. In the absence of shared information, she relies on her observations to interpret the children's emotional states. There is divergence (Smith et al., 2009), in Maeve's procedures, whereby having paperwork helps her discuss difficult issues with parents. This process, although tied to frustration, is also deeply relational. Her experience reflects a frankness, and strong emotions, and a side to practice whereby balancing documentation, observation and time is a challenge is a challenge that she manages to meet in an environment where understanding children's inner world requires sensitivity and patience.

Susan on the other hand felt it was down to practical things like ratios, which determine if she gets the time that is needed for attachment, made all the more difficult if the child has additional needs.

Susan: "*If you have a high ratio at the start of the year, and there are children presenting with additional needs, it [attachment] doesn't always come to the fore immediately…it takes a while, you have to spend a lot of the time with children. But they may not get your attention as much as they need*."

Susan's lived experience of attachment reflects a strain on professional caregiving, under time constraints. She reveals an ambition of attachment that competes with practical demands on her time, and the presence of children with additional needs stretch her resources. This creates an ongoing tension between intention and capacity, and the complexity of wanting to provide secure attuned care, but being constrained by time.

6.5.7 Interpretation

Lack of time to meet the children's emotional and behavioural needs is important to the analysis because a struggle could potentially hinder attachment relationships where their time and ability was compromised. Five participants articulated clearly how they felt unable to give all the children equal amounts of attention, due to other time constraints, such as children with additional needs or challenging behaviours. From an attachment theory perspective, the EYE narrative reflects the importance of emotional availability because the concept of the secure base remains central to Bowlby's (1969) attachment theory. However, professional tensions arose when they described competing demands which disrupt their capacity for emotional availability. In Schore's (2016), iteration of attachment, this can be understood as a limitation on attunement. This is the subtle non-verbal synchrony that supports emotional security and co=regulation. It is clear that when time and ratios are stretched, the mutual regulatory process essential for secure attachments becomes more difficult to sustain. Having reviewed the challenge of forming attachment under time constraints, attention now turns to challenging behaviours. Challenging behaviours were another clear overarching theme that emerged, which the next section will discuss.

6.5.8 Early Intervention versus Challenging Behaviour

"These children could sit at one end of the room, and just get up, walk over, and attack a child at the other side for absolutely no trigger or reason."

The issue of managing toddlers' behaviours was a significant theme, and it was discussed by six of the nine participants. This has relevance to this programme of research because in terms of children's education, over-activation of the stress response carries risks in the areas of cognitive development, impulse control, and socio-emotional development (Ha & Granger, 2016). Problems in early social emotional development are therefore likely to induce cognitive developmental changes which make being 'school-ready' more difficult (Campbell, 2002; Perry & Conners-Burrow,

2016). Therefore, behaviour management can be considered a barrier to attachment with BTT in ELC settings because when anxiety, stress or heightened fear are present, this makes learning problematic, and children are likely to suffer from low social skills, poor play skills with peers, and low attainment as a result (Cozolino, 2013). This directly addresses the a priori research question, which asked; what behavioural and environmental factors influence attachment processes and impact socioemotional development in children aged birth-to-three? These are the environmental factors which influence attachment processes as the theme emerged from all seven participants.

In discussing her lived experience of attachment relationships in the context of challenging behaviours, Jean spoke about noticing a change in children's behaviour, that it is getting worse over the last few years, especially since the COVID pandemic.

Jean*: "Over the years I've noticed the reasons for children being upset being more acute, and not just the practical things of being tired or hungry….and then COVID came! I suppose looking back, having missed so many milestones as they would have encountered on their normal everyday life, like for example going to the playground, even going into a supermarket, even being around other adults beyond their immediate family, COVID really impacted I think…children of all ages."*

Leah described a scenario where a staff member took a dislike to a child because of challenging behaviours. The child was this person's key child, meaning that she is assigned to that child, to form a key attachment with them. Leah saw from watching their interactions that the "fit" was causing distress.

Leah: *"This child had really big behaviours. There was quite a lot that happened in the background with this child. This child was this person's key child, and when you watch the interaction, particularly when the child got really upset, the educator would match the child, rather than being calm, y'know, to regulate [the child's emotions]. So it was really difficult, as someone on the outside, to watch. It happened on a couple of occasions so there was a meeting at some point, and I just said, "do you think it's working"? The educators had said "no, I'm finding it really stressful." So at*

that point then we swapped, I said, "I'm happy to take that particular child into my group of key children." The other person took it well. It did settle down after, and I think the other educator could feel it…you can feel the stress relief off that person because they were so…the interactions with this child were so stressful. She got to interact with that child, not when the child got really, really stressed and then their relationship developed, and it was a lot more positive. For me, I think the educator might be a little bit triggered by the child's behaviour, and find it really difficult to kind of cope."

Leah's description was an astonishing reminder that the attachment style of the adult has much bearing on the relationships with the child (Main, 1999). Leah's' staff member benefited from having an understanding manager in Leah. However, as can be seen from Olivia's lived experience of managing challenging behaviour, she did not feel she had a supportive atmosphere with regard to challenging behaviour.

Olivia: *"A child wouldn't cooperate and go on Time Out, and…y'know they were just being took by the hand, not dragged along the floor like or anything like that…but y'know, it just wasn't needed, there was other ways around what was going on. It could have been very easily sorted if they'd spoken to the child to see what the problem was, or why they were getting so aggravated. It wasn't nice to see. I didn't feel comfortable around it at all…em…I would not like to see my child being dragged by the arm. I think at the time, that person really didn't…she was just so stressed in the situation, trying to follow procedure, getting the child to Time Out. I'm not making excuses for it, but it was just so much pressure, and a different approach should have been used."*

Despite Olivia's openness to discussing this topic, there is a tension in her voice in describing this experience. There is an awareness of the juxtaposition between understanding and knowing. On one hand, Olivia says she understood the EYE was stressed, that she was only following procedure, and trying to do her job, while under pressure. Yet on the other hand, Olivia also knew there was a

better way, a different approach to handle the situation. Her reflection brings her to a conclusion, which she goes on to clarify.

Olivia *"I think if the practitioner had just sat down on the floor beside the child having a meltdown, and put their arms out, the child would have sat, and when the child calmed down, then it could have been resolved. I just think the child was already upset at the time…they didn't need to be in Time Out, it wasn't helping."*

When prompted if there was anything that management could have done to prevent this event happening in the first place, Olivia tentatively replied that management could have taken "Time Out" out of practice procedures altogether. Furthermore, when asked if she received any level of support or training for challenging behaviour from management, Olivia replies

"No…I'm sad to say I didn't".

Her use of the word "sad" reflects the depth of feeling she has for the experience, and highlights the difference a good manager can make, as was seen with Leah and her staff member.

With regard to the ability of the EYE to manage children's behavioural well-being, Kate commented on how in-house training helped her with children's challenging behaviours.

Kate: *"When I started in my new place [new job], there was a big emphasis on it in our training. Before we started the term, y'know [we were told] "don't get yourself in a tizzy, if you need help, ask for it. There could be twenty kids in the room, so there's a lot going on…it's OK to ask for help."*

Kate believes that the responsibility is for adults to meet the emotional and behavioural needs of BTT children. Whilst she does not explicitly refer to co-regulation, she describes very clearly the act of co-regulating a child's emotions and behaviours.

Kate: *"I think a lot of it is regulating your emotions first. If you're going into it straight away, and you don't have all the details, or if you're taking sides in something, I think that can disrupt how it's*

going to go in the first place. If there's conflict, or anything like that, that's just not the way to go. I think if you take a step back yourself, and know the age particularly at you're working with what they're going through themselves. If you have a bit of empathy for what's going on in their heads, I find that helps me a lot in targeting my expectations of how they should react, how I should react".

Although as previously mentioned, Kate doesn't mention the word "co-regulation", she is none-the-less helping the children to regulate their emotions, and solve any behavioural disagreements or conflicts with their peers. She does this by managing her expectations of toddler's behaviours. However, Carol reports that the main difference for behaviour management is that she sees a lot more children with additional needs. She says she feels powerless, and is compromised by a lack of support strategies for behaviour management for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEN/D). Getting early intervention for these children was her biggest challenge in building attachments with these toddlers.

Carol: "*We are seeing an awful lot more children with, I suppose, behavioural needs, y'know…more children who are on the spectrum, and it's very challenging, it really is. And y'know…they're not mature enough to understand big emotions, and you're trying to help them. You're trying to come up with strategies…you just need a whole heap of strategies up your sleeve to kind of help them, to try and teach them, to help them out."*

Another area that Carol described is sensory processing in toddlers. She said she sees a lot of sensory issues, so much so, that her manager puts together an improvised sensory room to support the children.

Carol: *"We obviously don't have the resources for a sensory room that y'know, a lot of the schools are now having to build. So we made a wee Wendy house, and "P" [manager's name], has put little fairy lights into it and black stuff on the windows, and rugs and sensory toys. It's just a little quiet room where, if a child needs peace and quiet, and to get out of the over-stimulation that comes*

from being in a room with eleven other kids…I could bring them in there y'know…it's proven to be actually quite successful".

With regard to SEN/D, Carol explained that, in her room the ratio is one adult to eleven children. So with eleven children in attendance she would normally be expected to work alone. However, at present she has an Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) educator in the room with her, because two children avail of an AIM support educator. AIM support is linked to the "Better Start" national initiative as discussed in Chapter Two. As also discussed in Chapter Two, AIM is designed to ensure that children with SEN/D have access to the ECCE programme with appropriate levels of support. However, Carol reports that her lived experience of AIM meant that she had to lay down some conditions for management, because she was seeing a lot more children with additional needs than she felt able to handle.

Carol: *"I was in the room on my own quite a bit for several years, and as things got more and more challenging over the years, I came to the conclusion that I would take the AIM children as long as I can have someone in the room with me, because I really just don't feel comfortable on my own anymore…it's too hard."*

Carol had to stipulate a condition for accepting children needing AIM support. However, she should not have had to do this. Pobal, who administer the scheme, clearly stipulate the conditions relating to its use, one of which is an AIM teacher accompanies the child, and can reduce the overall staff ratio in the setting (Access and Inclusion Model, 2025).

The increase in additional needs as described by Carol has also been witnessed by Niamh. Like Jean and Carol, Niamh saw an increase in challenging behaviours also over the last few years. As a manager, she felt it was necessary to get outside help.

Niamh: "*We have requested to work with the AIM Better Start Team. I actually get the children in pre- September, so AIM can come and observe them really before the other kids start in September*

because you want to have all the things in place for these children starting, so we're inclusive. We have started noticing, I'd say in the last five years, six years, a slow increase, and now it's every classroom has at least three or four children [requiring AIM support]. We definitely have seen a lack of ability to play in the toddlers and the ECCE children. They just don't know how to play with the toys. They're walking round carrying them, they actually don't know what to do with them y'know. So we are trying to encourage all that and teach all that through our curriculum, but yeah, a definite increase.

We're having a mix of children that definitely are showing strong indication that they're ASD [autistic spectrum disorder]. We have a lot of violence. A lot of nonverbal. We have children with multiple, developmental needs. It really varies, but there's actually an awful lot of violence, aggression and an awful lot of not being able to cope with their emotions…can't regulate".

Niamh explains that they implement the Dina Programme. This is a social and emotional early intervention programme, linked to the Incredible Years Parenting Programmes (Webster-Stratton, 1982). The Programme is specifically designed to meet the needs of communities where there are large socio-economic challenges. It is worth noting that this programme is designed for children aged three to six years whereas, as Niamh pointed out, she felt it was necessary to introduce it into the toddler rooms, to try to address the behaviour of the children there.

Niamh: "*What we're trying to do now is introduce "Dina" into the toddler room to try and help the children and it's not even…y'know…the normal developmental things. Children will hit out or they'll bite, or they'll…y'know, they all go through these wee phases in their life. So if someone goes to take a toy off them or is in their way, they'll push them, or they will y'know…hit out at someone in anger. It's not even that. These children could sit at one end of the room, and just get up, walk over, and attack a child at the other side for absolutely no trigger or reason*."

Niamh appears baffled by what she is witnessing in the children's behaviour. Despite her long experience, she is at a loss to understand it, and is without explanation as to why they are doing it, even after carrying out assessments such as ABC charts and functional behavioural analysis.

Niamh: "*We are forever doing ABC [Antecedent, Behaviour, and Consequences] charts, and behaviour frequency records just to try and work out is there a time of day this child gets this behaviour, is it more relevant or is it always on a Monday…those type of things. But you're constantly doing that. Staff are constantly doing that, because it's just trying to work out why they're walking over and whacking another child, or going for their eyes…that's what they do…they go for their faces, or they bite their arms, or things like that. That's in every room. We've a child like that in every room. It is scary.*"

To try to support her staff, Niamh relies on the relationship she has with the Better Start Specialist practitioner (BSS) assigned to her service.

Niamh: "*It's very scary. Two years ago, we had seventeen children under AIM Level 7 support, all needed, all required. I have a great relationship with my Better Start person, and y'know, she knows we're not exaggerating anything. We're telling it as it is. We are so familiar with being able to pick up on things [developmental delays]. We work very well together*."

Niamh adds further emphasis on the challenges she is seeing with the toddler's behaviour by expressively conveying a preschool inspector's shock while visiting the toddler room.

Niamh: "*I had the inspector out in November. She actually went into the room, and she had to come out, and she said don't put another child in that room, this is crazy. This is what the early years is like now*."

The reaction of shock from the preschool inspector is brought into the account by Niamh to support her own argument. She utilises the inspector's reaction to verify what she is saying, and to validate

what she herself is seeing in the toddler room with the children's behaviour. Niamh's own disbelief is mixed with concern for staff becoming overwhelmed, which she does her best to avoid.

Niamh: "*I kept ratios low off my own back so the girls can cope with these children. So my actual room might have 17 in it as opposed to 22, because these children would be so overwhelmed sensory-wise with noise and all that. It's not fair on them*."

Niamh spoke about how she kept ratios low "*off her own back*". Anecdotally, this phrase commonly relates to paying for something. In this case, Niamh is referring to the cost of extra staff needed to meet the demand for supervision in the toddler room. But according to Niamh, her service is not alone in experiencing unusual challenging behaviour from the toddlers. Her connections in the sector told her this is the case across the region.

Niamh: "*It's not just our service. I talk to other managers within this area, we meet regularly. We are actually part of an area co-ordination team that works with schools in DEIS [Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools Programme] areas, and all that type of thing."*

Niamh: "I mean it's so scary. We invested in a sensory pod. We're very aware that it's not just for children that have sensory issues, or children that...just y'know...maybe are having a little meltdown, and need a break."

Again, similar to Carol, Niamh reported that they needed to build a sensory room to meet the needs of the children who were experiencing sensory overwhelm. Despite her best efforts, Niamh and her staff are struggling to meet the needs of the toddlers attending her service, and any reference to attachment is notable only by its absence. However, as can be seen, this is not due to any lack of effort from Niamh or her staff, as she illustrates the other problems she has identified so far.

Niamh: "*We're seeing nonverbal speech delays. We've had a few in the last number of years with multiple global delay, sensory issues…we have a lot of ASD (autism spectrum disorders). There's a really distinct delay in services being provided for these children*. *I can't diagnose anyone; I'm not*

qualified to diagnose any child in ASD. But can I see the traits…yes absolutely! So my issue is…when it comes to the toddler room, and like I said, out of last year's fifteen, five of them had (AIM) Level 7, and I would say at least four of them would have ASD traits. I don't get any support for a toddler. I only get it when they go to ECCE. So you're working on your own, with your own strategies, or you're paying to put extra staffing in [the room] so to make that easier for all the children. With the toddler room you don't get AIM [support]. You get nothing. Nothing for us to get support with them. It's only when they go to ECCE. They [the AIM specialists] come out here, and observe the children. Even with that, I think we still struggle. We can't do any more than we're doing. We're working with AIM, working with Dina School, [the socioemotional learning programme], getting the girls [the EYE] extra training. All those things…and we're still struggling. They [EYE] are saying it's quite hard with some of the children."

For Niamh, it is clear that Early intervention for these children was her biggest challenge and for her staff in building attachments with the toddlers.

"I suppose for me, that's my biggest problem, is to not recognise the children with special needs at that age. I know normally they don't go for ASD diagnosis until they're 4-5 years old, but we can see these children are ASD."

Niamh's frustration is compounded because she and her staff can see from being with the toddlers every day, that there are toddlers displaying symptoms of concern. There is real frustration at the lost opportunity for early intervention services for these children, as Niamh explains further.

Niamh: *"Unless you start early intervention at that [toddler] age, you're missing an opportunity to help those children - a massive opportunity".*

Niamh's lived experience highlights the importance of understanding the circumstances surrounding the attachment needs of BTT children with additional needs.

6.5.9 Interpretation

It is clear that for the participating EYE her account represents a child looking for an adult who is their safe haven while in their care. The AIM programme exclusion as discussed by Niamh, shines a light on what happens when toddlers need early intervention. In relation to attachment relationships with BTT children, this is important to this research because as discussed in Chapter Two, access to the AIM suite of interventions is not yet a standard across the range of services also discussed in Chapter Two, Section 2.2.3. In relation to attachment relationships with BTT children, having reviewed "behaviour management" as a key theme, attention now turns to the PET of "Compliance or Connection".

6.5.10 Compliance versus Connection

"It was sad that we meant nothing, and therefore the children meant nothing"

The findings in this section apply to the Tusla inspections only. Among the themes that came up frequently was compliance with inspections. As discussed in Chapter Two, ELC settings are subject to two yearly inspections, one by Tusla, and one by the Department of Education (DE). Tusla and DE inspection have different foci, however both include follow-up inspections. This is important because inspections are mandatory and designed to maintain excellence and ensure children receive a quality education. The Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) (Registration of School Age Services) (Amendment) Regulations 2022 which underpins the inspections process, also requires ELC settings to re-register every year, to remain on the Tusla register. With regard to this requirement, Jean had mentioned in an earlier part of the interview that she had just recently decided to close her business, and leave the sector. When asked about how she felt, she disclosed the reason why she decided to leave.

Jean: *"I decided to close with the re-registration where we had to re-register with Tusla. It was such an awful experience, and there was yet more paperwork and more computers, which just doesn't*

work y'know, for me. I got a summons to court over a piece of paper that I could not get because my landlord could not find it…and the way, the treatment, was just so awful. I just had to say, "that's it…I'm done, I'm out of here…can't do this anymore I'm closing."

Navigating more paperwork involved in the re-registration process every year, proved to be the last straw for Jean, and she chose not to re-register her service. However, the decision was only the beginning of her battle.

Jean: *"Having to notify to close I'm even finding that process difficult. There wasn't as much as a thanks - not that you do things for thanks, but there wasn't any acknowledgement of the practice I'd been in for 30 years in the community. It was now gone, and so that was that."*

Jean revealed a desire to know that she and her services to the children's education were valued. As she spoke, there was a sadness in her voice. Her chain of thought was interrupted at times as she reflected on her decision and their treatment of her. There was also a tone of guilt, as though asking for validation or a thank you had somehow revealed a human vulnerability. Initially she stopped herself from fully revealing that she looked for any thanks staunchly adding that she was not actually doing "anything for thanks". Then, slowly her defences came down, and she allowed herself to openly admit the sadness she felt from receiving absolutely no thanks.

Jean: *"Yeah…it was sad that we meant nothing, and therefore the children meant nothing. That's the message I got from the experience. Anyone who I tried to speak to, anyone that I was talking to…was somebody who didn't care."*

The normal and human desire for validation expressed by Jean is clearly a reflection of the amount of love and effort she had poured into the business, and the children over the years. She talks about her business as though she and it were one entity, and she is still grieving the loss and undervaluing of decades of relational caregiving work. This is very relevant to attachment because Jean's account extends beyond the practical experience of business closure, and reflects a deeper sense of

relational and professional devaluation. Jean's statement that the children meant nothing suggests that the emotional and relational labour embedded within EYE practice was experienced by her as unrecognised and acknowledged.

Given that attachment informed practice relies on sustained emotional availability, responsiveness and relational investment (Bowlby, 1969; Schore, 2016), Jean's reflections raise important questions regarding how the EYE are supported and valued within the sector. Indeed, the truth of just how unseen she felt, was made evident by her description of the cold and indifferent treatment she experienced, which was in stark contrast to the warmth of her care for the children. In ending her business, she felt she meant nothing to anybody, and believed this meant that the children meant nothing also. However, despite the stress she experienced in closing her business, she was quick to show that she is a professional EYE, who fully recognises and commends the work of the inspections as she explained further.

Jean: *"I understand that there's room for improvement, and all the inspections and what they do is very good. It's just the manner in which it's dealt out, it's not very nice. We're doing very important* work, and it should be embraced and supported, more than ridiculed."

Jean's professionalism helps her moderate her mixed emotions about closing her business. The juxtaposition of agreeing about the need for inspections, whilst knowing that the very same inspections led to the closure of her business, leaves Jean in a cognitive conflict. However, she had enough insight to know she is doing important work. Susan, on the other hand, recounted her experience of inspections with anxiety, describing the apprehension of waiting for an inspection.

Susan: *"I would wake up thinking "oh have I cleaned the high touch points". You are kind of at the edge of your seat if you get an inspection because you don't know what to expect. You could get someone who's way better from someone who's not, and that could affect your confidence, and then your inspection report is out there for all the world to see, and it kind of follows you around".*

Jean and Susan described their experience of an inspection. Both commented on the anxiety of someone coming into their place of work, and telling them they were doing something wrong. Susan likened the feeling to being on edge. From an IPA perspective her use of the word edge to describe her emotions suggested she felt on the brink, with a sense of holding on, and the risk of falling at any stage. Susan described the pressure of not knowing what to expect. This pressure caused more fear, coupled with the reality that one bad inspection, could mean her non-compliance could be online for all the world to judge. From an attachment perspective this anxiety can potentially harm the capacity to form secure attuned relationships with children. This is because attachment is also affected by systemic conditions. This adds a greater sense of stress to Susan

Susan: *"The first inspection was during COVID, so it was very much focused on cleanliness and high touch-point areas being cleaned and stuff. I would wake up thinking "oh have I cleaned the high touch points". Y'know like the light switches, and the handles of the doors. That would be all that would be in my mind, and then the children are losing out on my mind being on only them, thinking of light switches and things like that and it's a family home as well and it was just unnecessary."*

Susan's description of waking up at night, fearing that the light switches and the handles of the doors had been forgotten, and the intrusion into her sleep as she described the constant vigilance where her mind could not rest. Susan knew that this meant the children were losing out on having her emotionally engaged and fully present with them. She knew vigilance and a preoccupation about thoughts of inspection, robbed the children of her presence. Despite this enormous stress on her caregiving abilities, her reflection on the matter offered her a solution to the problem.

"It [inspection] would be better if it was a collaborative approach, rather than a…you do this…you do that…fix this…you fix that [approach]. Rather than a recommendation, it's more like bossing around, kinda thing. They [the inspectors] continue to ask you, "where is this…where is that" and you're distracted trying to go find folders for them and stuff. It's not strengths-based. It's like… its

basically people come and tell you what you're doing wrong, instead of giving you confidence in what you're doing correctly."

Susan's use of the word "bossing" revealed that she is subjected to orders, rather than requests. However, there is little evidence of asserting herself in this power struggle, and instead she experiences only intimidation. Susan wished for a more collaborative approach to quality care, but instead of a collaborative approach, her experience of inspections was more akin to bullying. Like Carol, Susan reports on a lived experience of intimidation and fear.

Susan: *"I just didn't really like the experience. There's not a day goes by when I don't think "oh is someone going to come up my driveway now to judge me."*

Susan recounted how she had to seek out folders to show the inspectors and then the inspectors had to go over the paperwork with her, causing more time away from the children. This meant her husband had to take care of the children. Susan found this very upsetting, as she felt that shouldn't have been his responsibility. Susan's concern over the inspections process isn't only about her own fears and anxiety, she is also cognisant of how her husband feels, and how the children perceive inspectors. Her account goes on to describe how it totally changes the children's day.

Susan: *"When they [inspectors] are here, the children look for attention, because they are asking you questions constantly…and I'm on my own. It totally changes their day, and they don't have you as much as they'd like. They keep asking questions about "why is the lady here" and they [the children] don't like that."*

When asked if a change to the inspection approach is needed, she answers yes very affirmatively, to which she adds that she feels she still can't get it right.

Susan: *"If I can't do this right, like with my qualifications, how do people feel when they get their report, people who are only new to the role."*

Susan's account highlights the often-overlooked emotional labour involved in ELC. If relational pedagogy and attachment informed care are to be positioned as central to quality provision, then the emotional well-being requires greater consideration.

Like Susan and Jean, Carol accepts that Tusla inspections are necessary, but she described an unprofessional ambiguity to their ways.

Carol: *"An inspector came in from Tusla one day into our room. She couldn't find anything wrong, except there was a cobweb, and she wrote in her report that she found a cobweb. I mean seriously…it's just ridiculous sometimes."*

There is a sense of unfairness with Carol over the random nature of investigations carried out by the inspector. Carol described this event with an irate tone, which due to unclear goals and expectations, ultimately caused her to experience disruptive emotions. However, her defensive tone was soon replaced by anxiety.

Carol: *"There is also that stress, and there's also that pressure that Tusla could call today. Tusla…Tusla, Tusla…people are nearly afraid of Tusla."*

In Carol's reference to "people" being afraid of Tusla, there is an unmistakable resonance of her own fear. Her use of the word "nearly" is also interesting, because by adding "nearly" she is only partially disclosing her fear at this point, and there is still a residual sense of resistance. This reaction and reflection soon intensify when those defences come down, and her true feelings surface, as she continues to reflect on, and make sense of the emotions she experiences during the inspection process.

Carol: *"I don't know…I just…I find it very hard to be authentic when I'm being watched. I find that really difficult. I think you are kind of…I don't think you could be your real self if someone is standing there with a clipboard watching you…then you're waiting for her to ask you a question that you know the answer to, but you're a nervous wreck."*

Carol referred to not being able to be “authentic” during inspections. She depicted the memory of a figure with clipboard in hand, standing, watching, interrogating her. She described fearing questions, not because she might struggle to answer correctly, but because knowing the answer was not enough, she also needed confidence to be able to answer. In a state of apprehension, the anxiety of waiting for the dreaded question overwhelmed her thinking. Although Carol recognised that she felt stress, she did not recognise how the stress had actually impaired her working memory and cognitive function at that moment. This is the effect of overwhelming anxiety to the nervous system, which shows that chronic stress negatively affects executive function (Shields, Sazma, & Yonelinas, 2016). She went on to reveal thoughts of pre-occupation, anxiety, and in the end, animosity.

Carol: “*You know you do a good job, you know the kids are happy and well looked after. But my God…like…I mean…when they come in, it's nerve wrecking. It’s horrible actually…I hate it.”*

Initially Carol’s assessment of the effect of inspections on her room, was that it only “nearly” made her fearful. However, as she continued to reflect and make sense of her reactions, sensing she was in a non-judgmental safe space-i.e. the safety of the interview, the full extent of her true feelings emerged, and her fear of the inspectors revealed itself without holding back.

Carol: *“They come with a clipboard and a pen, and they’re judging you, probably gazing at you. You feel that they’re only looking to find fault.”*

Similar to Jean, as Carol made sense of the experience, her own resilience and ability to emotionally regulate soon took over with logic and reason, as just like Jean, she tried to justify this treatment with the reason why the inspectors are there.

Carol: *“But look…they’re looking for the good and the bad, but you feel they’re going to look for fault. I suppose they’re there to do a report, and it can’t all be 100% perfect…nothing is…no one is.”*

Carol's emotions are regulated by acceptance that the inspectors are there to do a job. However, her thoughts soon return to the figure looming, looking to find fault in her care of the children. She shared the effects of inspections on her emotional well-being.

Carol: *"You nearly become a bit robotic because…I don't know if it's just me…I just find it very unnerving, having someone standing over me."*

Again, Carol's use of the word "nearly" denotes that she is only becomes "nearly" robotic. There is a small part of her still holding on to some sense of herself in defiance. Nonetheless, in spite of her resistance, her fear and anxiety turning her robotic is leading to eventual dissociation, is described in the research as a coping mechanism (Spiegel et al., 2013). In the end, Carol can only get through inspections using this defence mechanism. By dissociating from reality and emotionally detaching from the event, she avoids complete overwhelm (Spiegel et al., 2013).

However, there is a detrimental consequence to shut-down, both for Carol's mental health and the psychological health of the BTT children who are in the presence of an adult who is emotionally overwhelmed and shuts down (Fisher, 2012). As discussed in this programme of research, any presence of stress in the caregiver is likely to produce stress in the child. As evidenced by Field et al., (2006), high levels of cortisol, a stress hormone, were found to be a strong predictor of reduced levels of serotonin in the child's developing brain. Additionally, this is important for addressing research Sub-Question One, because reduced levels of serotonin have consequences for children's learning, emotional well-being, and social development, all of which influence attachment process (Schore, 2003).

6.5.11 Interpretation

Carol's lived experience of the inspection process begs the question of how she can possibly be a safe haven of security (Bowlby, 1969), when she is being exposed to circumstances that leave her feeling fearful and feeling emotionally insecure. It also begs the broader question of how they can

they be expected to co-regulate BTT children's emotions, when they themselves are dysregulated by inspectors and the inspection process. EYE emotional regulation must be paramount, and protected at all costs if they are to be a role model of regulation for children. It is clear that educators and managers recognise the importance and time-sensitive nature of early prevention and the benefit of early intervention. It falls on her service to make up the short fall in early intervention practices with extra staff in place to support the care of these toddlers who require additional support. This then leads to problems for the service with regard to ratios, which Niamh questions the logic of the current ratio system. These are the environmental factors that put stress on attachment relationships.

6.5.12 Temporal Aspects of Practice

"It's an emerging curriculum, so you're constantly racking your brains to try and expand and move forward, and come up with new ideas"

A common theme unfolded from three of the seven EYE participants that the practices of today are different from the practice of just a few years ago within the ELC sector in the Republic of Ireland. Jean believed that important practices had been lost in training as compared to a few years ago.

Jean: *"Over the years I've noticed children becoming more and more anxious and having to work with families more, and the reasons for children being upset being more acute. The learning in the training, the more hands-on and experiential work is lost y'know. It's a lot more study about management and again - paper things…a lot of paperwork! But more practical things I think are needed in the training."*

Jean recalled past practices of working with infants and toddlers, and highlighted the temporal aspects of how practices have changed. She explained that she has to manage a lot more social problems with families, as compared to years ago, a sentiment that is shared by Carol, who remarks

on how the practices of today mean she must contend with a lot of thinking, reflecting, and checking on what the child is getting out of the activity.

Jean *"You're very much more flexible, but within that, you're thinking the whole time y'know…what's he getting out of this, how can I ensure that she's going to get the most out of that? You're working the whole time…your head is constantly working overtime. So I think it's nearly more cognitive now than before, it's probably more prescriptive."*

Carol welcomes that practice has become more reflective and cognitive.

Carol: *"We do monthly learner records for each child and from that, you look at…y'know, what they're interested in, what they're learning, what they might need to learn, and you'll do an extension activity to expand on that for them. That could be one activity, it could be an activity that could go on for a couple of weeks, and other kids would get on board. You can have great fun with it."*

Initially, she says that thinking the whole time about what the children will get out of the activity, actually means that she can have great fun with extending activities with the children. However, on further reflection, within her reasoning there is convergence and divergence as she reflected on the amount of work involved.

Carol: *"It's an emerging curriculum we work with, so you're constantly on the lookout. It means you keep racking your brains to try and expand and move forward and come up with new ideas and y'know, because you have to show all this recorded on a sheet, you have to show the children's emerging interests, and what you're doing to facilitate that. You have to show your plans, and whether or not you are doing that. Then you have to go into the back [of the lesson plan document] and there's reflection you have to do on your report [asking yourself], "what worked well… what didn't work…what can you improve on…have you any thoughts, etc…etc.*

Carol's passion for teaching is entirely led by and embedded in what the children are interested in. She takes time to observe, to ask herself what they're learning, to think about what they might need to learn, and she'll plan an activity to expand their interests. This means continually coming up with new ideas and concepts to keep the children's interest going. It is clear that the main priority is documenting what the children are getting out of the activity as opposed to simply delivery of the activity.

Maeve also thinks early education has really changed. She says her understanding of the amount of work involved in being an EYE has increased over the years.

Maeve: *"I think early years for me has really changed from when I first started to what I know now. If I had known back then what I know now, I think I'd have a very different view".*

As Maeve continued, she explained how she has evolved with the sector.

"When I first started within early years, I was only going on my own personal experience. I didn't know anything about a curriculum, I didn't know anything about Aistear. I didn't know about policies and procedures. I just didn't know much about it, only from the very basic standard of Level 5 when I did that. But I think going forward 14 years now, I know much more, and I have such a better understanding of the early years."

There is a temporal aspect to Maeve's perspective. In being sensitive to context and complexity, a consideration of the rapid change of pace and advances in the sector with regard to curriculum development and research on child development is reflected.

Maeve: "*Yeah, a lot of changes, not just within early years, but within the [childcare] Regulations y'know, with inspections, with interventions, y'know. There's much more intervention now with children, say with additional needs, or whatever support they need. I know we still have a bit to go, but we're certainly on to progress. The curriculum is getting better y'know…still within the Aistear curriculum, we are getting better with it. We are more knowledgeable. I wouldn't have been*

knowledgeable almost ten years ago. When I first started doing all the training that I have, it has helped me progress and understand it more."

Whilst Maeve felt that her training was adequate, Jean thought training in general was inadequate for the practicalities of today's challenges in ELC practice, despite the fact that she is a quailed Montessori teacher.

Maeve: *"My training as an early year's practitioner wouldn't have given me the skills to be able to listen and notice what's happening for that child. I saw the children in my service completely differently with play therapy training. So I would be an advocate [of Play Therapy training] for anybody working with children, including teachers who need to understand a little bit about the nervous system, and what might be happening for children in their care."*

Jean says that her initial training was inadequate to be able to cope with practice today, so she upskilled as a Play Therapist, a skill that she highly recommends. Her wish for today's EYE is that they retain flexibility in their practice, and take time to really observe the child. Jean sees the need for EYE to look beyond the curriculum.

Jean: *"We need to enhance the practitioner's realisation of how important their presence is with the child and to give them skills, more hands-on skills to use with the children y'know. See a child as an individual and not as one of eight, or one of 22. I know everybody feels they've trained so much, but this training is not inclusive. See the child's needs rather than the curriculum that's written up on the board".*

6.5.13 Interpretation

Whilst Maeve feels positive and certain that the sector is progressing in the right direction, particularly in the area of early intervention and curriculum development, there is divergence from Jean and Carol in their lived experience of practice. This temporal reflection on practice represents

a transformation in the ELC sector in recent times, owing to Government investment and progress in research. With increasing knowledge, there are still many changes for these EYE. Three out of the seven EYE report they have become more knowledgeable than they were ten years ago, and that training has helped them understand more. Whereas others maintain they are no better off.

6.5.14 Stress and Cleaning

"You are jack of all trades, and not considered master of any in most people's heads"

A common theme emerged from three of the seven EYE participants which involved tasks other than caring for the children, which they felt interfered with their ability to develop and maintain close attachment relationships with the children. The conversation turned to the topic of stress, which for Olivia, was about broader operational requirements, such as cleaning.

Olivia: "*The stresses I felt was cleaning-based, and you felt there were so many duties to be done, as well as caring for kids. If there's a child that could be having a meltdown, and you need to give the time to them, if you feel under pressure that you won't have the time, that's going to affect…With paperwork as well, that was…I know it's a must…em…it is time consuming to try do all the roles, the cleaning roles, record keeping…the caring for the children should come top."*

Her use of the words "*as well as*" indicates that caring for the children is not her only duty, and that she considers the children are not her sole priority. Caring for the children and cleaning are framed as having the same importance, yet she reports that cleaning takes her away from the children. Olivia relates to feeling the consequences of stress due to obstacles that get in the way of her creating an attachment to the children. The pressure of cleaning is a clear articulation about the obstacles that interfere with her relationships with the children. Having time for relationships and attachment, and the impact of the pressures of practice on her patience and care are impacting her attachments to the children. The impact of cleaning is also felt by Carol.

Carol: *"there's so much of your day has to go into cleaning, I mean, oh my God, the amount of cleaning, and then when you finish cleaning your room, you might have to go and clean the kitchen, or you might have to go and clean the hall. I have two days a week after my class when I have to clean. On Tuesday, I have to clean the kitchen, and then on a Thursday I clean the whole hall, and hoover it up and down. Then on Friday I have to deep clean my classroom. Then, in your list of garden checks, you're supposed to be checking, y'know, checking the weeds We remove cat poo every morning, bird poo every morning, clean the picnic tables, seriously!*

With regard to this, Carol makes her objections to her manager.

"I mean she [the manager] will tell you…me and her have had many arguments. I am not a gardener. [I say to her] -if you like your garden done, get a gardener!"

At a surface level Carol's account of cleaning responsibilities may appear unrelated to attachment, particularly given that many of these tasks occur outside direct interaction time with the children. Furthermore, maintaining hygienic and safe environments is an essential component of early learning and care, and it forms part of the professional responsibilities of EYE. However, the significance of this finding lies less in the act of cleaning and more in what Carol reveals regarding the demands placed upon educators within ELC settings. Carol's description of continuous cleaning, environmental maintenance, and safety monitoring illustrates her relational work with children is embedded within broader organisational and regulatory expectations. While these duties may not directly interrupt interactions, these responsibilities may contribute to physical fatigue, emotional depletion, burnout, and reduced relational capacity. From attachment-informed perspective this is significant because emotionally attuned and responsive interactions require not only time, but emotional availability and psychological presence. Carol's account therefore raises important questions regarding the balance between relational and non-relational labour within ELC practice, which Susan is also grappling with.

Susan: "*At the moment, it's very heavy, admin and cleaning-wise. Since COVID there is a lot of extra cleaning work. You kind of have to judge for yourself the opportunity for a break, it depends on what children you have, then the admin on top of that… it's just too much."*

6.5.15 Interpretation

This theme of cleaning adds a distinct but related dimension of the lived experience of attachment for EYE, the conflict between relational and non-relational work. Three of the EYE singled out cleaning as one of the pressures among the many other duties, they are expected to complete. From attachment perspective their experiences of non-relational work underscores how the demands of practice can obstruct the formation of secure responsive relationships. Bowlby (1988) emphasised that consistent emotional availability is essential to building trust. In addition, Schore (2016) adds that such attuned relationships depend on processes that require time and emotional presence. When these qualities are diverted towards cleaning the conditions for neurobiological attunement and emotional availability are lost. The result is emotional strain frustration and disconnection both from the children and from top-down structural demands, such as managers or inspectors. Whilst these narratives reveal frustration at being diverted towards cleaning and maintenance tasks, the sense of displacement underscores how play is the true work of EYE, forming the central medium through which educators nurture children's attachment, attunement, and emotional growth.

This particular experience highlights professional misalignment between practice priorities and pedagogical purpose. Cleaning removes the EYE from relational engagement, whereas on the other hand play represents the core tasks through which emotional attunement and learning occur. The theme of Play was evident in the EYE lived experiences of attachment which is discussed in the next section.

6.5.16 Playing with Meaning

"we're not just sitting here babysitting and singing songs…there's a reason why we do this."

Another common theme which unfolded from the participants was the value of play, but also concerns over children's play. Across the EYE their reflections on play emerged as a deeply meaningful, yet poorly understood aspect of early years' practice. The tone of their language conveyed a subtle frustration at the societal views of play, and three of the seven EYE felt compelled to justify play practices and activities as always purposeful.

Jean: "*I think we're learning more and more that they need more than just a few bricks to play with, that it's really got to do with the relationship between the practitioner and the toddler".*

Jean's emphasis on the relationship between the EYE and the child reframed play as a relational co-constructed process, rather than a way to pass the time. For Jean, play is relational, it is a space where trust, communication, and understanding unfold naturally. Her view that "it's really got to do with the relationship" reflects an awareness of play as emotional attunement and developmental support, not merely activity. Likewise, Kate's experience highlighted the misconceptions around play,

Kate: *"It's always like "oh you're just minding children" or "you're just playing with the kids". It's always that kind of mentality".*

Kate's voice expressed frustration at the persistent societal misconceptions that EYE are "just playing with kids". Again her choice of words emphasises a tension between the intrinsic value of play, and how society's view undermines her. Kate demonstrated the struggle for recognition through her words, and the need for the sector to be understood as nurturing, but also intellectually focused and valuable to society, which links back to why professional identity and mistaken beliefs diminish the ELC public image.

Whilst Kate was concerned about society's view of play, Niamh's concerns were that the children did not know how to play. This speaks to a broader concern regarding the loss of play in children's lives.

Niamh: "*We organise forums and different things and actually the last one earlier this year was on "Transitions" because we did find a lot of children were finding it very hard, not knowing how to play. Coming into preschool then the schools we're seeing that reflected as they moved on from us into them. So we done a whole parent forum on that. Our next parent forum is on the benefits of play, because children really don't have those skills anymore, and it's a big thing. That's what our next step is."*

Niamh highlighted not just her lived experience, but also her advocacy for play. Her concern for children not having play skills anymore was situated within a wider developmental crisis. Her idea to host a forum on the benefits of play demonstrated her leadership in bridging practice, parental understanding and play to illustrate that play is not trivial, but rather an essential part of children's learning and development.

6.5.17 Interpretation

All nine EYE reflected on play and conveyed a shared view that play is pedagogy and vice versa. It is clear that play is not simply a practice within the daily routine, but a professional philosophy that underpins their identity. This conviction coexists with the emotional labour of defending their professional expertise, against public perceptions and misunderstandings. The EYE constructed a rich layered understanding of play as purposeful, pedagogical and deeply human. Through their words play was reclaimed from its societal image as something made light of, to a professional act of care, creativity and meaning-making. Within an IPA lens, their shared views reflected a belief in play, not just as a pedagogical investment, but also as the child's right.

6.5.18 Conclusion to GET 1

The focus of GET 1 was on Barriers to Attachment", which EYE experienced every day in their relationships with BTT children. As discussed in the literature, attachment is the notion of a close relationship with a primary caregiver to ensure survival, and to help social and emotional development (Bowlby, 1969). What is important for this programme of research is that attachment relationships with BTT children emphasise the adult's emotional attunement and alignment with the child. Explored here were the central arguments regarding the narratives of the difficulty of operationalising attachment relationships with BTT children in ELC settings.

Discovered here were the salient viewpoints of the EYE. It is clear that to them, attachment means love. The EYE in the context of this study faced many challenges and there were many threats to their time, energy, and occupational esteem. In turn, these threats posed a risk to attunement and their relationships with young children.

This finding is important to this programme of research because as reviewed in Chapter Four, developmental science literature tells us that attachment is an organiser of early brain development, and the foundation of healthy social and emotional development (Schore, 2016). This section interpreted this conclusion from the literature, which states that what is important for attachment relationships with BTT children, is the ability of the EYE to mentor or coach the child to regulate their own emotions (Field et al., 2006). Also identified from the literature on attachment was how the adult helps the child to learn to regulate their own emotions. This is a process learned through the caregiver (Schore, 2016). The role of the EYE for that reason, is to co-regulate the child's emotions and behaviours, until they can learn to regulate themselves. This is the foundation of life-long social and emotional development (Schore, 2016). The centrality of social and emotional development in the wider literature on attachment is a consensus on the key issue of attachment, and these themes collectively make the Group Experiential Theme (GET) 1.

Having identified the barriers to attachment in ELC settings, the next section will discuss the identified facilitators of attachment relationships. This is important in order to gain a rounded view of the lived experience of attachment relationships for EYE and ELC managers in the ELC settings with BTT children in the Republic of Ireland.

6.6 GET 2: Facilitators of Attachment

GET 1 highlighted the obstacles as reported by the research participant's that exist in ELC practice which could act as a barrier to attachment relationships with children aged birth-to-three. Attention now turns to GET 2, which is on the participant's shared experiences of facilitators of attachment relationships in ELC settings. Facilitators of attachment relationships can be understood as affordances in the environment which support the adults to be consistent, responsive, and emotionally present and available to the children (Gerhardt, 2015). Explored in Section Two will be the lived experience of EYE regarding attachment relationships with BTT children for socioemotional learning and co-regulation of emotion and behaviour. As will be seen, in understanding what acts as a barrier to their attachment relationships with children, conversely the EYE know what works, and there were many examples of nurturing caregiving and intuitive love in the stories of their lived experiences in their attachment relationships with BTT children. The next Section begins by setting out the Personal Experiential Themes (PET) from which GET 2 was developed.

6.6.1 Personal Experiential Themes (PETS) within GET 2

6.6.2 PET 1: This is Me

"I just felt it was more em…more me."

The participants were asked to reflect on the influences on their career choice, such as teachers, parents, etc. The participants recalled their reasons for entering the sector, and their motivations were not too dissimilar. A common theme among the participants was having an initial interest in this type of work at a young age. Work experience emerged as a common learning ground, which helped them to make their decision to first enter, and then remain in the sector. In addition, many expressed the original feelings of excitement, and how they felt they had found an occupation that was made for them. This theme unfolded through in-depth evidence from all seven participants. For Jean, it was the importance of the role that appealed to her, as she likened it to stepping into the role of the parents.

Jean *"When it comes to the relationship between the adult and the child, I do think it's a really important relationship, because it could be for most children, the first time they move away from their primary caregiver. So there's somebody stepping into that place which is usually [occupied by] the mother, or y'know, the father as well".*

Olivia spoke about always knowing that she wanted to work with young children.

Olivia: *"I've always had little kids around, y'know. I just felt I was good with children. Then doing the Level 5, and doing the work experience, I definitely knew that it was kids I wanted to work with."*

Like Olivia, Kate also felt it was because she had always been surrounded by children that she too, always wanted to work with young children.

Kate: *"My mum used to mind kids when I was younger, so I suppose I've always been around that aspect of minding. When I was younger, I lived on an estate, and I'd be out with the kids. I always*

took on that role of taking care of them. The mums would say, "oh you're so good with kids" and I suppose that makes you think to yourself, "oh, yeah, I am actually good with kids. I suppose I felt it less daunting knowing that I was going to work with children, than knowing you were going into…I don't know…to be a lawyer or…y'know…I just felt it was more em…more me."

Another participant Sabrina, spoke about the link between wanting to work with young children and being surrounded by children in their family.

Sabrina: *"It was always something I wanted to do. Growing up I had two young nieces, so I think helping out with them, it really made me love being around kids. When I finished school I knew I wanted to work with kids, so I went into my [QQI] Level 5 and 6. I done my placement, and they offered me a part time job. My plan was to take the job for the summer months and go back to college and do my degree and I just didn't. I kept going with this and still here seven years later."*

Leah had a similar story to Sabrina.

Leah: *"I ended up doing work experience in a school-age childcare setting and loved it. So that was kind of my first experience of working with children and I thought, this is for me."*

For Kate, being around young children meant that she took on a caring role. She felt a caring role was more "her", whilst Olivia, Sabrina and Leah also "knew" it was for them. However, Olivia, Sabrina, Kate's and Leah's motivation was not just simply familiarity with children, but also a well-defined self-concept that they were "good with children". It was this belief that contributed to them becoming an EYE. With Maeve it was a little different, she was already in a caring role when she felt the need for a change.

Maeve: *"I was working as a care assistant in a residential home for a number of years, but then I decided I needed a career change. So I went looking into career prospects and done my first qualification [QQI] Level 5. I started working in early years in 2009. I was doing my work experience in 2008 and that kind of gave me a want to go into it."*

Unlike the others, Maeve's motivation came a little later in life, yet similarly it was work experience that gave Maeve a desire to continue with her decision. Leah went straight into her training from school, and it was work experience that gave her first-hand knowledge of working with young children, which like Maeve, also cemented her decision to remain in the sector.

For Carol, it was the need to secure childcare for her own family that brought her to the sector. Motherhood that gave her an interest in working in the early year's sector originally.

Carol: *"We [Carol and her husband] went away for four years, and when we came back to Ireland, we decided to start a family. I couldn't really justify waiting till I was thirty-two to have my first child, and then handing my child over to someone else to raise, and go to work at 7am in the morning, come home at 7pm at night. I actually couldn't do it. I had an interest in Montessori and early years, and had always kind of thought it might be something I might like to do…to start my own business."*

6.6.3 Interpretation

Within their reflections, eight EYE personified the role with personal attributes and characteristics of care, leading to an identity of wanting to care, and to be a caring person. This identity was at the heart of the EYE role for the participants. It was a blending of the EYE role, and occupational concepts of care with their own personality. This PET has relevance for this study as the a priori research question asked what behavioural and environmental factors influence attachment. This is because as previously discussed, self-efficacy influences identity (Bandura, 1997). Therefore, this theme links back to the central question running throughout this thesis, that of the lived experience of attachment relationships of EYE with BTT children the potential to influence attachment relationships with BTT children in ELC settings. Having reviewed the theme of "This is Me", the next section will review "Intuition versus Intellect" which also emerged as a strong PET.

6.6.4 Intuition versus Intellect

"You leave your problems at the door"

Many of the research participants articulated a deep instinctual knowledge of their work, a relational form of understanding that operated beyond training or theoretical knowledge. Olivia clearly articulated her use of instinct with the children. She felt she works well with the children, and she based this belief first and foremost on her intuition.

Olivia: *"I just clicked with them in a way that I could understand them…to help them out. I would be very patient. It's handing the control over to them d'know in a way, but still you're still getting what needs to be done, in a clever kind of way…unknown to myself too, it's only when you ask the question you…you really have to think."*

Olivia describes how she connects with the children by the use of the word "clicked", as though she and the children fit together, and it's a perfect fit to the point of hearing a click which indicates that the connection is secure. Clicking with the children means a lot to Oliva.

However, it is interesting to note that it is only when she is asked to think about her connection with the children, and she has to really think about her understanding of attachment. It is intuition that Olivia relies upon, as opposed to attachment theory, education, or any qualification.

Olivia: *"I love the way you just leave your problems at the door, and you're a different person when you go into work with the kids. You try to have it as a fun…a fun atmosphere. You can't be taking your own problems into work, it's a happy environment. I think that is something EYE have to be aware of. That is the many tasks of a practitioner, all rolled into one".*

Olivia's statement below "I love the way you just leave your problems at the door" revealed an ability to create a joyful, safe, emotional atmosphere for the children. This was not an intellectual or learned act, she revealed an intuitive shift in her perception. She transformed her emotional

state almost automatically on entering the ELC setting. This was an immediate response to the emotional needs of the children, rather than consciously applying a technique or a theory. Olivia sensed the emotional tone of her classroom. Her description of creating "a fun atmosphere" is an intuitive regulatory act. She knows that children need emotional lightness and safety, and her use of the phrase "leave your problems at the door" implies a boundary-setting, that her own emotional state must not spill over into the relational space of the ELC setting with the children. This shows implicit emotional intelligence. She may not have described affect regulation-but she enacted it instinctively. This principle is also shared by Carol and by Maeve.

Carol*: I've always said…regardless of what goes on in your personal life, you get to the front door, you're dealing with children…you fake it 'till you make it! You smile…you put your smile on, and you keep that smile, and actually, by the end of the day or the end of the morning, the smile is real, do you know what I mean. You can't go in to children and be in bad form, you just can't…and if you are, you shouldn't be in the job."*

The exact same sentiment is expressed by Maeve.

Maeve: *"I suppose I just have to leave whatever it is outside the door. Just park it at the door, and just go in and focus on what you have to do. It is hard yeah, but I think I…y'know eh, I think you build… what's that word… resistance to it-just park it at the door, you leave it and then go back to it, and [do] whatever you need to do, and that's what it is. That's for me anyway, maybe not for everyone, but my approach that's what I do-leave it at the door.*

As a manager, Niamh articulates this as a passion

Niamh*: "They're here for their passion of working with children. It's that type of job - particularly being with the kids - they're there because they want to be there".*

Jean also articulates clearly how the caring the role of the EYE working with toddlers is.

Jean: "*I think we're learning more and more that they need more than just a few bricks to play with, that it's really got to do with the relationship between the practitioner and the toddler."*

6.6.8 Interpretation

Jean distinguishes what's involved in the role of the EYE with toddlers and recognises how the caregiver's emotional availability is more important than the availability of toys. Kate is similar to Jean and Olivia, in that she too understands the important role of the adult, and that it is the emotional self-regulation of the adult that regulates the child.

6.6.9 Affection Beats Adversity

"It's lovely to see just how much they've come on in the short few months that you're with them".

The pressures of cleaning, ratios, and perception of paperwork as a burden, often fragmented their emotional focus, yet the capacity of the EYE to love and connect with the children prevailed. Sabrina spoke of the joy she experienced seeing the children develop and grow.

Sabrina: *"It's lovely. You can get really attached to the kids. It's lovely to see just how much they've come on in the short few months that you're with them. I think especially with this age group. In September for the majority of them, it was their first time being away from home, they're only two [years old]. So they're really babies coming in. [From] seeing them in September to seeing them now, how much they've settled and how happy they are coming in, and how they really do, they really need you in the room and it's lovely. You really do build a relationship with them and with the parents because the parents are putting their trust in you to mind their kids when they're not there. And so it is…it's lovely. You can get really attached to the kids. It's lovely to see just how much they've come on in the short few months that you're with them".*

For Maeve, the experience of caring for young children is deeply relational and all-encompassing. She speaks of “being everything” to the children, capturing a profound sense of responsibility and emotional depth that defines her daily work.

Maeve: *“When you're there, you’re with these children eight hours a day…y’know, and you're not just the mother, - you’re the doctor, you’re their nurse, you’re their counsellor, you are everything to these children, and not [for] one day. And that is the most important factor of who you are, and they... I mean the children have their trust in you, and you have to give that trust back”.*

Susan also reports high levels of attachment when she talks about the children in her care. She describes the children with warmth and fondness and an intuitive understanding. Amid the demands and pressures described by Susan’s account brings the focus back to relational meaning. Her words convey how attachment is not an isolated act but an ongoing emotional commitment that reflects a deep reciprocity of trust and care.

Susan: *“I kind of know their ways, and they know how to communicate with me. Sometimes they might shout out Mam! Now they're shouting out ‘teacher’ [laughs] but they always kind of laugh after it [and say] “oh, you're not mam” or “you’re not teacher” and then they come up and ask me for hugs if they need it. It's kind of like I'm their base, they come to me if they need me, but they're quite independent.”*

The extent of Susan’s relationship with the children is further articulated in her account when she refers to herself as the children’s “base”. Susan is so attached to the children that they accidentally call her “Mam” at times. Whilst both she and the children know that she is not their mother, they are non-the-less very attached to her. Susan attributes the children’s sense of security to them having that one person.

Susan: *“I think it's important that they have that one person in affect that they can go to, and they can build a strong bond with.”*

This theme reveals the subtle interplay between formal knowledge and instinctual practice. According to Bowlby (1969, 1988) personal attributes such as kindness, emotional presence, and the overall approachability of the adult in the relationship, are important qualities in the adult for secure attachments. However, despite that she and the children are so close that the children forget sometimes that she is not their mother, Susan omits any credit to herself with having these personal attributes, and she does not attribute the children's security to her presence. Instead, she stops short of taking credit for their sense of security.

Returning to her previous example, Olivia goes back to her story about the little boy in her ELC service.

Olivia: *"My personal understanding of attachment is just being able to understand the child at their level. You had to build up the trust with him, and from then on, I did build up trust, and he did trust me, and it was only me that could do his nappy, and he formed an attachment with me, y'know. And then later we realised he had different needs…[this]…was the reasons why he didn't want to interact with others. Em…that was a big eye opener for me".*

In describing her understanding of attachment, Olivia puts the onus on the adult to create the experiences that support attachment relationship with BTT children. She describes the moment she realised that this child had special needs. There was a sense of opening up, leading to a greater understanding. Her description of the experience as being an "eye opener", implies that she felt her eyes were once initially shut, closed off to the vulnerability of the child in a busy setting. For Olivia, opening her eyes set in motion a desire to do better, to help those children who were vulnerable, and to better understand them. For Carol, it is a similar approach.

Carol: *"I remember it [attachment theory] was very interesting. I remember bits and pieces of it. I know there's secure, avoidance, insecure. There's four type of attachment if I'm not mistaken. And I think there's been a lot of experiments…John...? Which was the one with the monkeys, was that one"? I'm not thinking that consciously. I'm not thinking that doesn't mean to say that*

unconsciously. No, I'm not thinking that consciously [of attachment], just because I'm not thinking that doesn't mean to say that unconsciously I'm not... Like, I'm very much aware of building a relationship with the children, and y'know, at snack time when we sit down and have a snack with them, it is a chance to bond with the children."

6.6.10 Interpretation

Carol claims to only remember bits and pieces of the theory of attachment, yet she is aware of the importance of being a secure and reliable person in her relationship with the children. Whilst she recalled fragments of the theory from her training, her lived experience of attachment relationships with BTT children in ELC settings unfolds intuitively in everyday moments such as snack time.

6.6.11 Love is All You Need

"I can't explain it…I couldn't put a finger on…but it's love"

The question of what motivates the EYE to remain in the sector revealed a love and a dedicated passion for working with young children.

Maeve: *"Em…it's a different kind of love, y'know. There is a love and a passion for what you do. y'know, I suppose in a caring sense y'know. Emm…there's that difference…it's a kind of a…special thing, y'know, it's a bond…isn't it-really. Yeah it is a different kind of love. There's a love for your children, or there's a love for your parents…or y'know, whoever…but it's different love to…y'know…the children you're with…y'know. I can't explain it…I couldn't put a finger on…but it's love".*

The feeling of love as expressed by Maeve, is one that is shared by Kate, Olivia and Leah.

KATE: *"I love the kids, and just seeing anything that I did, or if I planned something, and they really loved it. I just seen the smiles on their faces, the way they reacted to it, and I just felt like I had a*

special connection with them". I felt that I had these great relationships with these kids and babies that kinda…it outweighed the cons I suppose."

This sentiment is also expressed by Olivia, who also feels there is a sense of achievement in knowing that she is supporting children's learning and development.

Olivia: *"I love helping kids and knowing what I'm doing is helping them*."

Leah circles back to her own childhood experiences. She explains that her own experience of attachment growing up "wasn't great"

Leah: *"I didn't have the best situation growing up. So it feels like at some point that I may be healing myself in the process of making children feel important and valued and cherished."*

Leah's reflection moves beyond professional identity and practice challenges, into the deeply personal domain of attachment and self-understanding. Her words revealed how the act of caring for children has become both outwardly nurturing and inwardly therapeutic, a form of emotional healing through caregiving.

Leah: *"I love what I do, I genuinely love what I do. I love being able to support children and families and really give them a quality experience in early education and really make them feel important and loved. That's my joy. They really are, they're amazing. I love it. I love being with children. I love being able to be the person who gives them that quality piece. Who gives them that lovely environment to go into, y'know…who sees them, who respects them and values them. So yeah, I get a huge, I don't know what the word would be but yeah…a lovely warm feeling."*

6.6.12 Interpretation

Leah's account demonstrates the transformative nature of attachment. By acknowledging that her own early experiences "weren't great" Leah recognised how caregiving allowed her to rewrite aspects of her emotional past. This aligns with the view that early attachment patterns shape later relational models, but also that new secure relationships can foster repair (Bowlby, 1988; Thompson, 2006). In this way Leah's professional role became a space of security, where offering children the feeling of being "important, valued, and cherished" simultaneously met her own attachment needs. This process reflects caregiving as a form of mutual healing, where emotional attunements benefits both the child and the adult.

6.6.13 Summary of GET 1 and 2 Themes

The above EYE reflections illustrate how attachment informed practice often operates through implicit relational knowing, rather than conscious theoretical recall. Although two EYE could not fully articulate Bowlby's theory, their feelings echoed an intuitive caregiving stance. Schore's (2016) biological perspective of attachment further supports this implicit understanding, suggesting that such attuned interactions arise from emotional communication and regulation. The EYE account reveals how attachment theory is lived out experientially, where relational understanding emerges as embodied practice, rather than academic knowledge. This created a felt sense of connection over a learned concept of the theory. These themes collectively made the Group Experiential Theme (GET) 2.

6.6.14 Chapter Conclusion

The focus of this chapter was on the lived experience of EYE and ELC manager's attachment relationships with BTT children in a selection of ELC settings in the Republic of Ireland. Discussed here were the views of both the EYE and ELC managers. Explored were the central arguments

regarding the difficulty and also delights of operationalising attachment relationships with BTT children in ELC settings. Discovered here were the significant challenges for the EYE, with regard to the barriers for creating attachment relationships with BTT children. As was seen, In the context of the present study EYE and ELC managers face many challenges, and there are many threats to their relationships with young children. These challenges map directly onto classic attachment concepts, and also contemporary neurobiological models.

The findings in this Chapter are important to this programme of research because as reviewed in Chapter Four, developmental science literature tells us that attachment is an organiser of early brain development, and the foundation of healthy social and emotional development (Schore, 2016). This is also important because this Chapter interpreted the lived experiences of the EYE and ELC manager's attachment relationships with BTT children in ELC settings because attachment studies usually focused on attachment from the child's perspective. Having reviewed the findings, the next Chapter will discuss these findings in relation to seminal and contemporary attachment literature.

Chapter Seven: Discussion

7.1.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the findings from the empirical research carried out with seven EYE and two ELC managers working with BTT children in ELC settings in the Republic of Ireland. The aim of the current programme of research was to explore their lived experience of attachment relationships to understand how they make sense of attachment with BTT children in Early Learning and Care (ELC) settings. The focus of this chapter is on the discussion of the research findings through the approach of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The GETS identified in this study will be discussed in terms of attachment science.

The centrality of adopting this approach in the wider literature on attachment is due to the point of intersection of research, which integrates neuroscience with attachment theory as set out in Chapter Four, Section 3, Sub-section 4.3.1. This is due to the benefits and potential research which this intersection offers to the field of ELC and Early Intervention (EI) research. Therefore, explored in this chapter are EYE and ELC managers lived experiences, as compared and contrasted with the literature on attachment science to find where they can co-exist.

7.1.2 The Structure of the Chapter

This Chapter is broken down into six sections. The first four sections are organised around answering the research questions, while Section Five discusses the potential of the current research, including limitations and directions for further research. Section Six discusses researcher reflexivity. Whilst the findings were presented in the last chapter in an unabridged manner, the focus here is to "contextualise the findings in relation to evidence and theory in the literature" (Smith et al., 2022, p. 116). Thus, interpretations will be made in relation to the (i) contextual issues

(reviewed in Chapter Two), theoretical background (reviewed in Chapter Three), and previous research in the area of attachment (reviewed in Chapter Four).

These reviews of the salient literature were focused on the development of the "a priori" research questions, that were partially influenced by the researcher's positionality (Chapter One, Section 1.12). One main overarching research question emerged with three sub-questions. These were developed from the “a priori research question”, and the literature review. Therefore, interpretations will be reported sequentially, with regard to each research question.

The style and structure of each section will remain the same. Each section first answers the research question as a synopsis of the findings. From this, the focus is directed towards an IPA interpretation of the results with reference to the existing body of knowledge. This involves identifying the contribution that the findings make to the contextual, theoretical, and empirical work that were the foundations of the research. The chapter will then critically reflect upon the potential of the current research, including limitations, and offer suggestions and directions for further research. Finally, considering the importance placed on the need for the researcher to acknowledge issues pertaining to positionality, the chapter concludes with a focus on the need for researcher reflexivity. To begin, the next section presents the research questions and key findings. This is followed by the synopsis and interpretation of the key findings.

7.1.3 Section One: Reminder of the Research Questions

Main Research Questions: What are a sample of early years’ educators’ (EYE) and early learning and care (ELC) managers lived experiences of attachment with children aged birth to three (BTT) years of age, in early learning and care settings in the Republic of Ireland?

7.1.4 Synopsis of the Findings

The present study was designed to determine the lived experience of attachment relationships for EYE and ELC managers, with BTT children in the Republic of Ireland. Traditionally, attachment research has tended to focus on children's attachment styles and the experience of attachment from the child's perspective. In contrast, the interviews in this study were designed to understand attachment from the caregiver's perspective, and early year educators (EYE) and early learning and care (ELC) managers, were chosen to gain the lived experience of their relationships with children aged birth-to-three (BTT) years of age. The interview questions were planned in order to help us explore how attachment is operationalised in busy ELC settings in the Republic of Ireland.

7.1.5 Interpretation of the Findings

Appendix 13 represents a brief synopsis of the findings from both groups. As can be seen, the difference between the barriers for EYE and for managers are highlighted in the types of different challenges they each faced in trying to establish a secure attachment relationship with the children. For example, it is worth noting that barriers to attachment are significantly more frequent in the EYE group of participant's than in ELC managers group.

To provide a clear and a full understanding of the lived experience of attachment relationships for EYE and ELC managers with BTT children in a selection of ELC setting in the Republic of Ireland, the following section discusses the meaning of the findings, and how the findings addressed each element of the main overarching research question. Importantly, these findings extended our current knowledge relating to how we understand EYE and ELC manager's needs with regard to relational pedagogy, in a selection of ELC settings. The section that follows provides a brief synopsis of the findings and a discussion regarding the group themes identified. To begin, the next section

addresses the findings that answer the main overarching research question, that of the lived experience of attachment relationships with BTT children.

7.1.6 Barriers to Attachment (GET 1)

With regard to the lived experience of attachment relationships, the findings reflected a mix of both positive and negative experiences in the ELC environment. These experiences affected participant's attachment relationships with the children. While positive feelings towards the children were reported, feelings of stress and frustration were also revealed. Throughout the Interviews, all nine participants identified a different intensity to their relationship with the children. Four participants expressed feelings of being "in loco parentis" (in the place of the parent) towards the children. Such emphasis was derived from feelings of trust, placed in them from the children's parents. The lived experience of attachment was linked to being in loco parentis, however, this was sometimes interrupted by policies and procedures.

Parents were reported by three EYE to be central to how they perceived themselves and their role with BTT children, either positive or negative, as either babysitters, childminders or teachers. This issue was linked to identity, where using the title of "teachers" raised a number of interesting findings. Being referred to as a teacher was reported to raise the self-esteem of seven of the nine participants, and this elevated their overall sense of value and of being valued for their work. Referring to staff as teachers was also the preference of the ELC managers, both of whom reported observing the positive effects of this identity on their staff.

This is in line with previous research that indicated how EYE self-esteem and self-efficacy are linked to constructs of value (Park et al., 2014). A good relationship with the child's parents contributed to feelings of self-worth, which led to a sense of efficacy and autonomy among EYE, which in turn contributed to EYE maintaining a close bond with the child and the family.

When reviewed in relation to Chapter Two, the Contextual Review, these issues are a concern for this researcher. This is because Chapter Two highlighted the recently updated Aistear Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (Government of Ireland, 2024), to place an emphasis on attachment relationships, yet this finding suggested that management in the context of the present study hold a lot of influence in terms of how valued EYE perceive themselves to be. In addition, management seemed to either mitigate or exacerbate EYE stress over issues pertaining to a lack of validation or feedback. Lack of validation or feedback from managers was reported by EYE to lead to feelings of self-doubt, and "second guessing" themselves in decisions and practice.

The influence of managers on EYE practice could be conceptualised within Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), as discussed in Chapter Three, relationship dynamics in the macrosystem are directly communicated to the microsystem. Within this framework the child's immediate relationships and interactions within the microsystem, including relationships with EYE, are influenced by broader organisational policy and structure. In the context of the present study, participants' experiences suggest that attachment-informed practice does not occur in isolation at the level of educator-child interactions, but is shaped by interconnected ecological influences. Managerial approaches to leadership, involving emotional support and organisational culture form part of the mesosystem surrounding educators daily practice. At the same time regulatory requirements, administrative demands, workforce conditions, and policy expectations operating at exosystem and macro system levels, may indirectly influence the quality and consistency of relational engagement within settings ELC.

This interpretation emerged from three of the seven EYE who expressed how lack of feedback in particular directly led to negative thoughts about themselves. They became concerned with the idea that they lacked the appropriate ability and skills to do their job. This was due to a lack of leadership from managers telling them they were either doing a good job, or providing advice and guidance on areas where they could improve, which EYE reported they would welcome.

Whilst EYE revealed that they clearly felt their relationships with management were important, they perceived manager's availability and communication styles to be difficult to navigate. Two of the nine research participants perceived lack of communication as one of the contributing factors in their decision to leave the setting they were working in at the time, and they reported challenges related to the lack of direct and clear feedback from management.

This finding supports the phenomenological study by Hooper, Potts, and Walton (2022), where teachers' perceptions of their own professional development and expertise were interwoven with managerial-level structures and interpersonal relationships more so than their training.

This has important implications for applying the recently updated Aistear Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (Government of Ireland, 2024), with its emphasis on implementing a slow relational pedagogy. These findings may help us to understand sources and impact of stress on EYE relationships, given the long-identified link between adult's stress and poor-quality care (Mikulincer & Florian, 1998). Therefore, it is conceivable that stressful conditions are detrimental to attachment relationships, and where stress is prevalent, safe and secure attachments are less likely to occur, because the insecure attachments are activated by acute stressors (Mikulincer and Shaver, 2003). This may have important implications for developing a slow relational pedagogy (French, 2018; French, 2019; French & McKenna, 2022), and it raises intriguing questions regarding the nature and potential extent of stress in other ELC settings.

Another finding related to stress involved policies that six of the nine research participants reported as interrupting their interactions with the children. Instead of actively contributing to attachment relationships, documentation that requires evidence as proof of activity, was reported by these six participants as breaking the interaction and interrupting the connection happening between the them and the child in that moment.

Given the extent of the reported challenges experienced in ELC settings, all nine participants reported feelings of love and affection for the children, and of experiencing a sense of joy and

pleasure at their development. However, from the narratives of the participating EYE and ELC managers in this study, it was clear that they lacked an occupational identity that informed their work and what they do. There was no official recognition which embraced the role for those who care for and educate BTT children and indeed one EYE revealed a narratives of shame. We saw evidence of this in how Sabrina described the effects on her of her father's shock and disappointment on learning about her choice of college course. There was also the narratives of Kate and Oliva's experience, where other EYE colleagues in their setting belittled them for their role with BTT children.

These three EYE did not appear to be proud of their profession. Rather, Sabrina, Kate and Olivia reported being ashamed occasionally to tell people that they work with the BTT age group. It seemed as though they understood that society does not really appreciate what they do, and without an already strong occupational identity, this negatively affected by their perception. It also appeared that these three participants perceived themselves to have little or no control over their occupational identity. What clearly emerged from their experience of attachment is the way in which they reported that they felt their sense of identity was undermined by society, and without an identity, there was no recognition of their uniqueness.

When this finding is taken in light of previous research in the area of attachment (reviewed in Chapter Four), it is a sad reflection to think that the three participants felt no value was attached professionally to their role. It is also a worry, because within a developmental neuroscientific view, they are important and significant to the children they care for and educate with regard to the neurobiology of affect regulation (Schore, 2016).

The research on interpersonal neuroscience tells us that their presence and engagement is vital for attachment formation (Badenoch 2017; Siegel & Payne-Bryson, 2020; Schore, 2016). For example, according to Schore, when a young child looks at his or her caregiver's face, he or she is able to see and register a very definite bodily-based signal. These are messages of joy and of enjoyment in the

child's presence, and the social engagement, conveyed in the caregiver's eyes and smile (Schore, 2016). These social communications inform the child on a nonverbal unconscious level, that the carer's sympathetic nervous system has been activated and a "sparkle" (2016, p. 74), is unconsciously registered by the child as a flash of light reflected off the caregiver's retina.

These non-verbal social communication signals conveyed within the positive expressions of the caregiver, are implicitly understood by the child as interest, love, and attention, and according to Schore, they indelibly imprint onto the child's neurological structures, producing hormones such as oxytocin, vasopressin, and dopamine, which feed new neural connections, and support early brain development. If, however, there is no expression of joy, then the message conveyed to the child will be stress, which as Gerhardt (2015) points out, conveys to the child that they are not a priority at this time.

Within the context of this study challenging behaviour was reported as a common and frequent occurrence by eight of the participants. Behaviour management emerged as an increasingly urgent matter for both EYE and ELC managers, with recognition that access to Early Intervention and the AIM initiative could potentially alleviate the number of incidents of challenging behaviour.

These sentiments were worse where poor managerial practices existed, or where the EYE was anticipating a visit from the pre-school inspector. Stress from inspections was reported by many to be overwhelming. Many EYE disagreed with the methods of the inspectors, reporting a culture of stress and fear, with incidents of being intimidated and bullied. The current study found that over half of the EYE reported how this had affected their mental health, with one describing how she would become "robotic", and just mentally dissociate from the inspector as a coping strategy during inspections.

Another EYE, in the process of closing her business after Tusla brought her to court for failing to produce a particular document, reported how she felt she and the children "didn't matter" and that "nobody cared" with regard to her closing her business. This has important implications for applying

the recently updated Aistear Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (Government of Ireland, 2024), with its emphasis on slow relational pedagogy. Another important finding related to inspections was an EYE report waking up in the middle of the night with anxiety and nightmares of inspections, where she worried that she had forgotten to clean certain touch points, such as light switches and door handles. She also revealed being constantly "pre-occupied" with fear, while in the presence of the children, waiting for an inspector to come.

An implication of this is the possibility that inspections still require overly sanitised environments, as previously identified by Moloney (2016), and continue to create a culture of fear, which inadvertently lowers overall quality by focusing on compliance, rather than innovation and best practices (Moloney, 2016).

When taken into the context of stress, these findings are particularly troubling. This is because adults who are responsible for the care of very young children need emotional support themselves. According to attachment researchers, stress is detrimental to children's emotional development and attachment relationships (Gerhardt, 2015; Schore, 2016; Shanker, 2012). This is because, as seen from a review of the literature, it is the mature nervous system of the adult which provides a role model and a template for regulating the child's immature nervous system, and ultimately teaching the child to self-regulate (Schore, 2003b). Self-regulation is a vital skill for children's socioemotional development (Shanker, 2012). Moreover, as discussed by Gerhardt, a stressed adult sends a clear signal to the child that their needs are not a priority (Gerhard, 2015).

The findings reported here show that the participating EYE in this study fully accepted and endorsed inspections of their work, and of their interactions with the children. However, it was their approach which was reported to cause resentment and defiance. It is therefore likely that in the context of the present study, a connection exists between fear, stress and inspectors.

This finding highlights the challenges and continuing impact of inspections. Further research is needed to investigate the role of inspectors from Tusla and the Department of Education, with a

view to ascertaining their capacity to engender psychologically healthy and supportive educational environments. These are not descriptions of the inspections themselves, but rather of how the EYE in the context of this study construe the meaning of inspections.

Based on the findings, a significant gap was identified in the participant's interpretation of policies related to documenting the children's Learning Stories, and other learning logs which require taking photographs. While photographic documentation is commonly used within Learning Stories approaches in ELC settings, it is important to clarify that they are not fundamentally dependent on photographic evidence. Rather, Learning Stories were originally conceptualised by Carr (2001), as a narrative-based assessment intended to capture children's learning dispositions, interests, and meaning making within everyday experiences. However, one EYE reported that the time and difficulty of taking photographs during these times had a direct impact on the flow of the moment, and she felt a sense of withdrawal on the child's part from engaging any further.

A possible explanation for this withdrawal is the breaking of the intersubjective moment between the adult and the child. Intersubjectivity as discussed by Trevarthen, is the shared attention between the adult and the child, particularly in communication and social interactions (Trevarthen, 1979). It involves the ability to respond to the intentions and emotions of others.

In the context of child development, intersubjectivity is crucial for the development of the child's ability to engage in mutual exchanges of emotional expression, such as smiling, vocalising and imitating (Trevarthen, 1979). The development of intersubjectivity is also foundational to socioemotional and cognitive development, as it enables the child to connect with and learn from adults, and to share enjoyment in mutual learning experiences (Trevarthen, 1979; Trevarthen & Aitken, 2001).

Whilst this finding is the participant's own interpretation, the issue of interrupting intersubjective moments of learning must be addressed with clear policy and training. EYE perception of the invasive nature of these documenting activities is symbolised by Jean's account of how "*the*

connection is broken- everything is broken". (Jean p. 30). Therefore, an understanding of the concept of intersubjectivity is required and is essential if we are to encourage social and emotional development in BTT children. An understanding of this is also critical in supporting EYE to develop better strategies for tasks such as paperwork. Taking photographs of activities was expressed by another participant as a pre-occupation with *"can I get a Learning Story",* were cited as barriers which left her struggling to recapture the moment, in order to form and maintain what needs to be close affectional bonds (Bowlby, 1979).

7.1.7 Facilitators to Attachment (GET 2)

The most obvious discussion points to emerge from the findings was that the main facilitator of attachment was love. In the IPA interviews, EYE and ELC managers talked of many experiences of having affection for the children, and a strong care ethic emerged towards the families attending the service. Both groups showed a strong sense of wonder and awe at the phenomenon of BTT children's limitless curiosity, and their rapid growth and development. Wonder and awe were at the heart of why they loved working with and providing for the BTT age group.

Another element emerged in that the love expressed by the EYE did not differ significantly from similar views expressed by the ELC managers. This was unexpected given the extra duties and responsibilities on ELC managers. On the question of attachment with BTT children, this study found that love and intuition, as opposed to environmental affordances, were a much relied upon emotion, which facilitated attachment relationships. In particular, intuition and sometimes instinct led the narrative on their attachment stories, regardless of what educational approach was being implemented in the setting (i.e. HighScope, Montessori, etc.).

Conversely, Attachment Theory, and the writings of John Bowlby's seminal works did not feature large in the accounts of their lived experience. However, despite not being a deliberate and intentional practice in applying the theory to their decision-making, they all expressed how they

felt they acted as a “secure base” (Bowlby, 1988) for the children. One interesting finding was that whilst they claimed not to use Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969), both groups did not fail to value the adult-child relationship when it came to the children’s well-being, or when it came to nurturing the children’s socioemotional development. However, the EYE failed to express pride in their influence. Nor did they express awareness of their importance in the relationship for early brain development, and in how they are brain-builders (Rike et al., 2008), at a neurobiological level (Nugent, 2015).

Whilst other researchers confirmed that working with BTT children is associated with constructs of “professional love” (Page, 2017, pg. 2), the findings of the current study did not support previous research carried out by Page, which suggested that EYE feel compromised regarding expressions of love. These findings by Page (2017) suggested that a risk-averse climate has created unease among EYE, leading to hesitancy in forming close attachment relationships with BTT for fear of accusations of child abuse amidst concerns about child protection and safeguarding (Page, 2017).

In general, the study found a tendency for reflection on the personal, emotional and subjective aspects of this attachment relationships with BTT children in their separate yet unique roles.

Taken together, the results of the IPA interviews with EYE and ELC manager suggest from their narratives a greater need for understanding and support. It was encouraging to hear the candid manner in which the EYE and ELC managers freely discussed their lived experience of attachment relationships, when compared with that found by Brennan (2016). An evaluation of this study, with Brennan’s research, also conducted through IPA, found that in this programme of research, the EYE and ELC managers both spoke openly about their emotional challenges, and also their joys working with BTT children.

This was in contrast to Brennan (2017), who conducted four IPA interviews with EYE in New Zealand, in which she explored EYE emotional well-being working with BTT children. Brennan reported that due to the possible presence of “sanitising” (2017, p.165) their replies, she was unable to detect

how emotions influenced EYE behaviour. Brennan reported that the EYE framed their emotions and experiences within a professional discourse, and avoided divulging personal or negative experiences. Brennan concluded that this was a response to a sense of professionalism, stemming from training and social expectations, which prioritised competence over emotions (Brennan, 2017).

These results highlighted a reluctance of the EYE to discuss their emotions and instead relied on professional terms and discourses when asked to describe their feelings. This has implications for this study with regard to openly discussing emotional experiences. Given this study's' focus on attachment, relational pedagogy, and lived experience, it is possible that participant's understandings and experiences of attachment were not always explicitly articulated through emotional language, but instead emerged indirectly, through descriptions of care practices, routines, responsibilities, and professional concerns.

Additionally, Brennan's (2017) findings also reinforced the argument underpinning this study, that relational and attachment informed dimensions of practice may remain insufficiently foregrounded within professional discourse, training in ELC settings. If professionalism is constructed primarily through competence, regulation, and compliance, then opportunities for emotional reflexivity and engagement with attachment-informed relational practice may become marginalised. This has significant implications for how relational pedagogy is understood, supported, and enacted within practice. Therefore, while it appears that relational work and relational concepts exist, they are not always explicitly named or theorised within practice.

Among the recommendations made by Brennan (2017), were that future studies needed to validate and explore the details of the personal and emotional nature of EYE work with infants in ELC settings. This, Brennan concluded, would underscore the importance of acknowledging EYE relationships, attachments, and intersubjectivity, which may enhance caregiving practices and infant well-being. Therefore, Section Two sets out the synopsis and interpretation of Research Sub-

Question One, and a discussion of the EYE Personal Experiential Themes (PETS) that address this research question.

7.2. Section Two: Research Sub-Question One

The focus of Section Two is on a detailed discussion of the challenges to creating attachment relationships with BTT children, as perceived by the sample of EYE. As previously mentioned, an initial objective of the research was to identify how EYE operationalise attachments with BTT children in ELC settings in the Republic of Ireland. Operationalising attachments can be understood as a measurable act, involving the abstract notion of an emotional bond, and relating that to visible behaviours (Cohen, 1974).

With reference to this programme of research, this is when the EYE recognise when a child is looking for comfort and approaches. This is a concrete sign of attachment. By focusing on approach behaviours, attachment becomes a scientific construct that can be examined and measured, moving from a theoretical idea to a clear and observable act in the adult (Cohen, 1974).

The centrality of operationalising attachments in the wider literature on attachment is due to a strong relationship between adults' emotional presence and children's secure attachment style (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby, 1988) which has been reported as essential in attachment literature. This section begins with a reminder of Research Sub-Question One.

Research Sub-Question One:

What are the barriers to attachment relationships with children aged birth to three years of age in ELC settings?

7.2.1 Synopsis of Findings

The EYE revealed a number of challenges to their ability to be present with children, physically and emotionally. The study found that these challenges could be interpreted as barriers that could

potentially affect their attachment relationships with BTT children. Likewise, although the ELC manager's knowledge of attachment relationships with BTT children was evident, the challenges they faced, such as behaviour management with BTT children, staffing issues, financial and budgetary issues, meant that attachment issues were farthest from their minds as they were just about coping with other issues.

The managers perceived that their staff were valued and committed individuals, who played a significant role in the lives and education of BTT children. However, the main issue reported by managers in their lived experience of attachment with BTT was that EYE relationships were overshadowed mainly by behavioural challenges with the children. Despite working closely with outside agencies which offered behavioural support to assist staff struggling to cope, this help was reported by both managers as insufficient to meet their needs. Equally each manager reported extraordinary behavioural needs of the children that they were witnessing on a daily basis, and both remarked that they had never seen this type of behaviour before the onset of Covid-19 pandemic.

7.2.2 Interpretation of Findings

7.2.3 Equality in Identity

With regard to attachment facilitation, there was both divergence and convergence in the narratives of the participants. Two EYE considered themselves to be caring in nature and persona, they rejected the title "child care worker" and instead wanted to be referred to as teachers. Their view centered around the belief that teachers are awarded more occupational respect and a higher social standing in society. Three EYE felt that despite having great competence in pedagogical skills, they were largely overlooked in terms of policy and practice with regard to their occupational identity.

Other researchers exploring the issue of identity with EYE who work with BTT children, found that EYE beliefs about their role influenced their sense of occupational self-esteem. For example, EYE who perceived that society saw them as babysitters, was seen as a predictor of low occupational self-esteem (Park et al., 2014).

Additionally, this was found to be linked to a lack of pride in the role, as identified by Rike et al., (2008). What is surprising is that in contrast, EYE who had a lots of previous experience with babies and toddlers before their training (i.e. babysitting, minding younger nieces and nephews, etc.) said that the reason they chose to train as EYE in the first place, was because they considered themselves to be "good with children".

On the question of identity, another unexpected finding was the extent to which working in the ELC sector affected the EYE quality of life, and their chances of getting things like car insurance or a mortgage. This is because for the months of July and August, many EYE must leave their role and present themselves to the Department of Social Protection to open a claim for unemployment assistance. Unlike primary school teachers, whose contracts are spread across 52 weeks (Department of Education and Skills, 2014), EYE contracts are for forty-two weeks, with pre-schools closed in July and August. This means they can be without an income while their claim for unemployment assistance is being processed by the Department of Social Protection. The disconnect is that at present, Government do not consider EYE as teachers, and accordingly, do not treat them as salaried and pensioned teachers, under the responsibility of the Department of Education

These findings were rather disappointing because unfortunately this shows that EYE occupational identity is negatively affected by perceived Government perception. The reason why this is important with regard to EYE attachment with BTT children is because this study found that identity influenced self-efficacy. As discussed by Bandura, self-efficacy is related to motivation, and a belief in one's own capabilities (Bandura, 1977). Both EYE and managers believed that society does not

tend to think about toddlers and babies' early education, rather the focus is on the impression of childcare. Similarly, views were expressed by the EYE that the difference between the respect given to primary school teachers when compared to that of EYE, is as Carol believed, the difference between "*night and day*." (Carol, p. 66).

This finding is also partly due to societal views on the role of the BTT educator, and on the media, who continue to refer to ELC as childcare. However, this researcher contends that it is also due to the EYE themselves. The EYE in this study openly objected to notions of care, and did not wish to encourage the concept of "care" as part of their role, preferring instead to be called teachers.

This led two EYE in this study to further reject notions of "care" with its discourse on the traditional view of women, and which views childcare as the concern of women (Moloney, 2010). Over time, this has created a cycle in which professional identity is continuously threatened. There is a need to raise societal awareness on the critical work and role of EYE. This research has also identified also that the EYE in this study must first demonstrate to themselves and each other, their vital role in the emotional and social lives of all children, not just these aged in the BTT cohort.

This concept is important if attachment relationships are to be at the forefront of a slow relational pedagogy. This is because the challenges identified in this study so far highlight the structural and psychological pressures that EYE are under. This finding supports Noddings (2013), notion of reciprocity. In this context, this means others have professional regard and respect for EYE in their professional role.

7.2.4 Perceptions of Paperwork versus Presence

The paperwork that EYE had to complete dally was reported as records documenting everything from the children's daily attendance to their individual educational activities. Documenting the children's educational journey and marking developmental milestones is a policy and practice requirement. Two of the seven EYE felt it necessary to turn up for work earlier than their official

start time, in order to get paperwork done, while two of the seven would take paperwork home to finish later that evening. Two of the seven EYE made quick notes on their phones during the day, and then wrote these up when an opportune moment arose.

Paperwork was reported as a barrier to attachment relationships, because documentation required many different forms, including taking photos of the children's work. EYE reported on how paperwork is burdensome, and EYE revealed how they felt more like administrators at times. This supports findings by Ohi (2014), with regard to what she found among other EYE roles, where teachers were acting as administrators due to the volume of paperwork and reports that needed to be completed every day. The volume of paperwork was linked to a lack of time, which was another barrier identified by the EYE that did not work out well in practice, which the next Section will discuss.

7.2.5 Not Everyone's Time is Equal

Another important finding was competing demands on time. A high proportion of time was reported by EYE involving tasks other than teaching and caring duties. These were reported as causing a conflict between the choice of spending more time with the children or completing cleaning duties. For instance, cleaning duties were reported to involv not just responsibility for their own classrooms, but also other areas of the service such as the hall, the kitchen, the bathroom, and the garden.

Four of the seven EYE cited cleaning as their main stressor, which when coupled with perceptions of paperwork as a burden, was they felt "overwhelming." This sense of overwhelm was compounded by a sense of guilt and frustration in not being able to give the children more of their time. Prior research carried out by Pereira et al., (2025), noted the importance of time management in ELC settings.

This finding was highlighted with both public and private sectors represented through focus groups with twenty EYE in Portugal. Through Content Analysis methods, the focus group interviews revealed that educators and management participated differently in time management decisions. Additionally, it was found that time management decisions were often carried out according to the adults' agenda, with imposed schedules that did not respond to children's interests or needs. The researchers emphasised a greater need to introduce better participation between EYE and management with regard to decision-making, and the scheduling of tasks (Pereira et al., 2025).

This finding also aligns with more contemporary discussions regarding babies and toddlers' rights, participation, and relational pedagogy within ELC settings. Moloney, Skehill and Pope (2025), argue that adult lead structuring and institutional routines may inadvertently constrain opportunities for child agency, participation, and relationally responsive practice.

These differences may be understood in part within the broader regulatory and operational context of ELC settings, including increased attention to hygiene, infection control, and procedural compliance particularly during and following the COVID-19 pandemic. While the Tusla Quality and Regulatory Framework (QRF) (2018), was developed to support the implementation of the 2016 Early Years Regulations, rather than specifically in response to COVID-19 the pandemic, nonetheless intensified sectoral attention towards infection prevention, cleaning routines, and operational management within settings. It is possible that these increased procedures and demands contributed to more structured and infection-control routines, which may at times have limited responsiveness to children's emerging interests on relational cues. In other words, already existing regulatory frameworks plus pandemic infection-control structures may have contributed to increased procedural structuring.

Such structuring may have an impact on responsive practice, where educator attention becomes increasingly directed towards operational and structural responsibilities. Consequently, highly structured or adult directed routines may create tension between operational demands and

relationally responsive practice with BT children. Ultimately, from an attachment-informed perspective, this is significant because relational attunement requires flexibility and responsiveness to children's cues and emotional states.

Further research needs to determine if services need to employ cleaners to do the job of maintaining standards of hygiene, thus allowing the teachers to teach, similar to the procedures adopted by mainstream schools. However, more research on this topic needs to be undertaken before the association between cleaning and attachment is more clearly understood. This is an important issue for future research as the findings from this programme of research emphasise the need to respond to children's emotional needs, as the objective of EYE daily routines and time.

7.2.6 Compliance versus Connection

The findings in the context of this study raised questions about the use of Learning Stories about how pedagogical documentation are interpreted and operationalised within ELC practice. Two participants accounts suggest that they believe relational interactions may at times become framed through the need to evidence practice, potentially creating tensions between experiencing relational moments and documenting them. In this sense, participants accounts described how moments of connection risked becoming subsumed within accountability.

While photographic documentation is commonly used within Learning Stories approaches in ELC settings, it is important to clarify that they are not fundamentally dependent on photographic evidence. Rather, Learning Stories were originally conceptualised by Carr (2001), as a narrative-based assessment intended to capture children's learning dispositions, interests, and meaning making within everyday experiences. However, from an attachment informed perspective, this is significant because relational attunement depends upon emotional presence, responsiveness, and mutual engagement within the interaction itself (Siegel, 2012). While documentation may support reflection and communication, it is the perceived pressure to capture relational moments through photographs which may inadvertently shift educator attention towards recording practices. This

does not suggest that Learning Stories are inherently incompatible with attachment-informed pedagogy, but rather highlights the need to critically consider how documentation requirements are interpreted by the Early Years Educators.

7.2.7 Instinct versus Intellect

Although all nine participants felt they have good relationships with the children, two of the nine reported that they did not actively think about or consciously apply principles of attachment to their interactions with the children. One EYE admitted that they only remembered "bits and pieces" (Carol, p.39) of Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969, 1988), from their training and the other had never heard of John Bowlby or Mary Ainsworth.

Two of EYE could not map their relationships onto theory, or expand their experiences onto a theoretical underpinning. Yet they were able to describe warm interactions with the children, and paralleled the goals of attachment. Overall they had not forgotten the importance of being a reliable safe person for the children. Conversely, the degree qualified EYE (n=3), were a little more knowledgeable on attachment theory than the EYE qualified to QQI Level Six.

It seems possible that these results are due to the degree qualified staff covering more material on attachment theory (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby, 1969), than the QQI Level Six EYE. It may also be the case that variations which affect practice and knowledge are related to training. Another possible explanation for this may be that managers are not deconstructing theory for EYE, and mapping theory into practice in practical terms (Ring et al., 2018). The findings indicate a need for greater engagement with contemporary attachment science within ELC practice, policy and training content. Attachment Science may provide a useful framework for strengthening EYE's understanding of how everyday interactions support children's emotional security, learning and development.

7.2.8 Early Intervention in Behaviour Management

The managers vividly described the types of behaviour they saw in the toddler rooms of their respective services. One reported seeing a lot of violence among the children, where they attacked each other without provocation, and the children seem to target the eyes of the other children for attack. The children also engaged in biting. One manager also reported how her staff are seeing that the children do not know how to play with the toys, choosing instead to simply carry them around, instead of engaging with the object. Whilst it is hard to speculate on why this is happening without adequate observations, it could be that these frequent conflicts are due to minor things such as boredom, lack of attention, an ineffective curriculum or in response to overcrowding in the rooms, as recognised by the pre-school inspector.

Both managers conveyed a sense of worry about how to support their staff and the toddlers going forward. A main concern voiced by both managers was the exclusion of toddlers from the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM). However, as previously discussed it is important to reiterate that whilst AIM was never intended to be understood as a model of early intervention but rather a framework of universal and targeted supports, this issue is currently being resolved through Budget 2026, with measures designed to enable meaningfully participate within the ECCE programme.

7.2.9 Feeling Unsupported in their Role

Overall the managers expressed countless behavioural issues that they grappled with every day, for which they had no solutions. This finding was similar to findings by Tahira et al., (2020), who found a need for more professional development and training in addressing challenging behaviours in ELC settings. This finding is alarming because as discussed in the Literature Review, interpersonal interactions happen at a neural and biological level, and this makes social experiences either enjoyable and repeatable, or negative and potentially harmful, to the early developing social and emotional structures in the child's developing brain (McCain et al., 2007). Indeed, Gold (2018),

reminds us how relationships in early childhood become key elements in the psychological well-being and social-emotional development of the child.

What is interesting about this result is that managers feel they are unsupported in their role with regard to attachments. Both managers mainly expressed a range of difficulties running an ELC service and how they felt they did their best when it came to looking after their staff and the children. However, this was without much reflection on attachments. One reported how she had kept ratios low "*off her own back*" (Niamh) because she feared that the staff simply could not cope with the children's challenging behaviour.

When considered metaphorically through IPA, this could be interpreted as carrying the weight of the service on her back. The other manager expressed how her staff often worried about getting paperwork done, whilst at the same time maintaining quality and staying attentive to the children's needs. She described how she had to mentally re-frame paperwork as a benefit, and advised them to use paperwork as evidence that they can stand over their work.

The findings of the present study could be attributed to managers being in fight or flight mode. It is possible that the results in the context of the present study underestimate the true prevalence of the stress managers are under. However, these findings were not very encouraging. This raises the possibility that stress is overriding the manager's capacity to fully ensure that the social and emotional wellbeing of the children is prioritised. We know this is an important factor in attachment relationships, and that attachment is less likely to occur in stressful conditions (Delahooke, 2017).

7.2.10 Unconscious Drives and Attachment Behaviour

The findings from the ELC managers in the present study indicate that on the whole their views were consistent with best practice and research in the field of children's emotional well-being. This outcome is in line with the views of Hare et al., (2023), who conducted a systematic literature

review which explored the theories that provide the basis and rationale for the field of Infant Mental Health.

Weatherston (2008), a leading researcher in the field of infant and early childhood mental health, advises that adults emphasise the importance of warm responsive caregiving for children's emotional well-being.

In considering one manager's lived experience when asked about attachment relationships in her services, she spoke at length about attachment. One aspect of her narrative was the way she mapped her own attachment style onto how she operationalised attachment in the setting. This was found to be significantly associated with her lived experience of attachment.

The manager expressed how her own attachment relationships would not have been great during her own childhood, and she felt that in her role as manager (recently promoted from the position of EYE), that she was somehow healing this aspect of herself in cultivating attachment relationships with the children, visiting them regularly in their rooms. She revealed that she wanted the children in her service to feel welcome, valued, and important. These were the emotions she felt she had missed out on as a young child herself.

This disclosure was unexpected and yet very meaningful, and it was an insightful personal observation on the lived experience for this manager. It is therefore likely that such close connections exist between past attachment experiences and professional care duties, similar to the Adult Attachment Style of Parenting, as hypothesised by Main (Main, Goldwyn, & Hesse, 1998).

It further supports the idea that perhaps there is no boundary between the personal and the professional attachment style. This may also provide some explanation as to why they personify their role with personal attributes and characteristics of care, which seem to align to an unconscious identity of "a caring person who is good with children" as discussed in the previous chapter. This unconscious identity is a foundational idea of Jung (1933), who believes that the influence of the

unconscious mind shapes our thoughts, emotions and behaviours. This would support the finding that personal, unconscious, influences, can drive attachment-based professional practices and even behaviours.

The reason why this is important can be seen in Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006), as discussed in Chapter Three (see Section 3.3). This is because development during the BTT years takes place at a time when so much of what happens, including early brain development, is influenced by the child's wider bioecological system (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). This extends to including attachment mechanisms (Bowlby 1988), and the set-points for stress (Nugent, 2015). Without training, these conflicting approaches to operationalising attachments with BTT children could be associated with the nature of the individual and to training in best practice. In this programme of research it is possible that these unmeasured variables (such as attachment histories) could account for some aspects of this finding.

Section Three

Having discussed the findings which answer Sub-Question One, it is evident that training for ELC managers through continued professional development (CPD) is required. What emerged is that attachment relationships are important to them, but there is a lack of prioritising attachment. This next section addresses and discusses Sub-Question Two.

7.3.0 Section Three: Research Sub-Question Two

What are the facilitators to attachment relationships with children aged birth to three years of age in ELC settings?

7.3.1 Synopsis of Findings

With respect to the second research sub-question, the current study found that, despite a lack of knowledge about attachments and other challenges, beliefs and attitudes towards caregiving served as a facilitator of secure attachment. Indeed, a number of other factors positively influenced the EYE relationships with the children and facilitated their attachment relationships. These factors were intuition, love, and emotional resilience. Another important finding was that the EYE and ELC managers in the sample revealed that they know they have an important role in the children's emotional development, and they rely on these characteristics to help. The next section will discuss these characteristics individually.

7.3.2 Interpretation of Findings

On the question of attachment with BTT children, this study found that intuition was relied upon to facilitate attachment. Intuition and sometimes instinct led pedagogy regardless of what approach was being implemented in the setting (i.e. HighScope, Montessori, etc). Despite not intentionally applying attachment theory in practice, all nine participants expressed how they felt they acted as a secure base (Bowlby, 1988) for the children. Whilst this was positive, there was also divergence on this issue, as one EYE felt that some children demanded more feelings of safety and security, and they were unable to provide this for fear of being seen devoting all their time to one child. This was reported by the participant as a negative practice which could attract criticism from other EYE in her setting. Three EYE positioned themselves as substitute parents for the children while they were in their care, with one of the three EYE expressing how she was equally as emotional when the children in her service were transitioning to leave her care.

In addition, both managers expressed how they often spend any spare time in the toddler room to remind themselves of the joy and passion they have for their job in general. This was their "what"

and their "why" (Hayes, 2007), and they did not fail to appreciate their importance of their role when it came to the children's well-being, or when it came to nurturing their development. Such findings support previous research exploring the impact of caregiver internal states in facilitating the well-being of young children (Dedeotardi & Davis, 2008; Fonagy et al., 2007). Yet as discussed by Brennan (2017), and also found in this programme of research, there is little support for this aspect of ELC work in the literature, and more research is needed to explore the role of emotions and intuition in caregiving professions.

7.3.3 Love

The most obvious finding to emerge from the analysis was that the main facilitator of attachment was love. This finding is in keeping with research conducted by Page, who referred to this concept as "professional love" (Page, 2017, pg. 2). In the IPA interviews, all nine participants told of their affection for the children, and a strong care ethic emerged towards the families and children attending the service. A strong sense of wonder and awe at the phenomenon of children's insatiable curiosity, and their rapid development, was at the heart of why they loved working with this age group.

This confirms that research on the internal emotional states of the adult (Fonagy et al., 2007), is clearly relevant to ELC settings. This is because love is associated with affectionate interactions, which in turn lead to quality environments that are built on responsive caregiving and sensitive attunement. This study can confirm that working with BTT children is undoubtedly associated with feelings of affection. This shows a need to be explicit about exactly that is meant by the word attachment.

7.3.4 Play with Meaning

A surprising finding was that five of the seven EYE talked about a common practice of "*leaving problems at the door*". These EYE shared that before going into the room to work with the children

they did a quick mental audit of their own feelings and mood, and adjusted these accordingly if necessary. This involved putting their own emotional needs aside, regardless of what was going on in their personal lives, in order to be at their emotional best and ensure that their mood was upbeat and positive for the children.

The main objective for the EYE was to maintain a fun atmosphere in the room. In this narrative, the EYE constructed a rich layered understanding of play as purposeful, pedagogical and deeply human. Through their words play was reclaimed from its societal image as something made light of, to a professional act of care, creativity and meaning-making. Within an IPA lens, their shared views reflected a belief in play, not just as a pedagogical investment, but also as the child's right.

Whilst this practice was positive, it calls into question the availability of support for the mental health of EYE. This finding was important to this programme of research because the mental health of the caregiver has always been considered a key driver of children's mental health (Weatherston 2001).

7.4 Section Four: Research Sub-Question 3:

How does contemporary attachment research and literature compare with the lived experience of attachment relationships with BTT children in ELC settings, and how can it co-exist with current practices?

7.4.1 Synopsis of the Findings

A comparison of the results of the findings with the contemporary extant literature on attachment research reveals that there are differences between the lived experience of attachment for participating EYE and ELC managers in the research. This was the single most striking observation to emerge from the data. In short, current practices of ELC settings in the present study do not utilise attachment theory, or contemporary attachment research as identified in international

contemporary attachment science literature. Overall, the main barriers to this was lack of knowledge amongst the EYE, and lack of resources for ELC managers that may help them address attachment barriers in their settings.

The study also identified that whilst EYE report perception sof paperwork as a burden, and behaviour management as major barriers to attachments with BTT children, attitudes and low occupational self-esteem were also identified as barriers. However, attitudes and low occupational self-esteem did not remain confined to professional identity alone, rather they permeated into their relational capacity.

Attachment Theory (Bowlby 1969) emphasises that sensitive, attuned, and consistent caregiving is foundational for attachments with infants and toddlers. However, when all nine participants discussed societal views of their occupation, they became irritated and defensive. This dissatisfaction has the potential to compromise their emotional availability, which is the key to attachment security (Gerhardt, 2015).

Two EYE with diminished occupational-esteem, struggled to fully project confidence, warmth, and stability in their stories of attachment interactions with the children. Instead, relational dynamics became overshadowed by feelings of frustration. Structural factors such as low professional recognition and status exerted an indirect influence on their relational environment. This was a concern as children are highly attuned to the emotional cues of adults, and any inconsistency in responsiveness even if unintended can affect the quality of the attachment relationship. Furthermore, this finding can be understood when interpreted through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological theory of human development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). The wider societal view that ELC is of low occupational standing, is undermining their occupational identity and also their self-esteem. This may ripple down to the micro-system (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), of caregiver-child interactions, potentially impacting the emotional security and attachment experiences of the the EYE and ultimately the children they want to nurture.

7.4.2 Interpretation of Findings

As mentioned in Chapter Four, the Literature Review, contemporary attachment literature can be understood as attachment science, as it moved to a more contemporary or modern perspective involving an understanding of attunement and Intersubjectivity and emotional development (Badenoch 2017; Cozolino, 2014, 2013; Payne-Bryson & Siegel 2012; Schore, 2016). This next section will discuss the findings under contemporary attachment science concepts.

7.4.3 Attunement and Intersubjectivity

An important finding was that all seven of the EYE answered that they had no academic understanding of attunement or intersubjectivity, nor did they express confidence in using attunement and emotion-regulating principles with regard to behaviour management strategies. Whilst all nine participants discussed knowing about the children's attachment development, and their relationship with them, they seemed unaware about other important attachment concepts related to adult-child interpersonal interactions, such as working role models (WRM), or the ability of the brain's capacity for neuroplasticity to improve attachment disorders (Thompson, 2006).

The results of this study indicate that whilst the seven EYE and two ELC managers were dedicated and compassionate individuals, they were without fundamental concepts about attachment or relational pedagogy such as knowledge of attunement or intersubjectivity. This finding has significant implications for understanding how attachment is operationalised in busy ELC settings, but the main disadvantage is that it is hard to see how these dynamic interactions could be implemented and prioritised in line with the new Aistear Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (Government of Ireland, 2024), and its aspirations for a slow relational pedagogy with BTT children. Additionally, if these concepts are not fully understood, research suggests this is associated with an increased risk of inconsistent, harmful, or simply absent presence of warm, attuned adult interactions (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004). Indeed, exposure to

inconsistent emotional responses has been shown to be related to adverse effects in lifelong patterns of behaviour and health due to the interaction between genetics and the environment in shaping early socio-emotional brain development (Davidson & McEwen, 2012; Hane et al., 2010).

BTT children and Early Intervention

Another finding was related to the area of Early Intervention. This was due to the exclusion at the time of the research interviews of BTT children from the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) programme. However, more recent policy and budgetary considerations were directed toward expanding the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) programme with regard to inclusion support for younger children. This is a welcome development, because attachment for BTT children is even more relevant where there are developmental concerns for the child (Duschinsky, 2025). Therefore, an audit of training content is warranted.

7.4.4 Expressing Interest in Early Brain Development and Attachment

With respect to the third research question, it was found that the EYE and ELC narratives could co-exist with contemporary attachment literature as all nine participants expressed an interest in finding out more about attachment, and a neuro-relational perspective of socioemotional development (Delahooke, 2019, 2017; Gold, 2018). This finding was interpreted from an interview question, where the nine participants were asked if they had received any training in early brain development, to which all nine participants answered no, but expressed a desire to know more about early brain development in response. This is similar to results reported by Diamond & Whitington (2015), and Rike et al., (2008), where levels of job satisfaction were found to be associated with professional instruction on early brain development. The researchers reported that when they instruct EYE on early brain development, the pride of EYE increases and a new sense of their significance is felt in line with understanding early brain development. The following passage

reflects their experiences where Rike et al. (2008) observed a distinct shift in teacher engagement during professional development sessions on early brain development.

> When we stress the importance of what they do — growing brains — we immediately see a difference in the demeanour of the teachers. Members of the audience look at us with more interest, listen carefully, make comments, take notes, and sit up a little straighter. They begin to take an active part in the workshop rather than portraying the attitude they are just there to get the continuing education hours they need. Once participants have said "We grow brains!" a few times and have digested that concept, one can almost see their self-image changing. It is a powerful phenomenon to observe (Rike et al., 2008 p.22).

Although such findings have been reported also in earlier research (Rike & Wynn, 2005), the present results are significant with regard to training, in at least two major respects. Firstly, as identified in the literature review, researchers in attachment science have written extensively about how attachment is considered an organiser of early brain development. Secondly, for young children, learning to regulate emotions is a process learned initially through the adult by role modelling emotional regulation (Iwakabe et al., 2023). This makes the role of the adult vital to include in EYE training in interpersonal neuroscience and attachment science in order to regulate the child's emotions and behaviour, until they can learn to regulate themselves. Hence, it could conceivably be hypothesised that training on the link between EYE-child attachment security, and the foundations of children's emotional and social development, could enhance EYE emotional availability.

All nine participants frequently described feelings of professional emotional exhaustion and a lack of recognition, pay and condition. However, these experiences did not negate their awareness of the importance of their relational role in children's lives. Rather, a notable tension emerged throughout the interviews between participant's experiences of a lack of recognition, pay and condition, and their articulation of the significance of their work.

For five of the participants, the interview process itself appeared to create a reflective space through which they further contemplated and verbalised the importance of their role in supporting children's early emotional experiences and relationships. Consequently, the sense of empowerment identified within the findings did not emerge from external validation, but from these participants own meaning-making (Smith et al., 2009), regarding the value and impact of their work with children. This tension may reflect a broader issue within the ELC sector whereby relational and emotional work is deeply valued by practitioners themselves while recognising the challenges at the same time.

7.4.5 Chapter Conclusion

Having reviewed the findings, it is evident that in the context of the present study more research is warranted with regard to time and perceptions of paperwork. Whilst all nine participants expressed warm positive feelings towards the children and their role, it was evident that it is their interpretation of policy regarding paperwork that affects their attachment relationships. Therefore, managers and Government have a significant role in promoting and supporting the emotional well-being and retention of EYE in the sector. Factors which require consideration include recognising that each experience between the child and the adult is unique, and it is more important to stay in the moment than rushing for the phone camera to capture an intersubjective moment between themselves and the child -a moment which, as reported by one EYE only means “the flow is broken.” (Jean).

Managers need support also, ensuring that policies work on the ground, and that training programmes meet the needs of EYE for awareness and knowledge of children’s need for responsive attuned adults is essential. However, responsibility for the content and emphasis of educator preparation programmes does not rest solely with managers. Bodies such as QQI and QAB also play a significant role in shaping curriculum frameworks, learning outcomes, and the extent to which

attachment science, relational pedagogy, and socioemotional development are explicitly foregrounded within educator training programmes. In addition, it is important that programmes convey to managers just how vital their role is, as in the context of this study, both managers emerged strongly as knowledgeable of attachment theory, but not of attachment science. This is important as managers can help EYE to support BTT children's attachment and subsequent social and emotional development.

In the context of the present study four out of the seven EYE were unfamiliar with seminal attachment research, and concepts of attunement and intersubjectivity found in contemporary attachment research did not feature in the personal lived experience of their relationships with the children for all seven EYE. Therefore, finding a place for ELC practice to co-exist with research literature on attachment science is a potential new field of curriculum research and training for EYE and EI research. This is because as documented in this thesis, the identification of educator presence is a critical dimension of relational pedagogy. Educator presence is an important avenue for future research at the intersection of curriculum development and Attachment Science. While Aistear, The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (Government of Ireland 2024), emphasises the importance of relationships, Attachment Science provides a theoretically and empirically grounded account of how attuned, responsive, and emotional availability adult's support children's socioemotional learning and development. Further exploration of these connections may contribute to a more nuanced understanding of relational pedagogy, and inform the preparation and ongoing professional development of EYE working with BTT children in the ELC sector in the Republic of Ireland.

7.5 Section Five: Research Limitations, Contribution, and Recommendations

7.5.1 Limitations of the Research

Having compared the results of the findings with the contemporary extant literature on attachment research, attention will now be directed towards limitations that should be considered in any wider interpretations of the research. This study offered an insight into how a sample of EYE and ELC managers operationalise attachment in ELC settings in the Republic of Ireland. Although the current study is based on a small sample of participants, the findings suggest that training needs to be updated to support EYE in areas of identity and emotional availability. However, being limited to seven EYE and two ELC managers, this study lacks generalisability, and the transferability of these results is subject to certain limitations.

This limitation means that the study findings need to be interpreted cautiously having regard to the research methods and methodology. This is because in IPA studies, the research does not seek to generalise, but rather to maintain the principle of sensitivity to context (Yardley, 2000). This means making sense of how the individual participant makes sense of their own lived experiences. As discussed by Smith et al., this requires "immersive and disciplined attention to the unfolding account of the participant" (2009, p.154). This is the double hermeneutic (Smith et al., 2009, 2022), and it continues throughout the analysis process. The double hermeneutic places the emphasis on understanding the individual case, and then developing group experiences from across individual case studies (Smith et al., 2022). Therefore, generalisability is not the aim of this research.

Additionally, with regard generalisability Smith et al., (2009), recommend that "good IPA is written carefully, making claims appropriate to the sample which has been analysed. Interpretations are presented as possible readings and general claims are offered cautiously" (Smith et al., 2009, p.

154). Therefore, the present study was subject to the methodological limitations that are associated with conducting IPA research.

Another limitation was that the sample was culturally representative of Irish EYE and ELC managers. This limitation relates to the nationality of the sample. All nine participants were drawn from ELC settings within the Republic of Ireland, and all were from Irish backgrounds. As attachment is considered a culturally mediated construct (Tronick, 2009), this similarity may limit the transferability of the findings by being culturally homogenous.

The study was also limited by the responses relating to attachment relationships with BTT children. Again staying in fidelity with IPA research, these were personal narratives, and were therefore potentially susceptible to recall bias.

7.5.2 Contribution of the Research to the Existing Body of Knowledge

Having discussed the findings, this next section demonstrates the contribution that the current programme of research has made to new knowledge in the areas of attachment. This programme of research was conceptualised, planned, implemented, analysed, and produced in a manner designed to explore any gaps in knowledge, practice, and attitudes towards BTT children in ELC pedagogy. The answerers from EYE and managers further extend current research literature by providing an important insight into how the dynamics of their relationships within the ELC context may affect the attachment and socioemotional development of BTT children. The findings from this study make several contributions to the current literature, which the following sections will set out.

The original contribution of this study lies in its conceptualisation of educator presence as a critical dimension of relational pedagogy. Although relational pedagogy is well established within ELC research literature, the findings demonstrate that the quality of pedagogical relationships is not only notable by the existence of relationships themselves, but by the capacity for emotional presence, attentiveness, attunement, and emotional availability in everyday interactions. By

making visible these often overlooked dimensions of relationships, this study extends existing understandings of relational pedagogy and offers a framework through which policy, training and practice can better support infant and toddler early learning and care. Furthermore, the study suggests that educator presence should be recognised as a pedagogical competence in its own right. The findings indicate that supporting BTT children requires more than procedural knowledge or curriculum implementation. Rather it requires educators to engage in relational, practice. Consequently, the study has implications for workforce preparation, professional development, and policy initiatives concerned with improving the quality of infant and toddler early care and education.

This research represented the experiences of a sample of EYE working with children in the birth-to-three (BTT) years of age. Consequently, this research has given voice to these EYE and ELC managers lived experience of attachment relationships with children of this age, identifying the barriers and facilitators that exist with regard to attachment relationships in Irish ELC settings.

The finding supports the need for an audit into training content, which is important for the updated Aistear Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (Government of Ireland, 2024) and for the implementation of a slow relational pedagogy in ELC settings.

Within the context of the present study, three of the nine participants experienced Tusla inspections as emotionally distressing, anxiety provoking, and at times, intimidating. While these findings are limited to the lived experiences of participants within this study, and cannot be generalised to the experience of all Tusla inspections, they none-the-less raise important questions regarding the emotional impact of regulation and inspection process is on EYE in ELC settings.

This work contributes to existing knowledge of attachment studies in the context of ELC settings by providing an account of EYE experiences which involved warm loving and close bonds between the EYE and BTT children.

This study establishes a qualitative framework for IPA studies in revealing the lived experience of individuals in matters that could be sensitive topics. The interpretative analysis of relationships undertaken here has extended our knowledge of attachment. This is because the empirical findings in this study provide a new understanding of the challenges that EYE face every day, which have the potential to derail their well-being and consequently the children's well-being also. This approach will prove useful in expanding the literature in the field of IPA research. The method used for this study may be applied to other EYE elsewhere in the world.

This study contributes to the debate concerning whether BTT receive early education or care in ELC settings. As can be seen, early learning is care, and early care is also learning for the BTT child. Therefore, the role of the EYE is unique in how it combines these constructs into one pedagogy.

This study also appears to be the first study to compare the attachment experiences of EYE to that of contemporary attachment literature. This adds to the growing body of attachment research and specifically clarifies the importance of including EYE in attachment studies.

The present study is also an empirical investigation into the impact on self-esteem of occupational titles and identity among EYE and ELC managers. Although this is not the first study in this area (see Moloney, 2010), it none-the-less highlights how the same issues still exist despite fifteen years between each study.

The contemporary attachment literature identified in this study further supports the idea that "childcare" is a worthy and noble occupation, and that there is no greater role than that of the EYE who work with BTT children. This corroborates the ideas of Rike et al., (2008), who suggest that "EYE need to look at their work in a different light — not just providing care, but significantly affecting children's brain development" (2008, p.22).

These findings will be of broad use to the educational and scientific communities because the issues identified assists in an understanding of the role of EYE in attachment in education.

7.5.3 Establishing a Field of Research for Early Intervention and Early Education

It was planned from the beginning of this programme of research to explore the availability of and access to Early Intervention therapies for BTT children in ELC settings. Within an Irish context, and to the best of the researcher knowledge, this is the first thesis of substantial research which examines the association between attachment and early brain development, and amalgamated the research to create a new field of Intervention Science. This field of research lies at the intersection of developmental psychology and developmental neuroscience, for the use and benefit of early intervention programmes and teacher training.

7.5.4 Implications and Suggestions for Future Research

Although the findings should be interpreted with consideration to the methodology, this study has many strengths. These findings contribute in several ways to recommendations, and provide a basis for further research. The next section discusses implications and suggestions for future research

The current programme of research has implications for the implementation of a slow relational pedagogy in line with the updating of the Aistear Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (Government of Ireland, 2024). It also has implications for future research related to the area of attachment, within a variety of context (e.g., early years' education, play therapy approaches and Early Intervention Programmes) and across different disciplines (e.g., social science, psychology, nursing, and child psychotherapy).

The issue regarding EYE suspecting when BTT children are not reaching developmental milestones is not isolated to ELC settings. This is a societal issue, with consequences for the children, families and society at large. The role of EYE and their experience of spotting a child with special educational needs early, has relevance at a policy and societal level. Future research could explore ways to allow

EYE to contribute their observations as they hold a pivotal position in noticing and observing children on a daily basis.

While this study did not interview EYE from culturally diverse backgrounds, future research could explore how culture affects EYE lived experience of attachment perspectives with regard to different cultures. As highlighted by Tronick (2007), different cultures view attachment differently. Therefore, a qualitative case study of more ELC services would help to effectively identify strategies for building attachment relationships, especially where there are cross-cultural and linguistically different nationalities, as is the case in most ELC settings in the Republic of Ireland today.

In terms of methodological and theoretical issues, it is clear that when this topic had been researched previously, the focus tended to be on children's attachment style, rather than on the experience of attachment from an adult's perspective. The use of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as both method and methodology demonstrates that this is a very suitable approach to take in attachment research. However, as a novice IPA researcher, the interview questions did not seek to obtain the personal attachment styles of the EYE. Whilst one EYE revealed her own attachment history of her volition, others did not. Therefore, future research could explore in more depth if EYE attachment styles influence their lived experience of attachment relationships with the children in ELC settings. This would contribute to future studies in the field of attachment research with implications for early education research.

7.5.5 Recommendations for Policy and Practice

Having discussed the implications and suggestions for future research, the current programme of research has recommendations for policy and practice. The findings of this study contribute six recommendations to inspire the adoption of attachment science for a BTT pedagogy in ELC practice in the Republic of Ireland as follows:

1) In order to fully encourage and promote the awareness of attachment, changes need to be addressed at service level and training level for both EYE and ELC managers.

2) An audit of training content is needed for EYE and ELC managers in contemporary attachment research and early brain development, with an emphasis on the science of early childhood development.

3) Improve ELC policy to facilitate EYE to be able to spend more time with the children, forming important connections and building strong bonds and relationships. Ensure that paperwork and record keeping are separate from, and not embedded into, the children's daily routines.

4) Ensure adherence to measures regarding Budget 2026 for admission to the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) for BTT children.

5) Mentoring support, which specifically attends to the emotional well-being of the EYE is urgently required.

6) Whilst research on BTT children's emotional development from neuroscience and child psychotherapy have brought Attachment Theory into the 21st century, EYE and ELC managers do not have access to this research. More research on this topic needs to be undertaken.

7) The findings further suggest that attachment informed practise cannot be sustained solely through individual educator knowledge but also requires organisational systemic support. Therefore, consideration should also be given to workforce conditions, relational continuity, managerial support, and workload pressures all of which may influence the emotional availability and relational capacity of the educator. In this sense the integration of contemporary attachment science within ELC practice requires not only curricular audit, but a broader commitment to supporting relationally responsive education within the ELC sector.

8.) ELC for BTT children involves a lot of caregiving tasks, and EYE may find it more challenging to work with this cohort if this aspect of their work is overlooked by Government and parents. Hence,

it could conceivably be hypothesised that a way to promote and facilitate further attachment relationships with BTT children, would be to raise awareness amongst Government and parents, and educating them on the importance of the role EYE in the attachment and socioemotional well-being of BTT children. This may also be a way to promote the pride of EYE in the care and education of BTT children in the ELC setting.

9.) A need for more resources for managers was found in the context of the study, so that they can provide the environments in which attachment relationships can thrive.

7.6 Section Six: IPA Researcher and Reflexivity

Brooks and Wearden (2006) point out how IPA explicitly recognises the interpretative aspect of the methodology, and advises researchers to address this issue by providing reflections on the process. Additionally, as discussed by Olmos-Vega et al., (2022), engaging in reflexivity while conducting and disseminating qualitative research is an important process. With reference to this, the following section is a reflection on the researcher's learning in the dynamic process of conducting qualitative research through IPA. Olmos-Vega et al., (2022) also contend that framing reflexivity as solely acknowledging researcher influence is a weak conceptualisation of reflexivity, and that acknowledgment alone "does nothing to elucidate the effect of that influence on the data, participants, context, or researcher" (Olmos-Vega et al., 2022, p.242).

In reframing reflexivity, Olmos-Vega et al., (2022) propose researcher reflexivity as a means of benefiting from the researcher's knowledge and identity. Among the suggestions they propose, reflective writing involves the researcher writing freely about their background, documenting life experiences that might influence the research. This researcher's positionality was documented in Chapter One Introduction (Section 1.12). However, a second suggestion proposed by Olmos-Vega et al., (2022) is for the researcher to document their reactions to the participant's narratives and analyse their reactions.

Therefore, taking this advice, alongside the researcher's positionality (Chapter One, Section 1.12), Appendix 11, contains the researcher's thoughts as she analysed the participant's transcripts, as advised by Smith et al., (2022). This exercise was employed to ensure as much as possible that all aspects of reflexivity were embedded into the research process as a continuous activity, in order to ensure insightful and reflective decision-making in the research (Finlay, 2003). However, what follows next is a reflection on conducting IPA research and the issues that were encountered.

7.6.1 The Question of How Many Questions

The question of how many questions to ask came up in determining the interview questions. This was also reviewed as a result of conducting the pilot interview. Originally, the research study started out with forty interview questions. This was found to be too many, and forty was reduced by a process of incorporating some questions into other questions. The reason for merging similar questions was to streamline the interview process (Ismail et al., 2018). This resulted in fifteen questions for the interview schedule.

During the interviews, despite trying to avoid this happening, the researcher found that some questions elicited a yes or no answer from participants, while other questions confused some participants if they were not aware of the subject matter relating to Bowlby's (1969) Attachment Theory. Questions that elicited a yes/no answer were eliminated in order to encourage rich data (Roberts, 2020). From an IPA approach, according to Smith et al., (2022), this is normal and can be expected when conducting IPA interview. Eliminating questions that elicited a yes/no answer were meant that the participant's answers then became more nuanced, rich, and more in line with the concept of "gems" (Smith et al., 2009).

7.6.2 Listening Skills

The pilot interview provided a place for the researcher to practice listening skills, learning how to insert appropriate pauses and shutting out distractions. Most importantly, she learned how not to

think about the next question on her list, but instead focus on listening to the research participants answer. This was a valuable transferrable and self-awareness skill to learn as according to Ekhard Tolle, too much thinking can interfere with true listening and hearing (Tolle, 2004).

7.6.3 Length of Interview Questions

Sometimes it can be natural to ask for two-part answers from one question. One of this researchers asked two questions in one, and she learned that this is best avoided. This researcher noted that when this happened, the research participant was trying to answer the first part of the question, while their mind was trying to hold onto and think of the answer to the second part of the question. This interrupted their flow and chain of thought. Consequently, this researcher learned that one question and one answer at a time is quite enough. Compared with traditional phenomenological research questions, IPA questions are more as a guide in direction (Smith et al., 2022).

7.6.4 Language of Interview Questions

Another area that came up for this researcher was the use of everyday language. For example, one of the interview question asked; “What role does theory play in your attachment relationships with the children?” Sometimes when this question was asked, it wrong-footed some of the participants. On reflection afterwards, and thinking about why this was happening, the researcher reviewed the language used in the question. By taking reflexive action (Finlay, 2003), and changing the wording, a noticeable change occurred in the participants. This very slight re-wording of the language was a minor change, however it made a big difference in the richness of the answers received. The difference was that asking about attachment practices was ambiguous and too broad, as attachment could mean different things to different people. Asking “what role” does attachment play also assumed it played a role at all, and this assumption threw some of the participant off their storyline. In response, they were forced to produce an answer because they wanted to answer the

question, but some could not, because the question was too broad or confusing to them. This researcher quickly learned that it was a good idea to keep IPA questions personal, to write questions that prompted the lived experience. One way of moderating this was to ensure that participants answer using the word "I" because participants are the central character in IPA research. It is in the participants, not in direct questioning, where the essence of the experience lives (Smith et al., 2009).

7.6.5 IPA Interview as Relational Triangle

This researcher found it useful to visualise the IPA interview as a relationship triangle. The researcher, the participant and the interview questions made a dynamic trio, with each occupying its own space and place in the research. It can mean trouble if the researcher occupies the space of the participant, or if the interview questions occupy the space of the researcher, or vice versa. This researcher learned that she must get out of the participant's way and allow their answers to naturally move into place on the triangle. As pointed out by Miller, Chan and Farmer (2018), participants can experience the same event or phenomenon of interest, but interpret it very differently. This is why IPA is more concerned with the "how" than the "what" of a given phenomenon (Miller et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2009).

For the novice IPA researcher, there can be an overt tendency in the beginning to try to encourage the research participants to talk. This is understandable because the research findings would say nothing if the participants had not replied, or replied with only yes or no answers. The urge to come up with a list of questions is tempting. However, as counter intuitive as it may seem, this researcher found this unhelpful and therefore should be avoided. Instead, this researcher found that interview questions should be confined to areas of interest. This is because research participants will always try to answer all the questions the researcher asks.

In the beginning, this researcher posed too many questions. The tendency for the participant was to quicken the pace, and shorten their answers as a result. As the answers became shorter, this researcher, in an effort to gain rich data, asked the next question. This soon became a dynamic, where the participants' answers became more superficial as they very quickly sensed there may be a lot of questions to get through in the time available.

This researcher soon discovered that in IPA, it is the job of the researcher to navigate this dynamic, and slow the pace between the questions, giving participants a sense that there is time for reflection. This researcher drew the conclusion that it is better to ask fewer questions, than too many, because the time in between questions is where some of the best reflections can take place.

Farooq & De Villiers (2017), offer advice on using the telephone as a data collection tool, including using the interview questions in a flexible manner, to encourage participants with phrases such as "it's okay" and "please take your time". They also advise that after the interview the researcher thinks about ways of improving, for instance, asking questions in a different tone of voice, and the pace of the interview.

This last point is particularly important because in an IPA interview, time for reflection is essential, and very much required by the participant to mentally process the question and formulate their response. In the micro-minutes after the question is put to them, they are trying to think of examples that illustrate their experience, and to call on memory about how they felt at the time. This is a cognitive process, and as mentioned this cognition can be overshadowed by volumes of questions which leave little space for processing.

Interpersonal skills used in face-to-face interviewing, such as adopting an open and neutral body language, nodding, smiling, showing genuine interest and attentive listening, are more difficult to convey during a telephone interview. Instead, the skills of close listening, asking inquisitive questions, asking to return to a topic because of something very important that was said by the participant, and pausing to give the participant time to recognise that they are indeed being listened

to, are more appropriate skills. The sensitivity of the telephone interviewer is discussed by a number of researchers, and a technique was drawn from the literature.

7.6.6 The Interview Rhythm

As discussed, telephone interviews are conducted without being able to see the participant's facial expressions, and without them being able to see the researcher's facial expressions. For this reason, rhythm is an important dynamic of IPA research. Rhythm is where the researcher circles back in reverse order by topic (Smith et al., 2009), for example, asking a question which is related to the previous topic. Following this, the next question circles back to the second or middle topic, and eventually the last question circles back to the first answer. The researcher found the advice of Smith et al., which stated "…it can sometimes be helpful to respond by stating that you have heard the key things they have said and telling them that you would like to go back to each in turn" (2009, p. 62), to be very helpful in achieving this. Asking a participant to come back to something they had said earlier showed real interest, and conveyed the clear message that they had been listened to and understood. This technique of two steps forward, and one step back created a dance or a rhythm, which was especially helpful in creating a responsive, meaning-making dynamic which according to Smith et al., (2022) is the hallmark of quality IPA.

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Appendix 1: Early Brain Development

Introduction

The focus of this section is on neurodevelopmental research. Neurodevelopmental research can be understood as the study of the neurobiological, developmental, and genetic development of the brain and nervous system. The centrality of neurodevelopment for this study is the wider more contemporary literature on attachment science. There is consensus in the field of present-day attachment research that the birth to three (BTT) years of age is an important time for the early developing brain and nervous system. Therefore, Section One is a preface to the literature on attachment which follows in Section Two of this Chapter.

A brief overview of early brain development is presented through a translational research lens. Translational Research (TR) is a field dedicated to translating information or knowledge, that is created in one area and applied to another (Pomeroy & Sanfilippo, 2015). According to the National Institutes of Health (NIH), TR is defined as research which is aimed at enhancing the adoption of best practices (NIH, 2023). The goal of translational research is to promote transdisciplinary approaches and collaboration among researchers, to identify and support best practices (Crosnoe, 2012). Consistent with Crosnoe (2012), TR provides this programme of attachment research with a vehicle to translate developmental neuroscience into

educational research for early education, policy, practice, and early intervention. The reason why translating developmental neuroscience is necessary for this programme of research is twofold. Firstly, the neurobiology of attachment is at the cutting edge of current attachment research to date and secondly, the link between attachment and early brain development has gained considerable attention in attachment literature in the last two decades.

Therefore, this overview is important in addressing the “a priori” research question, which asks; what are the relational and environmental factors which influence attachment processes and impact and socioemotional development in children aged birth-to-three? This is in order to acknowledge new thinking on the link between attachment and early brain development, based on relational and environmental factors. This is important to the broader research on attachment.

Consequently, the focus of this section is on a synopsis of literature in the area of early neurodevelopment to set out the principles and sequence of brain architecture. This provides a greater view to evaluate the usefulness of this broader knowledge base in addressing the a priori research question. In addition, knowledge of early neurodevelopment is a prerequisite for developing a lexis of concepts and ideas related to contemporary attachment research. To begin, this section takes a look at stages in early brain development.

Stages of Brain Development Neural Tube Construction

As discussed at the beginning of this Chapter, neurodevelopment can be understood as the study of early brain and nervous system development.

This process begins within a few hours after conception, with a single-cell zygote making the journey towards cell division and growth. This early stage called mitosis, enables the zygote to divide first into two cells, then four, eight, sixteen and so on.

When cell division reaches eight in number, the cells begin to differentiate and take on certain characteristics, which will determine the type of cells they will eventually become (Nelson, 2000). Shortly after conception the neural tube begins to develop, which will eventually form the brain stem, and central and autonomic nervous system (Nelson, 2000).

The construction of the neural tube uses cells that originally lined a flat single layer of cells, called the neural plate (Kandel, 2013), before migrating around into the cylindrical structure that is the neural tube. Some of the cells within this lining will get connected to one another, and others will get connected to glial fibres (Jessell & Sanes, 2013).

The newly formed neurons, or neuroblasts (baby neurons), climb onto the glial fibres, and migrate either outwardly or sideways, along the radial glial fibre length. These baby neurons are then pulled up through the continuing process of cell migration, forming six layers of the cortex, in response radial migration (Jessell & Sanes, 2000). When radial migration is complete, the basic structure of the neural tube is now formed. The reason why this is important to this review is because these structures will have begun taking place as early as day twenty-four of the gestational period (Jessell & Sanes, 2000).

Cell Migration

How the brain organises and stores information from the environment is a complex process? In order to create the various structures and surfaces of the brain, such as sulci (the grooves), and gyri (the ridges), a process referred to as radial migration must first takes place (Jessell & Sanes, 2000). This stage in prenatal brain development builds the actual cerebral cortex, the main area that neurons must travel to (Kandel, 2013). Early brain development is a process of cell division and cell connection in a sequence which starts from the bottom up, and from the back to the front (Siegel, 2012). This is an important principle in early neurodevelopment, because connections at each level are only as good as the previous level (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). That is why early brain development is important to this study, as we review the neurobiological underpinnings of what will soon become the foundation for the connections that support attachment and socioemotional development. Cell migration is also an important event, and that is relevant to this review. This is because cell migration explains how neurons are positioned correctly to form functional brain regions, ensuring proper brain organisation and connectivity.

Foetal Stage

Increasingly more complex neural networks get built on simpler previously constructed circuits (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2007). Already by about the 40th day of gestation, the neurons have found their destination, and all six layers of the cortex have been formed (Kandel, 2013). So too has columns of cells, because throughout this process, cells were continually migrating and traversing upwards through these layers (Sweeney, 2009). In pregnancy, the third week after conception is the end of

the gestational period, and the start of the embryonic period. This stage plays an important role as the embryonic brain will soon become a foetus. By eight weeks, the prenatal brain continues its rapid development into the foetal period. The neural tube, spinal cord, and nervous system continue to form, so that by the end of the first trimester of pregnancy, the central nervous system has already become responsive, and reflexes begin to be seen as the foetus makes movement and reflex responses (Einspieler et al., 2021). The foetal stage is important to this review due to the rapid growth and differentiation of the brain during this time, including the formation of regions and sensory systems that are critical for all future cognitive and physical abilities (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2014).

Myelination

The second trimester is a time when the prenatal brain starts to mature faster. It continues to increase in size and structure, becoming more sophisticated in its ability to direct bodily functions with continued development of the brain stem and hindbrain, an area which will come to dominate heart rate and blood pressure. By the end of the second trimester, the nervous system is sufficiently developed to enable sucking, swallowing, kicks, and startling at loud noises outside the womb, to be detected by the baby.

At the start of the final trimester, dendrites and axons go through another rapid and substantial increase (Sweeney, 2009). The last phase in prenatal brain development is marked via an important process called myelination. Myelin is a protein produced by glial cells. It consists of 70% fat and 30% protein, with a high concentration of cholesterol and other fatty acids, which

make up its plasma coating (Schwartz and Westbrook, 2000). This fatty lining wraps itself around axons to form as an insulator and conductor of an electrical impulse, or brain signal, known as an action potential (Sapolsky, 2018).

Myelination is very important to pre and postnatal brain development, and therefore to this research also. This is because its role is to speed conduction and transmission of neural signalling speeds, enabling exchanges of information about the environment and behavioural responses (Sapolsky, 2018). The reason why this process is important to the current programme of research this because as mentioned, it is a widely held belief that even before birth, babies in the womb can hear sounds such as music, and react to noise (Craighero, 2024). This ability is aided by myelin, and it shows that cognitive development, learning, and memory are already active and ongoing, even from the very earliest stages.

This is important because myelination is an important feature of early brain development and behaviour as it continues throughout the lifespan (LeDoux, 1998). Myelination. Myelination will be taken up again in a discussion on learning in a later Chapter. As with most factors in child development, myelination is susceptible to damage, particularly childhood stress. A discussion on myelination in early brain development is necessary and relevant because of the importance of insulating neurons for efficient communication which is essential for motor and cognitive skill development.

Neurons, Axons and Dendrites

How the brain receives and communicates information from the environment is a many stranded process. This section covers the interplay

between genetic, environmental and nutritional factors that shape brain development and help identify risk and protective factors.

Making Connections

Receiving and sending signals of communication begins in response to environmental stimuli which excite the aforementioned and already present brain cells, or neurons, to make connections. Creating connections and communication between and across the various brain regions creates neural circuits which allow for stronger connections to be made right across areas of the brain which are structurally further apart (Kuhl, 2013). Brain cells, or neurons, are made up of axons and dendrites. Axons extend out from the neuron, becoming the conducting unit for sending signals to other neurons, whereas dendrites receive signals coming in from the axon of another neuron (Kandel, 2000). Each neuron is estimated to have at least 10,000 synapses (Zero to Three, 2025), which equates to thousands of points of contact to other neurons (Siegel, 2012). The synapse lies between these structures (Bear, Connors & Paradiso, 2016), and this is the point at which neurons communicate by exchanging chemical messages.

This is an important point in neurodevelopment, because as Kuhl (2013) points out, it is the neural connections that matter most. Without these connections, information and knowledge would stay within that particular region of the brain, unable to connect up with other regions, leading to a lack of information exchange (Kuhl, 2013), and integration (Siegel, 2012). This is also an important and relevant point for early educators who work with BTT children, children with special educational needs/disabilities (SEN/D), and children with challenging behaviours. This is because, expectations of

children's behaviour are one of the behavioural and environmental factors which influence socioemotional learning and attachment development in children aged birth-to-three. If information cannot be relayed by neural networks to all regions, then the foundations of emotional regulation required to regulate behaviour is not available to the child (Delahooke, 2019). Therefore, what looks like a challenging behaviour can ensue, when in fact it is stimuli from the environment that may be overwhelming the child's ability to emotionally regulate.

Glial Cells

Two main classes of brain cells have been identified in the nervous system, nerve cells (neurons) and glial cells (glia) (Kandel, 2013; Nelson, 2000). Schwartz & Westbrook (2000) identified different types of neurons, however differentiating between different neurons is outside the scope of this brief overview, but glial cells are important and relevant to the review. This is because glial cells surround and provide numerous supports for neurons in various forms, ranging from housekeeping to promoting efficient signalling between neurons (Bear, Connors & Paradiso, 2016). They also provide the developing brain with structure and insulate synaptic connections from each other, while preventing some toxic substances from crossing over the blood-brain barrier (Kandel, 2013). The extending axons of one neuron, and the receiving dendrites of another, in order to facilitate communication, which the next section will discuss. Glial cells are important to include in this review

because this highlights their role om supporting neurons facilitating synaptic connections and maintaining brain health during development.

How Neural Networks Connect and Communicate

As discussed, development of the brain structures take place at a rapid pace. This section explains the rapid formation of connections between neurons, which are important to this study because these connections are foundational for sensory processing learning and memory.

By the time the child reaches their second birthday, the brain has doubled in size, and by age three, it has already grown to 80% of the volume it will ultimately have as an adult brain (Bullins, Jha, Knickmeyer, & Gilmore, 2017; Society for Neuroscience, 2018). This rapid growth is enabled by communication, which is achieved through a myriad of information superhighways, called neural networks (Society for Neuroscience, 2018). Neural networks are pathways made of neurons which connect, transmit and receive communication from other neurons (Siegel, 2012). Information from the environment sparks one neuron to activate, which in turn activates other neurons either in an excitatory upward direction, or in an inhibitory downward direction (Siegel, 2012). These signals are communicated at synapse junctions which, as set out in the previous section, is how information flows from one neuron to the next.

The reason why this is important to this review is because rapid brain growth involving cortical volume, structure, and connectivity, is already in place by end of the second year, and these are built on the already formed foundations of brain circuitry discussed previously. These foundations are created in response to messages in the form of neurohormones and

neurotransmitters (Society for Neuroscience, 2018), which the next section will discuss.

Neurohormones

As discussed, neural firing is how neurons communicate messages with one another. Repeated communication between neurons form neural pathways, and along these pathways messages of information are sent via neurohormones. Neurohormones are chemical signals and messages sent when a neuron fires (Sapolsky, 2018). Depending on the actual experience, some neurohormones are known to be emotionally rewarding. This is because they facilitate positive emotions through feelings of safety, attachment, and bonding, in response to positive social interactions with others (Nelson & Panksepp, 1989). These hormones are naturally occurring opioid neuropeptides which contain chemicals known as enkephalins and endorphins (Nelson & Panksepp, 1989), also commonly known as 'feel-good' hormones.

In early childhood social interactions which are positive and emotionally nurturing experiences, induce the release of these neurohormones (Meaney & Szyf, 2005). This in turn triggers physical growth in the developing brain (Meaney & Szyf, 2005). Again with relevance to this research, this is important because as can be seen, changes to the neuronal structure of the brain activated by experience-dependent mechanisms of growth are again, already well underway. This is the process of neuroplasticity, a construct that will be covered in more detail in a later Chapter.

Neurohormones are important to this review because they play a role in regulating brain development, and exert an influence on early brain

development through maternal stress. The next section reviews how experiences become embedded and exchanged with regard to the environment.

Neural Firing

The different components of positive social experiences, say for example, an adult smiling during a social interaction, causes different neurons to fire repeatedly together. This firing is the establishment of early brain activity. This section explores what is happening at a social level to influence what is happening at a neural pathway level.

The establishment of early brain activity and functional circuits are essential for sensory and motor development. Creating an excitatory response and forming a connection between those two events, i.e. human social interactions, and warm, positive, friendly faces (Schore, 2016) the human brain making a connection. Neural firing is the way in which neurons “talk” to one another, by way of a response to any stimuli from the environment (LeDoux, 1998).

Repetition of an experience creates repeated neural firing, and a neural pathway is created in response to that particular experience (LeDoux, 1998). However, it is only through repetition of neural firing that experiences can manifest as neural pathways (Siegel, 2012). This aspect of early brain development also has relevance to this review because these processes, which are happening at a neural level, make positive emotional experiences and social interactions, a neurobiological necessity for healthy brain development. This is an important point and is very relevant to the role of the EYE, within the context of a slow relational pedagogy (French, 2019),

because as discussed by Degotardi, & Davis (2008) and French (2019) “the quality of children’s experiences matter” (French, 2019, p. 5). Therefore, EYE’s understanding and sharing of this information is vital to supporting a slow relational pedagogy. This understanding may help EYE manage their expectations of toddlers behaviour, by understanding that emotional regulation skills come with the experience of co-regulation with the adult (Whitebook, 2019).

Neural Pruning and Synaptogenesis

While the simple mechanism underlining all brain function is neuron-to-neuron communication, the mechanism that enables communication is known as synaptogenesis (Kolb, 2010). This is the process of neural pruning. In synaptogenesis two actions control the connections. Firstly, repeated events strengthen connections in response to the environment, and secondly, unused connections are pruned away. This too is important to this research because strong neural connections produced in response to the environment, build brain networks which support learning, memory, and cognitive abilities (Kolb, 2010). Therefore, the social experiences young children have with others, mediate these connections. However, an overabundance of connections between neurons can impair function, so pruning of connections is necessary.

Synaptic pruning is the scientific term given to the process of eliminating unused neural network connections, and the eradication of connections which are literally ‘pruned’ if not frequently utilised (Kolb, 2010; Society for Neuroscience, 2018). The brain refines the connections which are fired more often, and this makes the system efficient by improving the structure, nature,

and quality of the brain's neural architecture (Society for Neuroscience, 2018). Consequently, neurons which fire together do not get pruned away (Siegel, 2012). This is also relevant to note because the current theoretical and empirical view is that caregiving relationships and adult-child interactions are purported to shape these neurological and psychological internal foundations (Coan, 2016; Schore, 2016, 2003b). This proliferation and control of synaptic circuits provides an indication as to how the brain is shaped by experience, and therefore the by environment. Thus, understanding synaptogenesis is fundamental to early years' educators, helping them to establish and strengthen brain connectivity and enable the skills children need to succeed.

Summary

The focus of this section was on early neurodevelopment. As discussed here, neurodevelopment research is about early brain development, with genes laying the instructions for how cells will differentiate, migrate, and form structures, such as the neural tube, and other brain regions. As explored, the central argument in the literature is regarding understanding development of the nervous system. This is important because this structure will inform every aspect of the child's thinking, feeling, cognition, and health to come. In neurodevelopment this process happens at a rapid pace with the brain making connections between neurons, and between brain regions so that information can cross from one area to another. As can be seen, early brain development is an important time for laying the foundations for connections that help build strong brain architecture. This becomes the foundation for higher-order socioemotional and cognitive skills to develop later, which will

help the child adjust to the outside world, and respond to human interaction. The reason why this is important to this review is because the research on early brain development has fundamental significance for Early Learning and Care (ELC) staff, particularly infant/toddler teachers in their work with families and children. These developments influence the child's brain and biological trajectories, yet this is a hidden period in child development, which the training of early years' educators does not include.

Having reviewed the sequence of structures important for prenatal brain development, the next section looks at postnatal brain development. This is to introduce and situate this research within the wider literature on the development of the social brain, and the effects of stress or neglect on attachment and early socioemotional development.

Different Areas of the Brain

This section briefly sets out the regional areas and associated functions on what is currently known about brain development, continuing the review into the principles of early brain growth for SEL development, and attachment in BTT children. Early connections which commence at the back of the brain initially settle in an area known as the hindbrain. The travelling neurons within this structure form the second-largest part of the brain, the cerebellum. This area carries out a variety of important tasks, and contains over half the brain's neurons for functions such as spatial awareness and perception of where the body is in space (Society for Neuroscience, 2018). This area is involved in development of gross motor skills, movement and learning new motor skills (Sweeney, 2009). It also houses the pons and medulla oblongata, which when taken together, make up the brainstem

(Society for Neuroscience, 2018). The brainstem, part of the primitive mammalian brain, controls breathing and posture and carries connecting nerve pathways from the brain to the spinal cord (Sweeney, 2009). The mammalian brain is an important part of this review, as this is the area which is said to house the limbic system. The limbic system is considered our emotion-control centre, and regarded as the seat of emotional development (Le Doux, 1998). Development of the limbic system takes place over time, where the environment significantly influences early emotional well-being through social interaction with adults. This area is important, and will be discussed in terms of the research on early emotional development later in the Chapter.

The midbrain or middle section of the brain sits on top of the hindbrain. This area is said to coordinate reflexes in response to sensory information (Swanson, 2008). Other regions of the midbrain control fine motor body movements by helping to balance sensory information coming in, with perception of the environment (Society for Neuroscience, 2018). The third frontal section of the brain makes up the forebrain. This area contains the cerebrum, which is the largest part of the brain (Society for Neuroscience, 2018). Covering the cerebrum is the cerebral cortex, this is made up of four principal lobes, the frontal lobe, the temporal lobe, the parietal lobe, and the occipital lobe (Kandel, 2000). The occipital lobe is where visual information and visual understanding are processed (Society for Neuroscience, 2018). As mentioned, vision at birth develops rapidly, but is primitive in the early days. Estimates regard the distance a new-born can see is equal to the length between the adult's forearm and face, which is considered the perfect distance for gazing (Hofsten & Rosander, 2018).

Immediately in front of the occipital lobes are the parietal lobes on either side. This area is involved in assimilating sensory information from the environment with bodily states, including the integration and processing of information from the skin, with visual information (Kandel, 2000). The temporal lobe is associated with auditory processing, language recognition and memory. In the early developing brain, this is the area important for language development. This area has particular relevance to this research as knowledge of supporting language development in early childhood development is a crucial aspect of early education, because language development is a vital lifelong skill, particularly for SEL well-being (Kuhl, 2013).

The left and right temporal lobes connect via the anterior commissure, which transmits signals between these areas within both hemispheres (Swanson, 2008). This is an important connection because it correlates information with the opposite area on the other side, assimilating it in the parietal lobe with sensory information coming from the senses (Swanson, 2008). Together, these regions organise and transmit a functional integrated account of the social environment. This too is important to the early educator for consideration of the child's level of understanding, an important factor for also understanding child behaviour.

The prefrontal cortex is the last part of the brain to develop, and is not considered mature until around the age of about twenty-five years. In early childhood brain development, the frontal lobe, located at the very front of the brain, is responsible for the further integration of information (Kuhl, 2013). Speech, memory, and emotion are processed within this region, which

also houses the prefrontal cortex (Swanson, 2008). The prefrontal cortex oversees cognitive skills, such as planning, thinking, problem-solving and processing of information (Society for Neuroscience, 2018). These skills are referred to as executive function skills, and they play a major role in the development of skills for learning (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2011). Knowledge of executive function skills is necessary for EYE as these skills develop rapidly in the early years. The reason for this is because coordinating and directing regulatory processes in the area of planning, focusing attention, problem solving and inhibiting behaviour which may be inappropriate, are vital to success in the early education setting for children to make and keep friends. While the brain organises itself into the various brain regions, the influence is seen through their impact on abilities such as language, movement and cognition. However, none of this hold meaning unless it is

The Critical Role of the Adult

Although it is recognised by researchers that brain development takes place over a prolonged period across the lifespan, this section is important because it stresses the importance of a nurturing environment with proper attunement, and protection from stress.

The foundational structures of emotional and behavioural development are laid in the early years, and development continues within an environment of relationships, which connect and mature these neural structures (Lebedeva, 2015). As development continues, the brain forms new connections in response to stimuli. Hebb is famous for having remarked that neurons which fire together, wire together (Hebb, 1949). This is because as neurons fire

together in response to stimuli, they create new pathways of learning and association, transforming what was once the embryonic neural plate into a complex, and still developing human mind. This is made possible only because neural myelination happens in response to the recurrence and repetition of an experience (Siegel, 2012). The relevance of this information to this research is because this development takes place at a time when the mother may not realise she is pregnant, and so much of what happens during early brain development is influenced by the child's wider bioecological system (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006), including the set-points for stress reactivity (Nugent, 2015; Schwab and Rakers, 2022), and socioemotional learning (SEL) (Spangler et al., 2009). Again, this information is important to EYE, who come into contact with pregnant and new mothers every day and are part of the wider bioecological system as discussed in Chapter Three. Therefore, understanding and sharing this knowledge is vital to their role in supporting young mothers.

Summary

As discussed, neurodevelopment is the formation and migration of cells in brain development. and the influence of the environment on development. Explored here were the central ideas pertaining to early neurodevelopment, such as the sequence of early brain development and the basic principles of early brain growth, i.e. posterior to anterior and bottom-up maturation. These principles are important because they illustrate that not all areas of the brain develop at the same time, nor in response to the same mechanisms.

Healthy brain development takes place in tandem with the social environment. Social interactions are essential in order for the developing

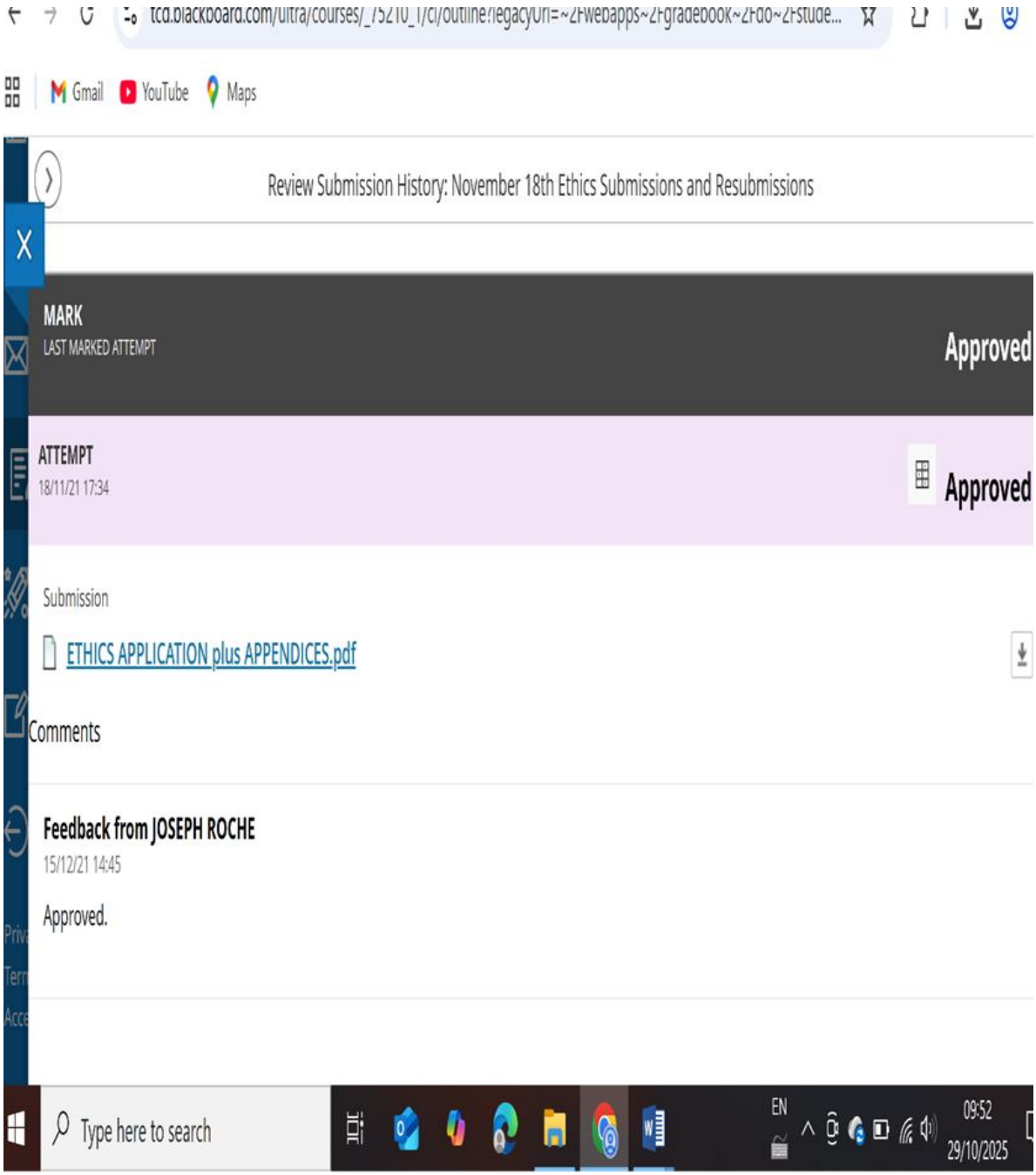
brain to build an understanding of the social world. This information is significant in the development of attachment and socioemotional development in BTT children. These topics collectively provide a comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms and factors shaping early brain development and paving the way for effective early interventions and early learning and care practices. By setting out the regional areas and associated functions with the basic principles of brain growth, Section One has contributed to the a priori question which seeks the developmental processes of attachment, and the behavioural and environmental factors which influence these processes, and impact socioemotional learning and development in children aged birth-to-three. This helps draw conclusions on the relevance of neurodevelopment for addressing the priori research question to benefit the research, and these are outlined next.

Conclusion

The research on early brain development is relevant to the literature review on attachment because it is important to set out the basic principles of brain growth before discussing later neurodevelopmental trajectories in attachment research. Understanding neurodevelopmental conceptualisations of attachment demonstrate that these mechanisms are the foundation of social and emotional well-being in early childhood. The relevance of including early brain development research, to the wider literature on attachment is that trajectories can sometimes be put in motion before birth, or shortly after, which can influence attachment development, such as relational and environmental factors. Whilst there are researchers working on fMRI using neuroimaging to understand early cognitive

development, in particular the FOUNDCOG project based in the School of Psychology in Trinity College (FOUNDCOG, 2025), it should be pointed out that this study has not reviewed in detail all the neurobiological research regarding early brain development, and has not conducted studies such as functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) in its exploration of early brain development. Instead, the relevance of including research on early brain development is with reference to the broader contemporary literature on attachment, which has advanced into a sophisticated analysis of the importance of early brain architecture for emotional development.

Appendix 2: Ethics Approval on Blackboard: Screenshot



Appendix 3: Letter of Invitation to Research

Dear Early Year's Educator,

My name is Catriona Hodgers and I'm an early education researcher in Trinity College Dublin, conducting research into infant-toddler care and education. As part of my study I'm looking for early year's educators who will volunteer to take part in a phone call with me to discuss the everyday experiences of working with this age group. My professional background is in the early education field, and I recently completed a Master's degree in Education looking at socioemotional development in infants and toddlers. I understand the enjoyment of working with this age group, but also the ages and stages challenge it can bring. I'd like to hear practitioners' perspectives on this because together our experiences can add richly to the research on infant/toddler pedagogy. The study has participation inclusion criteria and only one staff member from your service need to apply. If you meet the criteria set out below and are interested in taking part, we would very much like to hear from you.

What does taking part involve?

Taking part simply involves an informal and friendly chat over the phone to get your everyday experiences working with infants and toddlers. Everyday experiences refer to typical days, or events, stories (both happy and sad, good and bad), funny incidents, teachable moments and any memorable experiences that you wish to share. The telephone call which can be scheduled to take place at any time of your choosing, including evenings if you prefer. The call is entirely anonymous and free as I will be ring you. Your

name and phone number will be held under strict data protection regulations (GDPR), and be deleted after we're finished.

What happens next?

If you meet the criteria below I will send you an information leaflet. The information leaflet answers frequently asked questions (FAQ. Taking part is entirely voluntary, and after reading the FAQ, you can still change your mind. If you wish to receive the information letter simply text me, call, or email me, and I will send it to you. My contact details are on the next page.

Study Inclusion Criteria:

1). EYE with at least one year's experience working in early education settings

2). EYE currently working full time

3). Experience of working mainly with children aged 1 year to 3 years of age (infants, wobblers and toddlers)

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours Sincerely,

Catriona Hodgers

Text or Telephone: 0879530003 Email: hodgersc@tcd.ie

Research Supervisor: Conor McGuckin Trinity College Dublin

Email: conor.mcguckin@tcd.ie

Appendix 4: Email to Gatekeepers

Dear Manager,

My name is Catriona Hodgers, and I am a PhD researcher with the School of Education in Trinity College Dublin. I am conducting research into early childhood education, specifically infant-toddler pedagogy. As a former early childhood educator myself working mainly with infants and toddlers, I am very interested in recognising this area of early education as a pedagogy within its own right. I am looking for one practitioner from your service who has experience of working with age group to take part in a one-to-one telephone interview with me. The call from me will last approximately one hour at a time and place of their choosing. Hearing their thoughts, opinions and views about their everyday experiences working with this age group will contribute greatly to this research study and the direction of future research projects for the area of early education. I would be very grateful if you could

take a few moments out of your busy schedule to forward this email to your staff. It contains an invitation to the research, a participant's information letter and consent forms for their attention. Consent may also be given by telephone on the day. Details of specific inclusion criteria can be found in the participant's letter of invitation to the study, please be assured that any information (i.e. contact details and personally held views) gathered for this research will be handled in the strictest confidence in line with GDPR. Further details on this can be found in the participant's information letter. Thank

you for your time and we look forward to your collaboration with our research, without which studies like this would not be possible.

Yours sincerely,

Catriona Hodgers, PhD researcher Trinity College Dublin Mobile: 0879530003

Email: hodgersc@tcd.ie

Research Supervisor:

Conor Mc Guckin

Trinity College Dublin Email: conor.mcguckin@tcd.ie

Appendix 5: Consent Form

CONSENT FORM FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS

STUDY NAME: Early Childhood Educators and Early Learning and Care Managers Views on Attachment in Early Education and Care with infants and toddlers Centre ID:

Identification Number for study:

Consent Form

There are two sections in this form. Each section has a statement and asks you to place your initials in the box if you agree with the statement. The end of the form is for the researchers to complete.

Please ask any questions you may have

If there is anything you do not understand please email the researcher at hodgersc@tcd.ie or the research supervisor conormcguckin@tcd.ie

Thank you for participating.

General Initials

I understand that Catriona Hodgers is from the School of Education in Trinity College Dublin and is conducting this research as part of her PhD study into infant/toddler pedagogy in early childhood education

Catriona can be contacted by telephone on 0879530003 or via email at hodgersc@tcd.ie

Tick box:

I agree to be contacted by Catriona by phone at a pre-arranged

time that suits me.

I understand that the contact details I provide for this study

(name, phone number, email address), will be treated confidentially.

I understand that my contact details will be made entirely anonymous immediately following the interview and that any thoughts, feelings or events that I discuss can never be identified with my details

I understand that any identifiable information about me (name, phone number etc.) including if necessary, the transfer of this information outside the EU, will at all times be anonymised and protected in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

I understand that the purpose of my taking part is to talk openly about my day-to-day adult/child interactions with infants and toddlers and experiences of attachments while working with very young children's as regards their social emotional and behavioural development.

I confirm that I have read and understood the Participant Invitation Letter (PIL) for the study. The research study goal has been fully explained to me in this letter, and I have been advised to ask questions if I have any via email or a call to Catriona if I need to.

I understand that this study is entirely voluntary, and if I decide that I do not want to continue the interview I can stop at any time without giving a reason.

I understand that my withdrawal cannot have any adverse personal consequences because my participation is entirely anonymous

I understand that my one-to-one telephone call will be audio recorded for the purpose of transcription.

I understand that I may talk openly and freely during my telephone call and discuss any concerns, questions etc., at any point during the study.

I understand that I will not be paid for taking part in this study.

I understand that I should not experience any form of stress or discomfort participating in this study. I understand that at the conclusion of my participation, any further questions or concerns I have will be fully addressed.

I consent to take part in this research study having been fully informed.

I confirm that I have read the types of questions that will be asked in the research.

Data processing

I understand that only the researchers and examiners will have access to my data and can hold this information for up to 5 years under General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

I understand that personal information about me will be coded at source. However, in cases of the transfer of my anonymous transcript for educational purposes to outside of the EU, this will also be protected in strict accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

I understand that all information collected will only be accessible for the purposes of analysis and will be securely deleted 13 months after the research examiners decision.

I understand that the audio recording of my interview will be retained by Trinity College Dublin for 5 years for use solely by Trinity College Dublin, and then destroyed.

If during your participation in this study you feel that the information and guidelines that you were given have been neglected or disregarded in any way, or if you are unhappy about the process please contact Dr. Ann Devitt, Research Director, School of Education, Trinity College Dublin at devittan@tcd.ie or 00-353-1-896-1293. Please be assured that your concerns will be dealt with in a sensitive manner.

Participant Name (Block Capitals)

Signature: (electronic signatures accepted)

Date:

To be completed by the Principal Investigator or nominee.

I, the undersigned, have taken the time to fully explain to the above participant the nature and purpose of this study in a way that they could understand. I have explained the risks and possible benefits involved. I have invited them to ask questions on any aspect of the study that concerned them.

I have given a copy of the information leaflet and consent form to the facilitator with contacts of the study team.

Researcher Name (Block Capitals) CATRIONA HODGERS

Signature:

Date:

Appendix 6: Participant Information Leaflet (PIL)

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION LEAFLET (PIL)

Introduction

We wish to invite you to take part in research into what it is like to work with babies and toddlers as an early childhood educator. We wish to know your views and opinions as you work with very young children (i.e. infants and toddlers) in early education settings.

Before you decide whether or not you wish to give us your views on this topic it is important for you to understand why this research is being done and what taking part involves

Please read the following information. Please ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like further information. Our contact details are at the bottom of this letter.

Background

This study is being conducted because adult-child interactions in early childhood education are an important aspect as regards child development. However, as a former early childhood educator, I (Catriona) know that there is very little information provided to practitioners working with infants and toddlers as regards adult-child interactions, and this section of early childhood education still has little or no infant/toddler pedagogy despite a

lot of scientific research. I'd like to invite you to take part in our research study because I wish to hear your personal perspective on the delights and also the difficulties of care and education with this age group. Your insights will help develop a developmentally appropriate infant/toddler pedagogy for this important area of early childhood education from your experience.

Benefits

There may be no immediate benefits to you personally, however, your personal opinion and experiences of everyday life working full time with very young children will contribute to adapting or developing new training programmes for specific infant/toddler teaching and help us understand your role.

Disadvantages

As with all research there is a very small risk of your data being breached and your identity being revealed. However, while we must make you aware of this, the risk is small. Every precaution is taken at every step of the research to prevent this happening, including removing your name immediately after our phone call and applying a code number in its place.

Other drawbacks to be aware of include finding the time. Before you decide to take part, you should know that our telephone call discussion may take up to an hour of your time and may require a reasonably quiet place free from a lot of interruptions.

Do I have to take part?

Taking part is entirely voluntary and you do not have to give a reason if you don't wish to take part. You can also change your mind at any time. Please contact me (Catriona) if you wish to withdraw from the study at any time.

What happens if I take part?

Taking part will involve an informal telephone call with me (Catriona) to discuss the everyday experience of practice working full time with this age group. We will be discussing topics such as; identity, managing adult-child interactions with young children in group care settings, previous expectations of the role and experiences that encourage or discourage you. I will be asking questions such as "Tell me about a typical day with the children in your care" and "What factors help or hinder your relationship with the children"? I am interested in specific examples of experiences, your concerns, thoughts, feelings and insights. The call is expected to last around 40 minutes and the time and location of the call is entirely your choice.

Afterwards our discussion will be typed up into a transcript. A copy of this will be sent to you where you can add or delete anything. Under data protection law you have the right to view, amend, or withdraw your transcript, for a specific time period after the transcriptions are complete.

Your data will be stored securely in a locked filing cabinet and kept no longer than five years in line with General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR). Five years is necessary for the research to be fully completed, including the examination process.

The cloud storage platform for this study is the researchers TCD OneDrive account and Dropbox. Files uploaded to Dropbox will only be accessible to the researcher and the supervisor. According to Dropbox, as a cloud service provider they adhere to the Cloud Security Alliance (CSA) Code of Conduct for GDPR Compliance and as such Dropbox is fully GDPR compliant.

Under the freedom of information legalisation all research participants are entitled to access their information at any time.

Will my records remain confidential?

Your privacy is important to us. Under General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR), you have right of access, right to rectification, right to erasure, right to object to processing based on legitimate or public interest, right to data portability, right to object to personal profiling or making decisions about individuals by automated means

In this research, our discussion will be recorded for transcription purposes only and the recording will be stored on a double-coded computer, where both computer and file are password protected. Audio recordings of our discussion will be stored securely for 13 months after completion of the thesis examination process and then the digital files will be deleted in accordance with Trinity College secure data disposal service. Research data will be stored on a double-coded computer, where both computer and file are password protected, and as with audio recordings, kept no longer than five years in line with General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR). Only the research supervisor and I will have access to your data.

Immediately after our call your name will be removed and a code will be applied to your transcript. This means your name and transcript will now be anonymous and your identity remains confidential. No identifying information can be linked to you. Coded transcripts (Digital Files) will be retained for the transcription period only and the period while participants review their data.

The research may be shared outside of Trinity College Dublin or outside the EU. Your identity will remain confidential in all analysis, publication and/or presentation of results and findings.

Anonymised data may be shared with the scientific community and industry, but your identity will remain confidential at all times. We will never share your personal data with any third parties.

Please note no personal profiling or automated decision-making will be conducted in this study.

Please note that by law we are obliged to report any inadvertent discovery relating to illicit activities (e.g. physical, emotional or sexual abuse, concerns for child protection, rape, self-harm, suicidal intent or criminal activity).

What will happen to the results of this research?

The information from this study may be published in scientific papers and on public registries. If this is the case, your identity will remain at all times confidential.

The findings of this study will also be used to develop training programmes for early educators working with infants and toddlers. Your views will also be

discussed at conferences, published in publications and used for directing future research.

What do I do if I have any further questions?

If you have further questions, please email me or the research supervisor on the details provide below.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information leaflet. If you wish to take part, simply return a signed Consent form by email. Alternatively, you can give consent over the phone before our call starts. If you prefer to give consent over the phone, please email or text me on the number below so that we can arrange a time and date that suits you.

Researcher:

Catriona Hodgers:

School of Education,

Trinity College Dublin.

Email: hodgersc@tcd.ie

Research Supervisor:

Prof. Conor McGuckin

School of Education,

Trinity College Dublin.

Email: conor.mcguckin@tcd.ie

DATA PROTECTION INFORMATION

Data Controller: Trinity College Dublin

Data Protection Officer: Secretary's Office Trinity College Dublin Dublin 2

Dataprotection@tcd.ie

The lawful basis to use personal data. We will use the information you provide to us only for this research study which is in the public interest.

What are my rights in relation to your use of my personal data?

You are entitled to:

• The right to access to your data and receive a copy of it

• The right to restrict or object to processing of your data

• The right to object to any further processing of the information we hold about you (except where it is de-identified)

• The right to have inaccurate information about you corrected or deleted

• The right to receive your data in a portable format and to have it transferred to another data controller

• The right to request deletion of your data

Unless the request would make it impossible or very difficult to conduct the research. You can exercise these rights by contacting the researchers or the Trinity College Data Protection Officer (contact details above). Please note that these rights relate to data which could identify you (personal data). If your data has been anonymised, we will not be able to access or delete it, as we will have no way of being able to link the data to you.

Appendix 7: IPA Interview Schedule Question: Pre-Pilot Study

Q What are early years' EYE lived experience of attachment relationships with BTT children in early learning and care settings in the Republic of Ireland?

1.What are early years' EYE personal experience of the relationships with the children in their care?

2.Tell me about your experience, your role, the place here you work, how many children staff, length of service, qualifications,

3.Why did you go into childcare?

4.What is your understanding of attachment- prompt; what does attachment mean to you? Do you think an attachment is necessary for children's development? Does attachment theory influence your practice?

5.In what situations might you find attachment relationships challenging

6.Has attachment helped you manage any particular situation?

7.What personal traits help you to enhance your attachment relationship in practice

8.Do you enjoy this kind of work?

9.What is your understanding of social and emotional learning?

10. Tell me about a typical day in your relationship with the children in your care?

11. What did you expect full time caregiving to be like?

12. Can you tell me about the things that you do to help support the children's behaviour? Prompt: Can you tell me more about that approach?

13. What do you think about play?

14. Tell me about a memorable experience in this role?

15. Tell me about what is important for you to be able to do your role?

16. Are there times when you feel positive about your role? Prompt: Can you tell me about this?

17. What aspects of the caregiving role are you most proud of?

18. Can you tell me the most difficult aspect of caring for toddler's full time?

19. Are there times when you feel negative about the role? Prompt: Can you tell me more about this.

20. Are there aspects of caring for young children that you do not enjoy? Can you tell me about these?

21. Are there aspects of the work that you feel disappointed about? Can you tell me about this?

22. Are there aspects of caring for young children that make you upset or angry? Can you tell me about these?

23. Does government or parent's opinions affect your ability to care?

24. Do you ever feel a negative opinion of full-time caregiving with infants and toddlers?

25. From your experience, what factors help and what factors don't help your relationship with the children?

26. Can you tell me about any supports you receive to carry out your caregiving role?

27. What supports are useful? Why?

28. Tell me about how you cope with challenging behaviour or socioemotional difficulties. Prompt: What would help you feel more supported in this?

29. How would you describe a good day?

30. Is there another role/job that you would like to do?

31. What parts of an interaction with a child matter to you most? Prompt: eye contact, warm body language, tone of voice, hugging, or conversation?

32. Tell me about your relationships with other colleagues?

33. Tell me about your relationship with parents?

34. is attachment taught in your training?

35. Do you know what SEL is?

36. Did your training provide you with the necessary skills and knowledge for you to manage the social and emotional aspects of toddler development?

Appendix 8: Interview questions post-pilot study

1.How many children do you have and how long have you worked in this place? /previous place/ qualifications/

2.what drew you to work as an early year's educator?

3.How many staff/children in total

4.How do you feel this role is viewed by others?

Knowledge and Training in Early Intervention

5.Do you engage in CPD?

6.What is your understanding of Early Brain development?

7.Are there policies or procedures in place in your setting to follow for behaviour management? What are the main ones? Identification of Need/ Referral

8.Have you ever experienced a really emotionally difficult day?

9.For EYE working with children in the Birth to three age group, what do you feel are the best aspects of working with that age group / what do you feel their role is?

Collaboration and Communication

10. Can you communicate with management if you feel stressed?

11. What measures do you take when trying to understand the needs of the children in your care?

12. AS an early year's educator are you familiar with Government early years' educations policies? No/ Yes. If yes, can you discuss which ones work best and worst in practice?

13. Do you have much interaction with outside agencies (e.g. EI Teams, Betterstart etc) in your day-to-day role?

14. Can you collaborate with colleagues in relation to your practice and do you feel supported by them?

External Factors

15. How do you feel about the extra work involved in practice these days?

16. How do you feel about the Government support?

17. What factors impact on your role in providing appropriate care and education for children?

18. Do you feel your training prepared you for the role? What could have been helpful if anything?

Appendix 9: Interview Schedule Final

1. Descriptive: Qualifications

2. Descriptive: Years' experience

3. Descriptive: Tell me about a typical day

4. Narrative: What brought you to work in early education?

5. Narrative: What did you do before; how did you arrive at the decision to take this job?

6. Narrative: What did you expect this job to be like and have your expectations changed?

7. Narrative: Have you changed?

8. Narrative: What does the concept of attachment in early childhood mean to you?

9. Evaluative: Are there difficulties/barriers involved for staff in establishing attachments with the toddlers?

10. Evaluative: what's the difference between a good day and a bad day?

11. Evaluative: How do you feel after a bad day…how do you take care of your health?

12. Evaluative: Tell me about your relationships with parents and outside agencies such as inspectors etc?

13. Comparative: Can you see yourself doing a different job?

14. Comparative: What opportunities allow you to form attachments with infants and toddlers?

15. Comparative: What prevents you from forming attachments with the infants and toddlers?

Prompts:

1.Can you tell me a bit more about that?

2.What do you mean by…?

3.Going back to the issue of …

4.I'd like to return to something you said about …

Appendix 10: Sample Personal Experiential Themes **(PETS)**

Jean's PETS

For Jean, attachment relationships mean stepping into the role of the child's primary caregiver which she regards as a privilege

1: PRIDE IN IDENTITY

"Yes, when it comes to the relationship between the adult and the child, I do think it's a really important relationship because it could be for most children the first time they move away from their primary caregiver and so there's somebody stepping into that place, which is usually the mother, or y'know, a father as well. I think we're learning more and more that they need more than just a few bricks to play with, that it's really got to do with the relationship between the practitioner and the toddler."

Jeans account articulates the uniqueness of the toddler teacher's role. She relates to stepping into the role as a privilege, because previously that place was occupied by the mother or father, the primary caregiver. There is a commitment involved in toddler teaching made by stepping into the role of primary caregiver. Jean recall past practices of working with infants and toddlers.

2: THE GENTLE ACT OF INSTINCT

"In the past we used to do a lot of work by instinct, where they all worked as a group, and we didn't really understand what we were doing with toddlers and as both you and I know, as we understand child development studies more, it's important that we are really being 100% present with that child. It has got a lot to do with the child being seen and given the time and the

opportunity to explore the world, explore the developmental stages that they're at, and to really facilitate their exploration in a very kind and gentle manner."

Jean recognises the influence of research on practice, training, and education in learning about child development

"Parents do things naturally, y'know. Parents swaddle their children, they rock their babies, they soothe their babies, and as practitioners we would have recognised what worked and what didn't work, because that infant told us very quickly what didn't work. When people understand development, then we all go "ah that's why I did that…". I suppose now with the early childhood degree, there appears to be a lot more learning and understanding in practice. I'm not quite sure how much comes through though from the study into the difficult job of looking after toddlers.

Jeans feels that instinct is an important reflex for the difficult job of looking after toddlers. She is sceptical and not confident of just how much learning comes through into practice from class-based learning. Whilst it is important to her that educators apply learning theories in practice, she fears that practitioners are losing instinct as an important skill, and that this is being replaced by "learning". As Jean explains, this is not the only barrier to attachment relationships practice.

3: PERCEPTIONS OF PAPERWORK AS A FLAWED SYSTEM

Documenting, observations and record keeping are one of the obstacles cited by each participant. Indeed, even to the point where they interrupt practice. Jean expressed how she feels the administration system is flawed.

"If I was doing circle time, my colleague would be writing up the notes. But she really should have been participating in the circle with me, or being with, and observing the children with me. Where I would have maybe spent time doing circle or doing organised activities with the group which allowed for my colleague to write the notes, she wasn't present with half of the children in the group that she should have been present with. So I genuinely feel there's a flaw there."

The children are not the only thing on Jean's mind when she is writing up observations.

"I think there was a good intention, but for some reason it's turned into, y'know, basically feeling the need to write this [observation] down because the HSE can come in at any stage and tell me I'm wrong."

4: LOSS OF CONNECTION

Jean goes further by explaining how moment-to-moment interactions are delicate with children of this young age. She is sure that paperwork takes her away from the relationship between herself and the child, acting as an obstacle to attachment and to the proposed emergent nature of the curriculum.

"Emerging curriculum is absolutely fantastic if we can just do it. if a child comes in with a snail and I want to talk about it, about what they eat, they live in the garden bla bla bla… I can go with what's happening, but the thoughts of having to try and prove it to somebody does inhibit the natural flow with the child. Admin completely takes the presence of the practitioner

away from the child in the moment. It takes away from the reason why we're doing this, y'know."

Jean's issues with paperwork extend beyond the mere inconvenience of interrupting the flow of the moment with the child, for Jean it is not an inclusive approach suitable to everyone. Yet her service is only deemed good if they have a lot of photographs of intersubjective moments between the child and practitioner.

"I'm dyslexic, so writing it down obviously I've got a big problem with writing things down. That chore of documenting things y'know, it takes away from the spontaneity. It's just in the back of your head all the time. "Oh, God, I better document it" or "I better take the photograph so I can prove it". For my service to be deemed good, that's shown by what I document. I just found it really stopped any spontaneity for me personally."

There is a sense of a power struggle with paperwork. In Jeans' practice, she must make a choice between compliance and just being present with the children.

"Yes, for some reason the writing just takes away from the 100% presence that is needed, that we know that the child's brain needs. I think paperwork is causing a block y'know. Some sort of screen between the living experience and being with the child. Learning Stories are amazing when it's happening with the child. It's incredible. It's exactly what the child needs. It's child led, child directed…y' know emergent curriculum and all that…fantastic! But having to stop and take those photographs does stop the flow…it absolutely stops the flow. You have to take the photograph and think about y'know

producing it and publishing it, and sticking it down, and y'know they have a certain amount of observations per child per term".

Learning Stories are part of the paperwork for children's records. However, Jean fears that not much learning is taking place, with a clear articulation that paperwork is causing the problem. Having to stop and take photographs means she is missing out on the intersubjective moment in front of her, and taking the photograph is moving the child out of their joint attention, and replacing it with a camera.

"I'm looking at a butterfly [with the child] and I'm thinking "oh, I'd better get a photograph…where's my phone? I go to my phone, my camera, take the photograph and then re-engage with the child. The flow is broken. The intention is broken. Everything's broken. Children are living with adults who only have a limited amount of attention on them before it's broken, and then we expect children to concentrate!"

Jean is quick to point out that her attachment and engagement is under threat with ner perception of the burden of paperwork.

"Writing observations appears to be a good practice, in actual fact and in reality, it means they're not with the child and engaged with the child. Somebody watching them and writing down what they're doing is not the same as somebody being with them and available to them to help nurture that growth. There is the pressure of being inspected at any moment and get all this [observations] written down. In reality, the child is being left to his own devices. Being "present" and "presence" are two very different things. There's a flaw there. A flaw is undermining the necessary documentation required."

Reaching for the camera tells the child that there is something more important than them in this moment. It sends them the message that they are not the most important thing in the practitioner's world. Rather than being in that lovely moment, sharing eye contact, company, and the moment of looking and learning about the butterfly, it is a case of documentation for the inspector, a competition for attention, inspector versus the child. For the practitioner, there should be joy and wonder at experiencing the butterfly from the child's eyes, their fascination, and their wonder at this beautiful and curios creature. However, all synchronicity is lost if a practitioner is rummaging for a camera, sending the wrong message. The message sending to the child is either, the photograph is more important, or the inspector's wrath is more important. Either way the photograph only proves there was the potential for an intersubjective moment, what is confirmed is that this seems to be more important than the actual encounter between the educator and the child, taking place.

5: PAPERWORK

Jean agrees that this type of practice is very sad. She questions why are we surprised when the children then present with high levels of anxiety [page 31, line 78].

Y'know it's not just about the toys or what we have on the shelves, or y'know whether we've got y'know, diverse costumes. Our space is diverse and that's very important, I understand that, but at the moment the importance is being missed. [for example] since COVID, whether I have Polish books on my shelf is irrelevant at the moment, children are in too much need of help. The other stuff will come later."

With regard to COVID, Jean is asked how are the children doing, and have they settled in any way in her opinion.

"In fairness, I haven't been practicing because I actually have just closed due to the paperwork. So now I'm only working as a Play Therapist, and our books are just so full, because children are still reeling from the effects [of COVID] but we have to understand, it has not been that long, y'know. COVID has not gone y'know, it's still there. But y'know everyone's thinking "oh back to normal for the kids" but they're still reeling from what those 2-3 years did to them."

6: TIME-BASED ASPECTS

Jean believes that the practice of today is not the same practice that existed in her day. She cites a lack of training and training in general as being inadequate for the practicalities of today's challenges in practice. She believes practice has changed over the years, and that she has to manage a lot more administrative work.

"The learning in the training, the more hands on and experiential work is lost. Y'know it's a lot more study about management and again - paper things…a lot of paperwork!" More practical things I think are needed in the training."

Jean feared that her initial training was inadequate to be able to cope with practice today, so she upskilled as a Play Therapist, a skill that she highly recommends.

"My training as an early year's practitioner wouldn't have given me the skills to be able to listen and notice what's happening for that child. I saw the children in my service completely differently with play therapy training. So I

would be an advocate [of Play Therapy training] for anybody working with children, including teachers who need to understand a little bit about the nervous system, and what might be happening for children in their care."

7: THE PLACE OF PLAY

Jeans wish for today's practitioner is that they retain flexibility in their practice and take time to really engage in the child's play.

"We need to enhance the practitioner's realisation of how important play and their presence is with the child and to give them skills, more hands-on skills to use with the children y'know. See a child as an individual and not as one of eight, or one of 22. I know everybody feels they've trained so much, but this training is not inclusive. See the child's needs rather than the curriculum that's written up on the board". More practical things I think are needed in the training."

8: COVID

Jean reports how things were already tough in her service with more social problems being experiences by the children. Then came COVID to make matters worse.

"I suppose over the years I've noticed the reasons for children being upset being more acute, and not just the practical things of being tired or hungry, and then COVID came. I suppose looking back, having missed so many milestones as they would have encountered on their normal everyday life, like for example going to the playground, even going into a supermarket, even being around other adults beyond their immediate family. So COVID really impacted, I think, children of all ages."

Jean describes the impact of COVID on her and the children, and the fear which permeated through her and the service. She relives the experience and recalls the overriding fear in the memory of removing her face mask because it was upsetting the children.

"Coming back from COVID, I had 22 children in my service and there was definitely two who were non-verbal coming back, or had one-word sentences. A lot of children were unable to make friends, one being completely dysregulated, he just was in "fight" mode". I wore a mask, but within two days I had to take them off, I just could see the fear in the children's eyes, because what we are saying was "This place is not safe."

Jean's understanding of the children who attended her service is greatly supported by an understanding of their need for psychological safety. She discusses her own fear and the children's fear during COVID interchangeably. Her tone is low, with long thoughtful pauses between each sentence. At one point, she stops talking altogether as she tries to pull herself out of the powerful memories that are clearly still very vivid for her.

"For the children…to look around and see the world, and to see people with masks on, and the roads to be empty, and y'know…not going out to see Granny and Grandad. Y'know the perception of fear was absolutely huge."

The lines between Jean's accounts of the children's fear, and her own fear become blurred, and it is hard to tell when she is talking about her own fear, or that of the children's. As she talks, she maps her experience of Covid onto the children.

“They’re going to be in fight, flight, freeze and in a state of stress, and then they're asked to go into their preschool which is meant to be a really safe place, “and mom and dad can't come in with me for the first time in my life and I've had to let go of a hand and walk across a two-meter space into the hands of somebody else”.

Jean does the voice of the child in the above account, putting herself into the shoes of the child

“That alone is a physical distance y’know, and I found some children found it difficult. But on the other hand, some children managed so well. They were just so brave and ran to us y’know, when we stood there to greet the children.

In this statement, it is interesting to note that she may be referring her own bravery also.

“We could not have had a mask on…because y’know they're so young…I just couldn't do it. I just couldn't put the mask on…we did it a bit, but it just felt so wrong.”

Jean goes between talking from the children’s perspective (mom and dad can't come in with me), and her own perspective. As she talks, she switches again, merging her experience and the fear perceived from the children’s experience. This identification of fear contrasts sharply with the perceived safety of her setting, where children come to learn and grow and feel safe in the environment she has prepared for them. Covid has robbed her of being the children’s secure base (Bowlby, 1969). As she continued, her tone lightened and she recalled the bravery of the children, and indeed, of herself, and the hard decisions she made to make to protect the children’s well-

being. Like everyone else, for Jean Covid was an unknown entity in the early days. However, she relied on intuition to get through with a return to implicit practice, more than rigid curriculum.

With regard to curriculum, the play-based curriculum of early education took on a new meaning for Jean

9: TRAINING TO SEE THE CHILD

"Their [children's] capability to learn was reduced because they needed to play so much. Our dolls had never got played with so much you know, they were acting out being at home and there was a lot of prison play…which was so interesting because I suppose they were imprisoned in lockdown. So their play showed the impacts of their time at home and they're learning. Definitely it felt like…we felt they didn't need to learn 1, 2, 3 as much as they needed to play with their friends, so we really upped the play time for the kids, and I suppose that was us just working on instinct again."

Jean describes how the children were working through their trauma using play and how it was an incredible thing to witness [pg. 17, line 46]. Jean saw the children in her service differently which she attributes to her training in Play Therapy. She is now a keen advocate for Play Therapy training for those working with children, especially teachers, whom Jean believes need to understand the child's nervous system, to really see the child, and understand what might be happening for children in their care.

10: LACK OF EARLY INTERVENTION AND SUPERVISION

"There's no practitioner's supervision". There's no help for practitioners to bring a child to supervision to say, "this is what's happening, what could we

do better for this child...to see the child as an individual, and not as one of eight or one of twenty-two".

How Jean sees the children is important to her. Children's mental health is also important to her. She recognises the significance of being an advocate for extra training for young children's socioemotional wellbeing, which she rightly points out is not in their initial training.

"I know everybody feels they've trained so much, but this training of understanding the child's nervous system is not inclusive. It's not in teacher training, and it's not in the early years [curriculum]".

Jean is able to see the benefits of Play Therapy through her training, and her orientation is towards better training for better practices. When asked how much of an understanding of the child's nervous system impacts her own personal practice she says she believes that this type of knowledge is more important than what we currently have. When asked about seeing the child differently, she explains it in terms of understanding the child's nervous system.

"I think it's huge now. I think it completely outweighs other training and understanding of the job. Yes I have Montessori and I have early years [training] and I use that. But when I view a child, I look at them differently now, y'know. I often think back and go "oh if I'd only known this with X, or if it could have helped x".

Viewing the child in terms of understanding their emotional state (nervous system) is further explained by Jean as seeing the child holistically, taking into

consideration everything that might be impacting the child's life, but yet "coming behind" the child.

"I see the child, the individual. It's looking at the child within the framework of their life y'know. Where their parents are coming from, y'know. If there's grandparents involved parents are working, y'know. All these things that come behind the child, when the child comes in our door. We do have to consider that y'know. We do have to consider that there's other siblings, or there's a baby at home, what might be happening for that child, y'know. In the morning when they come to us for a lovely day of learning or experience, it may not be that way for them. They may need a cuddle, they may need you to know, some sand play, they may need to get stuck in with the boys, y'know. It's just to see their needs rather than the curriculum that's written up on our board. Responding to what you see, I suppose."

Jean describes how understanding the mental health needs of young children helps her in seeing "needs" rather than just the curriculum. She feels this orientation to her work is crucial to help her see the child first. In putting the child's needs before the curriculum there is a therapeutic dynamic to her relationships with the children. By acting in response to what is seen and observed, reflexivity is inherent, and this is clearly important to her. She uses this line of reasoning to circle back to practice.

"That's exactly the key. What they're trying to say is; "be reflective by writing it down…" I know that teaches you reflection, but I think it needs to be more experiential. I think they need to do more y'know, role play with people to see what that actually feels like, and to allow the practitioner to do it and store it in her mind. Doesn't have to be on paper all the time."

As recognised by Jean, best practice advocates practitioners be more reflective in their practice. However, Jean says it is more hands-on practical skills such as role playing, that is required. There is a mismatch between reflexivity and reality

11: CAN'T DO THIS ANYMORE, I'M DONE

Jean had mentioned in an earlier part of the interview that she was leaving the sector. When asked how this was going, she gave a grim insight into why she decided to leave the sector.

"I decided to close with the re-registration where we had to re-register with Tusla. It was such an awful experience and there was yet more paperwork and more computers which just doesn't work y'know, for me. I got a summons to court over a piece of paper that I could not get because my landlord could not find it and the way, the treatment, was just so awful. I just had to say, "that's it I'm done, I'm out of here" can't do this anymore y'know, I'm closing."

The Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) (Registration of School Age Services) (Amendment) Regulations 2022 requires early years and school age services requires services to re-register every year to remain on the Tusla register. Navigating the paperwork involved in registration ever year proved to be the last straw for Jean, and she choose not to re-register her service. However, as she continues, the decision to close was only the beginning of her struggles

"Having to notify to close, I'm even finding that process difficult. There wasn't as much as a thanks - not that you do things for thanks, but there wasn't any acknowledgement of the practice. I'd been open for 30 years in the

community. It was now gone and so that was that. Yeah, it was sad that we meant nothing and therefore the children meant nothing. That's the message I got from the experience. Anyone who I tried to speak to, anyone that I was talking to…was somebody who didn't care."

As she closed her business, a struggle emerged for any kind of recognition from the inspectors that she or her service were valued by society. As she reveals this normal and human desire for simple recognition, she shakes in her speech, and her chain of thought is at times staggered. She reflects on the decision to close, and there is a tone of guilt, as though in asking for appreciation, she has revealed a human vulnerability. Initially she catches herself from fully revealing any need for validation, adding that she was "not actually doing it for thanks", but almost immediately her defences go down, and she allows herself to acknowledge the hurt that remains. This is a strong reflection of the amount of love and effort she has poured into the children and the business over the years. In Jean's eyes, she and the business are one entity, and the truth of just how invisible she is, was made evident to her by the cold and indifferent treatment of the inspectors in ending the business and ending her. From allowing herself to be vulnerable, Jean is quick to show that she is also a professional early educator who recognises and despite what she went through, still respects that there is a need for inspectors.

"In the week I closed, I got a fully compliant inspection for the first time in 30 years. I understand that there's room for improvement and all the inspections and what they do is very good. It's just the manner in which it's dealt out, it's not very nice. We're doing very important work, and it should be embraced and supported, more than ridiculed. I've heard of a lot of people finding

difficulty finding staff across the board at the moment. A friend of mine just lost the most beautiful manager that she's had for years over the way she was treated in an inspection. Yeah, she just said, "I can't do this anymore" and she's an absolutely talented woman and she said, "I cannot be treated like that anymore". It's awful".

Jean sees and agrees with the need for inspections. However, she reports feeling intimidated and reported feeling ridiculed. Her anecdote about her friend loosing "*the most beautiful manager*", because she would not tolerate being treated disrespectfully by inspectors, is in her own words *"awful".* In addition, her friend's manager is reported by Jean to have said the word "anymore", indicating that this was perhaps not the first episode of alleged mistreatment she experienced. Jean goes onto highlight how staff leaving the sector is a barrier to creating attachment relationships.

"There's a lot of Spanish girls who are hoping to be teachers coming to Ireland and they're wonderful. They have a lot to offer, which is great. But the children become attached to these lovely ladies and then they're gone [back to Spain]".

Jean doesn't blame them.

"I can't think of any other environment, any sector that would put up with that treatment, like it's an appalling way to work. Quite honestly, it's easier to work somewhere else where you get paid more and you don't have the stress of the job".

Despite her best efforts and high standards, Jean is no longer in business. The care and compassion Jean showed to the children in her service is evident.

However, it will be forever tainted by the poor treatment she experienced from the inspectors, which is etched into memory. To conclude her lived experience, Jean is asked what would be her one wish for other educators, by way of parting advice as she prepares to move into a new sector.

"To understand how to be confident. To go with your gut feeling, and to go with your intuition, and if you feel like picking the child up when the child needs an extra hug, you know to go with it. That's OK. Understand the good that they have in them, I think would be a fantastic place to start, and then they will be able to go into their room feeling good about themselves, and that will spill down to the child". [page 42, line 66]

SUMMARY

Overall, Jean's lived experience of attachment as being an orientation toward the practice of using instinct and intuition in her relationships with toddlers. This is evident in her experiential statements and in her sense-making of what good relationships with the children means to her, and what it feels like (Smith, Larkin & Flowers, 2022 P.98). Her lived experience was one of "challenge" in trying to maintain her connection and attachment with the children, due to the pressures of her role.

Appendix 11: Research Search String

RQ: What is the lived experience of practitioner's attachment relationships

with infants and toddlers in early learning care settings"?

concept 1 staff experience

experience or attitude N3 (practitioner* OR educator* OR staff)

Concept 2

Interaction* OR relations*

Concept 3

"early childhood *" OR "early years*" OR infant* OR toddler* OR nurser*

OR preschool OR playschool OR kindergarten* OR "group care*"

ERIC 160322 (Title/Abstract kw and thesaurus terms)

concept 1 staff experience

experience or attitude N3 (practitioner* OR educator* OR staff)

OR DE "Teacher Attitudes"

AND

concept 2

interaction* OR relations* OR DE "Interaction" OR DE

"Teacher Student Relationship"

AND

concept 3

“early childhood *” OR “early years*” OR infant* OR toddler* OR nurser* OR preschool OR playschool OR kindergarten* OR “group care*” OR DE "Early Childhood Education"

5364 hits

PsycInfo 160322 (Title/Abstract kw and thesaurus terms)

experience or attitude N3 (practitioner* OR educator* OR staff) OR DE "Teacher Attitudes"

AND

interaction* OR relations* OR (DE "Interpersonal Interaction") OR (MM "Teacher Student Interaction")

AND

“early childhood *” OR “early years*” OR infant* OR toddler* OR nurser* OR preschool OR playschool OR kindergarten* OR “group care*” OR DE "Infants (Animal)" OR DE "Preschool Students" 4424 hits

Web of Science (core collection) 160322 (Topic search)

experience or attitude N3 (practitioner* OR educator* OR staff)

AND

interaction* OR relations*

AND

“early childhood *” OR “early years*” OR infant* OR toddler* OR nurser* OR preschool OR playschool OR kindergarten* OR “group care*”

Monday, November 08, 2021 9:54:33 AM

#	Query	Limiters/Expanders	Last Run Via	Results
S4	S1 AND S2	Limiters - Date Published: 20150101-20211231 Expanders - Apply equivalent subjects Search modes - Boolean/Phrase	Interface - EBSCOhost Research Databases Search Screen - Advanced Search Database - ERIC	139
S3	S1 AND S2	Expanders - Apply equivalent subjects Search modes - Boolean/Phrase	Interface - EBSCOhost Research Databases Search Screen - Advanced Search Database - ERIC	631
S2	DE "Intervention" OR DE "Early Childhood Education" OR DE "Early Experience"	Expanders - Apply equivalent subjects	Interface - EBSCOhost Research Databases	98,587

		Search modes - Boolean/Phrase	Search Screen - Advanced Search Database - ERIC	
S1	DE "Attachment Behavior"	Expanders - Apply equivalent subjects Search modes - Boolean/Phrase	Interface - EBSCOhost Research Databases Search Screen - Advanced Search Database - ERIC	3,744

Kw – early childhood intervention

"early intervention" OR "early years" OR "early childhood" OR nurser* OR creche* OR kindergarten* OR toddler* OR infant* OR preschool OR "pre-school"

Descriptors -

Kw – attachment

attachment* OR interpersonal* OR emotional* OR affective OR mindful*

kw – practitioners

“early years educator*” OR “early educator*” OR “child care practitioner*” OR “preschool teacher*” OR “k

kindergarten teacher*”

#	Query	Limiters/Expanders	Last Run Via	Results
S10	S6 AND S8	Limiters - Date Published: 20150101-20211231 Expanders - Apply equivalent subjects Search modes - Boolean/Phrase	Interface - EBSCOhost Research Databases Search Screen - Advanced Search Database - ERIC	3,329
S9	S6 AND S8	Expanders - Apply equivalent subjects Search modes - Boolean/Phrase	Interface - EBSCOhost Research Databases Search Screen - Advanced Search Database - ERIC	4,637

S8	S2 OR S7	Expanders - Apply equivalent subjects Search modes - Boolean/Phrase	Interface - EBSCOhost Research Databases Search Screen - Advanced Search Database - ERIC	150,540
S7	TI ("early intervention*" OR "early years" OR "early childhood" OR nurser* OR creche* OR kindergarten* OR toddler* OR infant* OR preschool OR "pre-school") OR AB ("early intervention*" OR "early years" OR "early childhood" OR nurser* OR creche* OR kindergarten* OR toddler* OR infant* OR preschool OR "pre-school")	Expanders - Apply equivalent subjects Search modes - Boolean/Phrase	Interface - EBSCOhost Research Databases Search Screen - Advanced Search Database - ERIC	86,545
S6	S1 OR S5	Expanders - Apply equivalent subjects	Interface - EBSCOhost Research	18,761

		Search modes - Boolean/Phrase	Databases Search Screen - Advanced Search Database - ERIC	
S5	TI (attachment* OR interpersonal* OR emotional* OR affective OR mindful*) OR AB (attachment* OR interpersonal* OR emotional* OR affective OR mindful*)	Limiters - Date Published: 20150101-20211231 Expanders - Apply equivalent subjects Search modes - Boolean/Phrase	Interface - EBSCOhost Research Databases Search Screen - Advanced Search Database - ERIC	15,491
S4	S1 AND S2	Limiters - Date Published: 20150101-20211231 Expanders - Apply equivalent subjects Search modes - Boolean/Phrase	Interface - EBSCOhost Research Databases Search Screen - Advanced Search	139

			Database - ERIC	
S3	S1 AND S2	Expanders - Apply equivalent subjects Search modes - Boolean/Phrase	Interface - EBSCOhost Research Databases Search Screen - Advanced Search Database - ERIC	631
S2	DE "Intervention" OR DE "Early Childhood Education" OR DE "Early Experience"	Expanders - Apply equivalent subjects Search modes - Boolean/Phrase	Interface - EBSCOhost Research Databases Search Screen - Advanced Search Database - ERIC	98,587
S1	DE "Attachment Behavior"	Expanders - Apply equivalent subjects	Interface - EBSCOhost Research	3,744

		Search modes - Boolean/Phrase	Databases Search Screen - Advanced Search Database - ERIC	

Psycinfo

Accessibility Information and Tips

Print Search History

Monday, November 08, 2021 11:13:36 AM

#	Query	Limiters/Expanders	Last Run Via	Results
S8	S5 AND S6	Limiters - Publication Year: 2015-2022 Expanders - Apply equivalent subjects Search modes - Boolean/Phrase	Interface - EBSCOhost Research Databases Search Screen - Advanced Search Database - APA PsycInfo	8,028

S7	S5 AND S6	Expanders - Apply equivalent subjects Search modes - Boolean/Phrase	Interface - EBSCOhost Research Databases Search Screen - Advanced Search Database - APA PsycInfo	26,720
S6	S3 OR S4	Expanders - Apply equivalent subjects Search modes - Boolean/Phrase	Interface - EBSCOhost Research Databases Search Screen - Advanced Search Database - APA PsycInfo	179,440
S5	S1 OR S2	Expanders - Apply equivalent subjects Search modes - Boolean/Phrase	Interface - EBSCOhost Research Databases Search Screen	461,055

			- Advanced Search Database - APA PsycInfo	
S4	TI ("early intervention* “OR” early years" OR "early childhood" “OR” nurser* “OR” creche* “OR” kindergarten* “OR” toddler* “OR” infant* “OR” preschool “OR” "pre-school") “OR” AB ("early intervention*" “OR” "early years" “OR” "early childhood" “OR” nurser* “OR” creche* “OR” kindergarten* “OR” toddler* “OR” infant* “OR” preschool “OR” "pre-school")	Expanders - Apply equivalent subjects Search modes - Boolean/Phrase	Interface - EBSCOhost Research Databases Search Screen - Advanced Search Database - APA PsycInfo	175,935
S3	DE "Early Intervention"	Expanders - Apply equivalent subjects Search modes - Boolean/Phrase	Interface - EBSCOhost Research Databases Search Screen - Advanced Search	11,575

			Database - APA PsycInfo	
S2	TI (attachment* OR interpersonal*) OR (emotional* OR affective) OR mindful* OR AB (attachment* OR interpersonal*) OR (emotional* OR affective) OR mindful*)	Expanders - Apply equivalent subjects Search modes - Boolean/Phrase	Interface - EBSCOhost Research Databases Search Screen - Advanced Search Database - APA PsycInfo	459,799
S1	MM "Attachment Behavior"	Expanders - Apply equivalent subjects Search modes - Boolean/Phrase	Interface - EBSCOhost Research Databases Search Screen - Advanced Search Database - APA PsycInfo	19,347

Hits 19,347

19,347 references imported for screening

- 10263 studies removed

2137 duplicates removed

8,126 studies screened against title and abstract

7682 studies excluded

444 studies assessed for full-text eligibility

0 studies excluded

0 studies ongoing

0 studies awaiting classification

444 studies included

Appendix 11: Sample IPA Transcript

JEAN				
Quotes	INT = INTERVIEWER PART=PARTICIPANT	Experiential Statements	Exploratory notes: (what's important to the participant	PERSONAL EXPERIENTIAL THEMES (PETS)
	INT: The study is interested in the relationship between infants, toddlers and toddler-teachers and we're very interested in that dynamic. What relational practices do you think works with toddlers?			
"I do think it's a really important relationship marked by moving away from the primary caregiver, probably for the first time". *"I think we're learning more and more that they need more than*	PART: Yes, when it comes to the relationship between the adult and the child, I do think it's a really important relationship because it could be for most children the first time they move away from their primary caregiver and so there's somebody stepping into that place, which is usually the mother, or you know, a father as	Relates to stepping into the role of the primary caregiver, as a privilege, because previously that place was occupied by the mother or father. She recognises the influence of research on practice, training, and education, in learning about child	stepping into the role of the primary caregiver is a privilege	COMMITMENT

just a few bricks to play with, that it's really got to do with the relationship".	well. I think we're learning more and more that they need more than just a few bricks to play with, that it's really got to do with the relationship between the practitioner and the toddler.	development.		
	INT: And in your lived experience of working with that age group, what things did you find worked and what things did you find necessarily didn't work?			
"Allowing exploration through presence in a kind and gentle manner".	PART: I suppose in the past we used to do a lot of work by instinct, where they all worked as a group, and we didn't really understand what we were doing with toddlers and as both you and I know, as we understand child development studies more, it's important that we are really being 100% present with that child.	Recognises how childcare is now part of a much wider discussion on children's right to education.	The struggle for identity is illustrated in the temporal aspect of this paragraph. As she learned more about child development, her concern became a struggle for recognition. To be valued for the work she does and be considered a professionally skilled person.	TIME /THE TEMPORAL FACTOR OF IDENTITY Reflective note: In the past, early education was once viewed as "childcare".

	It has got a lot to do with the child being seen and given the time and the opportunity to explore the world, explore the developmental stages that they're at, and to really facilitate their exploration in a very kind and gentle manner.		Her struggle for recognition and acknowledgement of the child's rights and identity, reflects her own fight for recognition and acknowledgement	
	INT: Something you said there about practice in the past struck me…do you think that we were working on instinct most of the time?			
	PART: Yes, absolutely. A lot of nurturing instinct. I suppose you're right. When people understand development, then we all go "ah that's why I did that…". Parents do things naturally, y'know. Parents swaddle their children, they rock their babies, they soothe their babies, and as practitioners we would have recognised what		She is seeing that her interactions were instinctive practices, such as nurturing.	

	worked and what didn't work because that infant told us very quickly what didn't work.			
	INT: I'm wondering how much of today's practice is instinct and how much of it is theory?			
"…with the early childhood degree, there appears to be a lot more learning and understandin g in practice. I'm not quite sure how much comes through though, from the studies, into the difficult job of looking after toddlers".	PART: I suppose now with the early childhood degree, there appears to be a lot more learning and understanding in practice. I'm not quite sure how much comes through though from the study into the difficult job of looking after toddlers.		She is l sceptical or simply "doesn't know" how much learning comes through into practice from class-based learning. It's important to her that educators apply learning theories in practice. are practitioners losing instinct as an important skill, and that this is being replaced by "learning". Instinct is an important reflex for the difficult job of looking after toddlers.	Reflective Note: This is the gap between theory and practice.
	INT:			

	Have you found admin a burden in your practice?			
Quotes	INT = INTERVIEWER PART=PARTICIPANT	Exploratory notes:	Experiential Statements	Personal experiential themes (PETS)
"Admin completely takes the presence of the practitioner away from the child in the moment". *"Writing observations appears to be a good practice. In actual fact and in reality, it means they're not with the child or engaged with the child".* *"Somebody watching them and writing down what they're doing is not the same as somebody being with them and available to them to help nurture that growth".*	Absolutely yes. The admin completely takes the presence of the practitioner away from the child in the moment, and while writing observations appears to be a good practice, in actual fact and in reality, it means they're not with the child and engaged with the child when the child is looking for the support in their learning y'know.		Admin completely takes over the presence of the practitioner. It takes the practitioners' thoughts away from the child, and whips them out of the moment.	Admin

	INT: So that's very interesting. Can you expand on that?			
Quotes	INT = INTERVIEWER PART=PARTICIPANT	Exploratory notes:	Experiential Statements	Personal experiential themes (PETS)
"There is the pressure of being inspected at any moment and get all this (observations) written down". *In reality, the child is being left to his own devices* "Being present" and "presence" are two very	I suppose there's a lot of pressure for a lot of boxes to be ticked within the day when you're working with children and the pressure of being inspected at any moment and get all this written down and it does in my opinion, take away from the valued relationship between the practitioner and the child. It's like as if there's this gap between the two things that they're trying to achieve and I know it has to be quantified some way and on paper that might be the way to do it but in reality, the child is being left to his own devices.	They are losing precious moments of connection and attachment because of a perception that paperwork is too much.	Paperwork takes away from the relationship between the practitioner and the child. On one hand the idea was that they would do observations in order to get a better understanding of the child. But the child is losing out. Some procedures appear to be a	PAPERWORK

different things.			good practice in theory, however in her lived experience their practical implementation leads to the exact opposite of positive outcomes.	
	INT: Would you say that the observations and the admin are something that isn't working at the moment?			
"There's a flaw there". *"A flaw is undermining the necessary documentation required".*	PART: Yes, I feel so. In practice there's two of us in the room where I would have maybe spent time doing circle or doing organized activities with the group which allowed my colleague to write the notes. So therefore, in actual fact she wasn't present with the children in the group that she should have been present with. I genuinely feel that that there's a flaw there.	Accountability		RESPONSIBILITY
	00:07:25			
	INT: So in your practice then, it took two of you?			

"if I was doing circle time, my colleague would be writing up the notes. But she really should have been you know participating in the circle with me or being with and observing the children with me" *"the practical hands-on work that needs to be done to have a prepared environment, definitely would have been compromised"*	PART: Yes, there were two of us in the room with 22 children. So, if I was doing circle time, my colleague would be writing up the notes. But she really should have been you know participating in the circle with me or being with and observing the children with me, aware that someone might need to go to the bathroom or somebody was being uncomfortable or you know a child is looking tired and may need to have a jigsaw or one to one time or preparing playdoh for later on, you know so the practical hands-on work that needs to be done to have a prepared environment definitely would have been compromised.	MISDIRECTED GUILT	Feeling at fault. She holds herself and her colleague accountable for not being present with the children	RESPONSIBILITY/ HUGE CAPACITY FOR GUILT
	INT: What other aspects of practice that impinge on the			

	relationship with the children?			
It would have been lovely to have more role play, and more learning about games and physical activities with the age groups like we did years ago. There's a lot more resources out there that we would have been able to bring to the rooms to enhance their time within the service.	PART: I suppose the learning and the training. The more hands on and experiential work was lost y'know. It was a lot more study about management, and again paper things, - a lot of paperwork. It would have been lovely to have more role play, and more learning about games and physical activities with the age groups like we did years ago. There's a lot more resources out there that we would have been able to bring to the rooms with the children to enhance their time within the service.		She's compromised by competing demands. These involve paperwork versus teaching. She recognises that spending time teaching the children is more important, and she would prefer to be doing just that.	The is a need to develop more practical things, more appropriate and aligned training.
	INT: Is it practitioner's time or is it the practitioner's mental presence? would you be able to explain that?			
"We need to enhance the practitioner's	PART: Yeah, I suppose we need to		Believes that training needs to focus on the	TRAINING

realisation of how important their presence is with the child". *"More practical things I think are needed in the training"*	enhance the practitioner's realisation of how important their presence is with the child and to give them skills, more hands-on skills to use with the children y'know. More game ideas, more messy play ideas y'know. Just give them a lot of ideas that they can have in their back pocket so when their child is having y'know, a bad moment, or a bad day, or is finding separation from a parent difficult, the practitioners hav e all these tools in their back pocket to use. More practical things I think are needed in the training.		importance of the practitioner, to include practical tools in their back pocket.	
	INT: Can you go back in time and think back to what made you come to the conclusion that you needed to have, y'know…sort of the ready-made activities in your back pocket? Was			

	there ever a point where you said "oh, if only I had something to hand"?			
"With children who are very dysregulated coming in and very upset, my training as an early year's practitioner wouldn't have given me the skills to be able to listen and notice what's happening for that child".	PART: Yes. With children who are very dysregulated coming in and very upset, my training as an early year's practitioner wouldn't have given me the skills to be able to listen and notice what's happening for that child.	Training in managing dysregulation is inadequate	Having the skills to be able to listen and notice is important and valuable to her.	managing children's dysregualtion is not adequate
00:20:00 *Quotes*	INT = INTERVIEWER PART = PARTICIPANT	Experiential Statements	Exploratory notes	PERSONAL EXPERIENTIAL THEMES (PETS)
	INT: something that you said that I want to go back to which was very interesting. Are children much more unregulated these days, than before COVID. Has that been your experience?			
Completely, hugely, 100% Yeah (*children are much more unregulated these days*)	PART: Completely, hugely, 100% Yeah. And there's no comparison.			

	INT: Can you tell me more about that?			
"Over the years I've noticed children becoming more and more anxious, working with families was more acute, than the practical things, of being tired or hungry"	PART: I suppose over the years I've noticed children becoming more and more anxious and having to work with families more, and the reasons for children being upset being more acute, and not just the practical things, of being tired or hungry and then COVID came. I suppose looking back, having missed so many milestones as they would have encountered on their normal everyday life, like for example going to the playground, even going into a supermarket, even being around other adults beyond their immediate family. So COVID really impacted, I think, children of all ages.	COVID	She reports how things were already tough, and then COVID came to make matters worse.	the effects of covid on families / parents
	INT: This is very, very interesting. Have you seen changes in their language skills or			

	maybe in their social emotional skills, that type of thing?			
"There was definitely two who were non-verbal coming back or maybe had one-word sentences, which wouldn't have been in line with their age". *"The children are either in fight or flight mode, or freeze"*	PART: Yeah. Coming back from COVID we would have had 22 children in my service and there was definitely two who were non-verbal coming back or maybe had one-word sentences, which wouldn't have been in line with their age, and we would have seen a lot of children unable to make friends, would have been quite reserved in the garden, and even one being completely dysregulated that just was in, I suppose "fight" mode.	COVID	Says that she has seen how COVID has led to children having language and communicatio n delays. She has 2 non-verbal children attending her setting	the impact of covid on children's language and communication
Experiential Statements *Within two days I had to take mine [mask] off. I just could see the fear in the children's eyes.*	PART: Yeah, I think we understand now the impact [of Covid]. Y'know I personally didn't wear a mask in my practice for a long time until we got covid, and then it was y'know, in the homes a lot. So I wore a mask. But	COVID	Is willing to put her own health at risk to protect the children's emotional well-being.	the impact of covid: the sacrifice and compassion shown

	really within two days I had to take mine off. I just could see the fear in the children's eyes because what we were saying to them with masks on was that this environment is not safe.			Reflective Note: The children's emotional well-being is paramount.
	INT: That's extremely interesting…can you tell us more about wearing the mask?			
"talking from my head a bit". [from a psychological perspective]. *For the children to look around and see the world, and to see people with masks on, and the roads to be empty, and y'know, not going out to see Granny and Grandad.* *Y'know the perception of fear was absolutely huge so*	PART: Yeah, I suppose y'know... Well, I'm actually talking from my head a bit. I'm a Play Therapist as well, so I'm coming from it with this information you know. For the children to look around and see the world, and to see people with masks on and the roads to be empty and you know not going out to see Granny and Grandad.	COVID COVID	She discusses her own fear and the children's as well during COVID. Her tone is low, and she has long pauses between her sentences. At one point she stops talking altogether. They're going to be in fight, flight, freeze and in a state of stress and then they're asked to go into their preschool	fear of COVID.

therefore they're going to be in fight, flight, freeze and in a state of stress.	Y'know the perception of fear was absolutely huge [long pause] They're going to be in fight, flight, freeze and in a state of stress and then they're asked to go into their preschool which is meant to be a really safe place, and mom and dad can't come in with me for the first time in my life. I've had to let go of a hand and walk across a two-meter space into the hands of somebody else. So that alone is a physical distance you know, and I found some children found it difficult. But on the other hand, some children managed so well. They were just so brave and ran to us you know so when we stood there to greet the children. We could not have had a mask on because you know they're so young.		which is meant to be a really safe place, Is she talking about her own perception of COVID? Goes back to talking about the children (*and mom and dad can't come in with me).* As she talks, she changes between her experience and the perceived fear of the children's experience. She maps her experience of fear onto the children. Is this empathy or transmission of her own fear. The fear of Covid contrasted with the safety of preschool.	REFLECTIVE NOTES: Is this empathy and a keen sense of intuition from years of experience, or does it suggest that she herself has not yet healed from the trauma of that experience. Is mapping her experience onto the child's feelings?

	I just couldn't do it. I just couldn't put the mask on and we did it a bit but it just felt so wrong.			
	INT: And were there any other things that flagged up to you?			
"We could feel their need to play". *"We felt they didn't need to learn 123 as much as they needed to play"* *"We really upped the play time for the kids, and I suppose that was us just*	PART: Yes, I also felt that the learning, their capability to learn was reduced because they needed to play so much. We could feel their need to play. Our dolls had never got played with so much you know, they were acting out being at home and there was a lot of prison play and which is so interesting because I suppose they were imprisoned in lockdown. So their play showed the impacts of their time at home. And they're learning definitely it felt like, we felt they didn't need to learn 123 as much as they needed to play with their friends.	Tacit practices	She uses the word "instinctive" a lot and describes how she "feels" their need to play. She values intuition.	instinct and intuition. Reflective Notes: This statement is surprising, because children learn their 1,2,3, and A, B, C, through play.

working on instinct"	So we really upped the play time for the kids, and I suppose that was us just working on instinct.			
00:17:15 Quotes	INT: So were the children working through their trauma using play?			
	PART: Yeah, yes through play…. incredible to witness.			play
	INT: Incredible yeah. And also incredible to hear. You said a moment ago that you're also a Play Therapist, that's very valuable too...			
"I'm not sure where the training came from for me to realise that". *"I saw the children in my service completely differently with play therapy training".*	PART: I'm not sure where the training came from for me to realise that. I'm trained in both modalities [early years education and play therapy] and I suppose with Play Therapy, understanding came in, and I saw the children in my service	The battle for identity, and to be thought of as a advocate for children's well-being	Is an early year's teacher, and a play therapist. Says she saw the children "completely differently" with play therapy training.	professional identity

"I would be an advocate for anybody working with children including teachers who need to understand a little bit about the nervous system, including teachers who need to understand a little bit about the nervous system and what might be happening for children in their care? *There's no [practitioners] supervision. There's no help for practitioners to bring a child to supervision…to say this is what's happening…what could we do better for this child. See the child as an individual and not as one of eight or one of 22.*	completely differently with Play Therapy training. So y'know, I would be an advocate for anybody working with children, including teachers who need to understand a little bit about the nervous system and what might be happening for children in their care? I did hear of somebody who works with early years and she said she has a staff member who was finding it very difficult with one child in particular. I thought she didn't understand the child, but she found it was just too difficult. It was just too hard, and I said to my friend "*you know, there's no practitioner's supervision"*. There's no help for practitioners to bring a child to supervision to say "*this is what's happening what could we do*		How she and other practitioners see the children is important to her Her chat with her friend implies her own search for an Identity in the child development world. Children's mental health is important to her. She recognises the	Reflective Note: Play Therapy modalities for early years educators.

	better for this child". To see the child as an individual, and not as one of eight or one of 22.		significance of being an advocate in children's mental health, and of being a support for children's socioemotional wellbeing	
00:20:00 Quotes	INT = INTERVIEWER PART = PARTICIPANT	Experiential Statements	Exploratory notes (what matters to the participant)	PERSONAL EXPERIENTIAL THEMES (PETS)
	INT: So what can we do then? What can be done to bridge that gap between the practitioners and the understanding of the child's nervous system?			
	PART: I suppose a lot of support, supervision, and training.			
	INT: OK yeah. Again it comes back down to training…doesn't it really?			
"I know everybody feels they've trained so much, but this training [understanding the child's nervous system] is not inclusive. It's	PART: Yeah it does really unfortunately. And I know everybody feels they've trained so much, but this training of understanding the child's nervous system is not inclusive. It's	Practitioners are ready for a deeper understanding of children's health and emotional wellbeing	She highlights how understanding the child's nervous system is not in teacher training in the early years. She is able to see the benefits of	therapeutic orientation

not in teacher training in the early years".	not in teacher training and it's not in the early years [curriculum].		understanding Play Therapy through her training, and her orientation is towards better training for better practices.	
	Int: How much of an understanding of the child's nervous system impacts your own personal practice as practitioner?			
"I think it completely outweighs other training and understanding of the job"	PART: I think it's huge now. I think it completely outweighs other training and understanding of the job. Yes I have Montessori and I have early years [training] and I use that. But when I view a child, I look at them differently now, y'know. I often think back and go "oh if I'd only known this with X, or if it could have helped x".		Understanding the child's nervous system outweighs other training. There is a therapeutic orientation in the dynamic of her relationships.	training
	INT: I'm wondering what form that [training] might take.			
	PART:			

	Yeah and I suppose it's a bit like, you know, when you have the educational inspectors come around, they do have a lot to offer but it's not of this modality.			
	INT: You said you see the child differently. Can you tell me what is it that you see?			
"the child within the framework of their life" *"all these things that come behind the child when the child comes in our door, you know we do have to consider that".* *"see their needs rather than the curriculum that's written up on our board".*	PART: I see…I see the child, the individual. It's looking at the child within the framework of their life y'know. Where their parents are coming from. You know, if there's grandparents involved, parents are working, you know, all these things that come behind the child when the child comes in our door, you know we do have to consider that, you know, we do have to consider that there's other siblings or there's a baby at home, what might be happening for the child? You know. In the morning when they come	Putting child's needs before curriculum.	She feels that a therapeutic orientation to her work is also crucial to help her see the child first.	THERAPEUTIC ORIENTATION

	to us for a lovely day of learning or experience, it may not be that way for them. They may need a cuddle, they may need you know, some sand play, they may need to get stuck in with the boys, you know. It's just to see their needs rather than the curriculum that's written up on our board.		She sees "needs" rather than curriculum.	
	Int: So does that take you then out of the busy practitioner into a more reflective stance.			
	PART: Yeah, absolutely. Responding to what you see, I suppose.	responsivity and reflexivity	Acting in response to what is seen and observed. Reflexivity is important to her.	REFLEXIVITY Reflective Notes: This is reflexivity in action and action in reflexivity.
00:20:00 Quotes	INT = INTERVIEWER PART = PARTICIPANT	Experiential Statements	Exploratory notes (what matters to the participant)	PERSONAL EXPERIENTIAL THEMES (PETS)
	INT: Is it quite hard to teach somebody to be reflective?			
	PART: Yes, and that's exactly the key. What they're trying to say is; "*be reflective by writing it down…"* I know that	Keeping reflexivity real.	Best practice advocates practitioners be more reflective in their practice. However, she	reflexivity versus reality

	teaches you reflection, but I think it needs to be more experiential. I think they need to do more y'know, role play with people to see what that actually feels like, and to allow the practitioner to do it and store it in her mind. Doesn't have to be on paper all the time.		says it is more hands-on, practical skills that are required.	
	Int: these observations, notes and things they write down…this paperwork, what is that for?			
"Observations and documenting has, for some reason turned into, y'know, basically feeling the need to write this down because the HSE can come in at any stage and tell me I'm wrong". *"I think there was good*	PART: I think there was good intention, but for some reason it's turned into, y'know, basically feeling the need to write this down because the HSE can come in at any stage and tell me I'm wrong. It takes away from the reason why we're doing this, y'know?	Paperwork reported as it disrupts practitioners' presence	Being present	Perceptions of Paperwork versus Presence

intention, but for some reason it's turned into, y'know, basically feeling the need to write this down because the HSE can come in at any stage and tell me I'm wrong". *"It takes away from the reason why we're doing this, y'know"?* *"Emerging curriculum is absolutely fantastic if we can just do it".* *"I'm dyslexic so writing it down, obviously, I've got a big problem with writing things down, but y'know if a child comes in with a snail and I want to talk it, about what they eat, they live in the garden bla bla bla. I can go with what's*	Emerging curriculum is absolutely fantastic if we can just do it. I'm dyslexic so writing it down, obviously, I've got a big problem with writing things down, y'know. If a child comes in with a snail and I want to talk it, about what they eat, they live in the garden…bla bla bla, I can go with what's happening. But the thoughts of having to try and prove it to somebody does inhibit the natural flow with the child.			

happening, but the thoughts of having to try and prove it to somebody, does inhibit the natural flow with the child".				
	Is that what they're expected to do…to write? Are they literally taken, whipped out of the moment?			
	PART: We are yeah, because we have to document it.			
	So coming back to your example of say, a child comes in with a snail or a butterfly, So what you've to do is grab a piece of paper and a pen?		laughs in recognition	
"*Oh, God, I better document it…I better take the photograph*	PART: Oh no, we have to document it later, y'know, but its' in our heads. It's just that chore of documenting things y'know, it takes away from the spontaneity. It's just in the back of your head all the time. "*Oh, God. I better document it…I better take the photograph so I can prove it*".	Capturing Intersubjectivity on camera.	She describes how having to photograph every interaction takes away from the spontaneity of the moment.	Perceptions of paperwork versus presence

so I can prove it". *"for my service to be deemed good, that's shown by what I document"*	And you know for my service to be deemed good, that's shown by what I document. Yeah, I just found it really…it just stopped any spontaneity for me personally.		She describes how a service is only deemed good if they have a lot of photographs of intersubjective moments between the child and practitioner.	Reflective note: It took Meltzoff and Moore (1979) weeks to capture moments of intersubjectivity on camera, and they had a team of assistant researchers trying to catch that moment!
.	Just apply this to say the role of a parent, whereby if we were asking a parent, to do that, just as you describe. I mean…there would be no relationship between the parent and the child because the relationship would never have had a chance, y'know…if the parent is trying to think of everything, and run for the camera.			
	PART: Yeah I ask you...[metaphorical]			

	Int: I don't know what the word is…but it doesn't feel right at all, sure it doesn't. To be…to be documenting it all!			
"I think it's paperwork causing a block y'know. Some sort of screen between the living experience and being with the child".	PART: Yes, for some reason the writing just takes away from the 100% presence that is needed, that we know that the child's brain needs. There's a block… I think it's paperwork. Paperwork is causing a block y'know…some sort of screen between the living experience and being with the child.	Clear articulation that she feels paperwork is causing a problem.	is paperwork blocking the practitioner from the child or is this her perception?	Perceptions of paperwork
	This is fascinating to uncover. I wasn't aware that this was going on in practice. I knew that the practitioners had a certain amount to document at the end of the day, but I didn't realise that it had to be so intense that they had to photograph things, and that this kind of thing			

	will pull them out of the moment.			
	PART:			
	Oh yeah… yeah they're called "Learning Stories" y'know, so you could document but just for those photographs but you have to take the photograph and think about y'know producing it and publishing it and sticking it down and y'know they have a certain amount of observations per child per term.			
	INT: I'm familiar with that concept. I've seen evidence of it up on preschool walls. I wondered how come so many photographs were taken, and how come it's so well documented? Where was the process within all of that?			
	PART: Exactly!			
	INT: So is there a problem then with Learning Stories or perception.			
"Learning stories are amazing	PART: Yeah. I agree it's amazing, learning		Reports having to stop and take	

when it's happening with the child. It's incredible. It's exactly what the child needs. Its child led, child directed you know emerging curriculum and all that's fantastic but having to stop and take those photographs does stop the flow. It absolutely stops the flow".	stories are amazing when it's happening with the child it's incredible. It's exactly what the child needs. It's child led, child directed y'know…emergin g curriculum and all that…fantastic. But having to stop and take those photographs does stop the flow. It absolutely stops the flow.		photographs, while missing out on what in front of them. The inspector isn't important in that interaction. In that moment, the only important individuals are the child and the teacher.	
	Yeah, it absolutely has to. Because if I am in the moment in that flow, y'know that flow state of mind…			
	PART: Gorgeous…yep…y eah			
	PART: Yeah...			
	INT: I can see that's really at logger ends with anything that we would want to create, such as a moment, a presence, a dynamic between the practitioner and the child.			

I'm looking at that butterfly [with the child] and I'm thinking "oh, I'd better get a photograph. Where's my phone? Go to my phone, my camera, take the photograph and put it out and then re-engage with the child. The flow is broken. The intention is broken. Everything's broken. *"The children are living with adults who only have a limited amount of attention on them before it's broken, and then we expect children to concentrate"*	PART: Yeah. So I'm looking at that butterfly, and I'm thinking "O*h I'd better get a photograph…where's my phone*? I go to my phone…my camera…take the photograph, and then re-engage with the child. The flow is broken…the intention is broken. Everything's broken! Y'know. The children are living with adults who only have a limited amount of attention on them before it's broken, and then we expect children to concentrate!	Sending a clear message to the child that they are not important, only documentation and paper trail is important.	We are teaching the child that there is something more important than them in this moment. Taking the photograph is moving away from the child. The message is that's the most important thing, rather than being in that lovely moment, sharing eye contact, company, and the moment. The sharing of looking at the butterfly, the wonder of experiencing the butterfly from their eyes, their fascination, and their wonder at this beautiful and curios creature. The synchronicity is lost if a practitioner is rummaging for a camera. We are sending the wrong message. The message we	evidence versus authentic practice

			are sending to the child is either, (a) the photograph is more important, or (b) the inspector's wrath is more important. Either way "proof" of an intersubjective "moment" is confirmed to be more important than our actual encounter.	Reflective Note: Providing evidence of intersubjective moments seems to be more important than the actual encounter itself.
	INT: My goodness me, this will certainly be a huge focal point of the research			
	PART: Yeah…it's interesting isn't it.			
	INT; Yeah but very sad…			
"Since COVID, whether I have Polish books on my shelf is irrelevant at the moment, children are in too much need of help".	PART: Very sad. And also, then why are we surprised when the children present then with high levels of anxiety, y'know? You know it's not just about the toys or what we have on the shelves, or y'know whether we've got y'know,	THE IMPACT OF COVID CHILDREN'S SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL WELLBEING (EARLY YEARS MENTAL HEALTH)	In her view, the impact of COVID means that early education is not just about the toys, or what books they have on the shelves. These are irrelevant at the moment because in the aftermath of Covid, she believes that	COVID AND CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH

	diverse costumes. Our space is diverse and that's very important, I understand that, but at the moment the importance is being missed. Since COVID, whether I have Polish books on my shelf is irrelevant at the moment, children are in too much need of help. The other stuff will come later.		children need emotional help.	
	INT: Are they still at that critical juncture [with covid] or have they…has it settled in any way?			
00:20:00 Quotes	INT = INTERVIEWER PART = PARTICIPANT	Experiential Statements	Exploratory notes: what matters to the participant	PERSONAL EXPERIENTIAL THEMES (PETS)
	PART: In fairness, I haven't been practicing because I actually have just closed due to the paperwork. So now I'm only working as a Play Therapist, and our books are just so full. Children are still reeling from the effects			

	[of COVID] but we have to understand, it has not been that long y'know. COVID has not gone y'know, it's still there. But y'know everyone's thinking "*oh back to normal for the kids*" but they're still reeling from what those 2-3 years did to them.			
	INT: You said there a second ago that you…you're not practicing anymore?			
	PART: No.			
	INT: How was that for you…how did that go?			
	PART: I decided to close with the re-registration where we had to re-register with Tusla. It was such an awful experience and there was yet more paperwork and more computers which just doesn't work y'know for me. I got a summons to court over a piece of paper that I could not get because my	The constant struggle for appreciation is illustrated in the temporal aspect of this experience	Staggered speech when she reflects on the outcome.	Identity

"I'd been open for 30 years in a community. It was now gone and so that was that. Yeah it was sad that we mean nothing and therefore the children mean nothing. That's the message I got from the experience".	landlord could not find it and the way, just the treatment was just so awful. I just had to say that's it I'm done, I'm out of here, can't do this anymore you know and I'm closing. Having to notify to close I'm even finding that process difficult. There wasn't as much as a thanks - not that you do things for thanks, but there wasn't any acknowledgement of the practice. I'd been open for 30 years in a community. It was now gone and so that was that. Yeah it was sad that we meant nothing and therefore the children meant nothing. That's the message I got from the experience.		As she chose to close her business after 30 years, her concern became another struggle for recognition and to be valued and considered a professional and a skilled educator.	
	INT: Can you tell us a little bit about that time?			
"We're doing very important work, and it should be	PART: Of closing…? I suppose I decided to close with the re-	EMOTIONAL HURT FROM THE ACTUAL REALITY	She recognises that they're doing very important work and that	BELIEFS VERSUS THE STRESS OF REALITY

embraced and supported more than ridiculed".	registration, and you know, anyone who I tried to speak to, anyone that I was talking to, was somebody who didn't care. But we did get our last inspection actually. I can't remember who came…she was very nice…I said "*actually we're closing in eight weeks"* and she said "*oh, I'm here now, I may as well come in*". I said "*absolutely, do come in*" and she did a bit of inspection. I actually got a fully compliant inspection for the first time in 30 years, which I thought was quite remarkable, [laughs] considering I was closing!! Yeah so that was that. It was bittersweet y'know. I understand that there's room for improvement, and all the inspections… and what they do is very good. It's		it should be embraced and supported and not ridiculed; at the same time, she reports that she felt nobody cared when she was forced to close her service because she couldn't cope with the paperwork. The emotional hurt of that must have been so hard for her. The gap between what she believes is right and reality. She uses humour to deal with the trauma. Laughs at the irony. Uses humour to deal with her feelings. She describes the experience of closing and her tone goes from melancholy to humour and	

	just the manner in which it's dealt out is not very nice y'know. We're doing very important work, and it should be embraced and supported, more than ridiculed.		from humour back to melancholy. Relating this event she shows her conflict and the contradictory aspects of the whole experience.	
	INT: What was your experience of the inspectors?			
"Very badly treated. So badly treated yeah…so badly treated." *"Any other sector would not allow people to work in such a heightened state of stress, and they say we're trying to align with children and regulate them but also as practitioners we are working in an environment where somebody walks in at any moment on our working day*	PART: Very badly treated. So badly treated yeah…so badly treated. Actually, I think any other sector would not allow people to work in such a heightened state of stress, and they say we're trying to align with children and regulate them but also as practitioners we are working in an environment where somebody walks in at any moment on our working day you know, to document what we're doing and we know they're out to find mistakes. We definitely feel	Parallel's with the carers ECCE can't strike because they are too busy actually doing the job.	She says that any other sector would not allow people to work in such a heightened state of stress.	TOO BUSY CARING ABOUT THE CHILDREN TO GO ON STRIKE Reflective note: these occupations pay much more than ECCE, and they strike regularly to highlight their stress and concern about working under such continued pressure.

y'know, to document what we're doing and we know they're out to find mistakes. We definitely feel they're just there to find mistakes". *"I can't think of any other environment, any sector that would put up with that treatment, like it's an appalling way to work".*	they're just there to find mistakes. I can't think of any other environment that would, any sector that would put up with that treatment, like it's an appalling way to work.			
A friend of mine just lost the most beautiful manager that she's had for years over the way she was treated in an inspection. Yeah, she just said I can't do this anymore and she's an absolutely talented woman and she said, "I cannot be treated like that anymore…it's awful".	PART: A friend of mine just lost the most beautiful manager that she's had for years, over the way she was treated in an inspection. Yeah, she just said "*I can't do this anymore*" and she's an absolutely talented woman and she said "*I cannot be treated like that anymore, it's awful".*		She finds validation for her own actions in relating how others have experienced bad personal treatment during an inspection	ATTRITION POOR TREATMENT FROM INSPECTORS Reflective note: This is the wearing down of talented educators, now leaving the sector in droves, because they refuse to accept any lack of professional respect.

	INT: So on balance then, when we look at practitioners, is there a consensus that the government is treating them very poorly?			POOR TREATMENT FROM GOVERNMENT
	PART: Yeah.		She knows the inspectors are treating them very poorly.	COMMITMENT VERSUS COMPROMISE Reflective note: I'm surprised at the level of dedication. I'm in awe at the level of pure commitment to the children's wellbeing. That seems to be what keep the practitioners motivated.
"…finding Irish practitioners is very difficult". *..quite honestly, it's easier to work*	PART: Yeah I don't really know how so many people are working with children. We've a lot of Spanish workers at the moment because I know finding Irish practitioners is very difficult. I think it's going to get harder and harder because y'know, quite honestly, it's easier to work somewhere else			ATTACHMENT The challenges being experienced by the practitioners are leading to the exact opposite of what is required to support the attachment learning and development needs, of BTT children.

somewhere else where you get paid more and you don't have the stress of the job. *I've heard of a lot of people finding difficulty finding staff across the board at the moment.* *"the children become attached to these lovely ladies and then they're gone…"*	and you get paid more and you don't have you know, the stress of the job. I do know, I've heard of a lot of people finding difficulty finding staff across the board at the moment. There's a lot of Spanish girls who are hoping to be teachers coming to Ireland and they're wonderful. They have a lot to offer, which is great. But they don't stay for long, so the children become attached to these lovely ladies, and then they're gone y'know. So that's not great either.		She recognises that attachment is an important motivator in development.	
	INT; That's y'know…that's breaking their attachment… poking the attachment system, when we should be letting the attachment system grow.			ATTACHMENT RUPTURES
	PART: Yes…grow.			
	INT: Yes, grow and settle y'know			

	and become solid.				
	INT: So there are many things in the sector that we need to be looking at, yes…?				
	PART: Yeah…I'm not sure of where you'd start…				
	Int: I'm not sure where to start either. Although I do think speaking to people like you, is a good start. This is the start because it's only from hearing it from people like you, hearing your perspective, not just your perspective, but also the perspective of others which the same message is coming across very clearly. You're more or less saying the same thing, and your experiences are very similar. In fact, almost identical, and at least that gives us a handle on the themes and the problems that are coming up time and time and time again.				

	PART: Yeah…yeah.				
	INT: And I suppose that is the place where we'll start. When it comes to our findings and our analysis, and when we try to do justice to the things that you…you guys have told us, which we will do. We will work tirelessly to do that.				
00:20:00 QUOTES	INT = INTERVIEWER PART = PARTICIPANT	Experiential Statements	Exploratory notes: what matters to the participant	PERSONAL EXPERIENTIAL THEMES (PETS)	
	INT: Before we wrap up, is there anything more you would add...? So that we can have an idea of what's needed?				
	PART: Let me see…I think we covered it all really.				
	INT: I remember on the lost interviews that you spoke about a mentorship. I remember thinking that was a really lovely idea. It was your idea, would you tell us a little bit				

	about that again?				
"For the practitioners to stand by what they do, to understand the great job they're doing…"	PART: It's about…I suppose it's coming from the supervision point of view y'know. With play therapy, we have supervisors, and we are mentored by them y'know. Very much hands on y'know. A place where we can bring individual children or, y'know individual things that we find difficult, or to be encouraged to grow in our practice, to grow in our confidence, in what we do y'know. [I would add]…for the practitioners to stand by what they do, to understand the great job they're doing.		She says for the practitioners need to stand by what they do. But wouldn't it be better if we stood by them first.		
	INT: Yeah…				
"To understand how to be confident, to go with your gut feeling and to go with your intuition and if you feel like picking the child up	PART: To understand how to be confident, to go with your gut feeling and to go with your intuition and if you feel like picking the child up when the child needs an extra		Her wish for practitioners is to understand how to be confident, to go with your gut feeling and to go with your intuition	INTUITION.	

when the child needs an extra hug, you know go with it. That's OK. *Y'know, you don't have to be all bells and whistles for them. Just understand the good that they have in them…I think would be a fantastic place to start and then they will be able to go into their room feeling good about themselves and that will spill down to the child".*	hug, you know go with it. That's OK. Y'know, you don't have to be all bells and whistles for them. Just understand the good that they have in them…I think would be a fantastic place to start and then they will be able to go into their room feeling good about themselves and that will spill down to the child.				
	INT: Well, we're going to take what you're saying, and we're going to try and get that into practice in some way. I think that we have come to the end of our interview so what I'm going to do now is I'm going to thank you sincerely and let you know that we will now be in the process of transcribing everything that				

	you've said, plus the other participants as well, and you'll hear back from us. we'll send you your transcript and you can have a read of it and just to confirm with us that this is your transcript, and this is what you said. You can also add any new reflections that you have or if you find that there's something there that you would like to take out, you have the freedom to do that also, but we will be sending that to you. I'm going to turn the recorder off now.				
	PART: No problem.				
	INT: And again, much appreciated.				

Appendix 12: Research Question

Research Question	ANS: (derived from the two Group Experiential Themes (GETS)
1). What are a sample of early year's educators' and managers lived experiences of attachment with children aged birth to three years of age, in early learning and care settings in the Republic of Ireland?	The lived experience is reported to be one mainly of barriers to attachment relationships. However there are a number of facilitators which support attachment relationships
Research Sub-Question 1).	• Equality in Identity • Perceptions of Paperwork versus Presence • Not Everyone's time is equal
What are the barriers for the EYE to their attachment relationships with children aged birth to three years of age in ELC settings?	• Early Intervention versus Challenging Behaviour • Compliance versus Connection • Temporal Aspects of Practice • Playing with Meaning
Research Sub-Question 1). *What are the barriers for ELC Managers to attachment relationships with children aged birth to three years of age in ELC settings?*	• Policy • Perceptions of Paperwork • AIM Access • Stress • Budgets
Research Sub-Question 2). *What are the facilitators to EYE attachment relationships with*	• This is Me • Intuition versus Instinct • Love is All You Need • Affection Beats Adversity

children aged birth to three years of age in ELC settings?	
Research Sub-Question 2). *What are the facilitators to ELC manager's attachment relationships with children aged birth to three years of age in ELC settings?*	• Time • Resources
Research Sub-Question 3). *How does EYE attachment relationships compare with contemporary extant literature, and can it co-exist?*	Current practices in this sample of ELC settings in this study do not utilise Attachment Theory. Four of the seven EYE unfamiliar with contemporary attachment research Contemporary attachment research not currently featured in personal lived experience co-existing with research literature is a potential new field of research for EYE and EI research.