



“This is a business..... It’s not a one-to-one”

Exploring early years educators’ psychological and financial
well-being in non-profit and for-profit early years settings in Ireland

Master in Education studies (Early Childhood Education)

2020

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Date of Submission: 02/06/2020

Word Count: 20,853

Declaration

I hereby declare that this dissertation is a presentation of my original research work.

Wherever contributions of others are involved, every effort is made to indicate this clearly.

This work has not been submitted previously at this or any other educational institution. The work was done under the guidance of Maja Haals Brosnan at the Marino Institute of Education, Dublin. I agree that the Library may lend or copy this dissertation upon request.

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Abstract

This research study focuses on comparing early years educators' psychological and financial well-being in community, private independent and private chain settings in Ireland. Drawing particularly on self-determination theory and Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, this study focuses on exploring the psychological needs of autonomy, competency and relatedness. This research study applied a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design, where findings from the questionnaire (n=115) were used to inform the structure of the semi-structured interviews (n=4). Findings from this study indicate that the relationship educators have with children in their setting is of particular importance and one that drives their intrinsic motivation to remain in their settings. However, it is also clear that there are numerous issues affecting their ability in ensuring the formation of consistent and meaningful relationships. Findings also suggest that educators who have informal relationships with management have greater job satisfaction, provide higher quality of care and education and feel more valued by management. This research also revealed differences in educator well-being among the sub-groups, with educators from community settings experiencing better working conditions and higher job-satisfaction than educators in private settings. There were significant variances however, between independent private and private chain settings, suggesting that the problem may not lie in the 'for-profit' status, but in the prioritising of profit. A concerning finding from the study found that the majority of educators across all the sub-groups described dissatisfaction with their pay, felt a lack of recognition from both the government and society and more than half expressed a strong desire to permanently leave the sector. It is recommended that policy considers the benefits of a holistic working environment for educators, through prioritising time for relationships, encouraging competence and promoting autonomy.

Acknowledgements

I would firstly like to thank the early years educators that participated in both the survey and interviews. This study would not have been possible without the sharing of their experiences, opinions and insights.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank my supervisor Maja Haals Brosnan for her guidance and encouragement.

I would also like to thank my fellow students for their friendship, support and advice over the past year. Finally, I would sincerely like to thank my family, friends and husband for their support, encouragement and most importantly their patience during the final stages of this study.

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List of Acronyms

DCYA – Department of Children and Youth Affairs

DES – Department of Education and Skills

ECCE - Early Childhood Care and Education

ECI – Early Childhood Ireland

EYE – Early Years Educator

JCCYA - The Joint Committee on Children and Youth Affairs

NCCA – National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

OECD - Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

SDT – Self-Determination Theory

Chapter One: Introduction

In July 2019, RTE investigates – *creches behind closed doors* shocked audiences with their undercover footage from childcare chain Hyde & Seek. The programme highlighted concerns over cutting costs with meals supplied to children, sleep room conditions and ratios. Most shockingly however was the appalling attitude and behaviour displayed by the manager, towards both the children and staff members. At one point an educator even had to defend her actions of putting the needs of an infant before the needs of management to which she was reminded that “this is a business... it’s not a one-to-one”.

Outrage soon broke out after broadcast. Blame was passed around from the chain itself, to the Department of Education and finally fell on the shoulders of Tusla. At one stage CCTV was even discussed as a plausible solution to the crisis (Clarke, 2019). Bringing trust to the forefront of the debate. Throughout the RTE documentary and preceding days that followed, very little attention was drawn to the negative experiences and well-being of some staff members working in the childcare chain, whom at one point were seen to be left caring for eighteen infants by themselves.

Rationale for the Study

Initial inspiration for this research study began on reflection of whether early years settings in Ireland should be profit driven and what implications this may have on quality of care and education being provided. In Ireland, it has been reported that on average, educators working in community services, remain in their settings longer than educators in private settings (Pobal, 2019). This research study aims to investigate the reason for this by exploring the opinions and experiences of early years educators and examining whether these experiences differ among non-profit and for-profit early years settings.

Research has shown that the early years of a child's life are the most vital for their development (Allen, 2011). Most important to these years, are the relationships that are formed within them, as these relationships have shown to have a significant impact on both the child's development and well-being (Hamre & Pianta, 2004). High staff turnover rates in early years settings have shown to negatively impact these relationships and reduce the quality of care and education (Grant, Jeon & Buettner, 2019; Cassidy et al., 2011). The national average rate for staff-turnover in Ireland is currently estimated at 11%¹. The early years sector average staff-turnover rate is more than double that figure at 23% (Pobal, 2019). In full time early years settings, however this figure is considerably higher at 40% (E. Hogan, personal communication, 28 February 2020). It could be argued that the relationship children have with educators in full time settings is perhaps even more vital to their development considering how much of their daily lives are spent there.

Central to these high staff turnover rates is educators' financial well-being. A recent survey reported finding the majority of early year educators in Ireland have poor financial health and are actively looking for other employment opportunities (Greer-Murphy, 2019). The average rate of pay for an early year's educator is currently estimated to be €11.93 (Early Childhood Ireland, 2018). It is no surprise then that low pay is a major contributing factor for high staff-turnover rates. However, other aspects including stressful working conditions and a lack of recognition are also contributing factors to why educators are leaving the sector (Greer- Murphy, 2019). This research study aims to explore these aspects and how they relate to educator well-being.

¹ Staff turnover rate refers to the percentage of workers who leave and are replaced by new employees.

Aims and Objectives of Study

Researchers are increasingly recognising the links between early years educators' well-being and high-quality education and care (Jennings, 2015, King et al., 2015, Jeon, Buettner & Grant, 2018). Research has also suggested that quality is generally higher in non-profit settings (Sosinsky et al., 2007). However, it has also been noted that there are significant differences in quality among private early years settings, such as independent private and corporate chain settings (Rush & Downie, 2006). Therefore, this research study explores and compares educator's psychological and financial well-being in community, independent private and private chain settings through a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design.

Through use of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory and drawing particularly on Deci and Ryan's (2017) work on self-determination theory, this study aims to explore the following:

1. To explore aspects of early years educators' well-being in comparison to community, private independent and private chain early years settings.
2. To explore factors that contribute to and benefit early years educator workplace wellbeing.
3. To explore perceptions of early years educators in improving quality of care and education.

Chapter 2 Literature review

Research has shown that early years educators have on average poorer levels of psychological health in comparison to other professions (Whitaker et al., 2012). It has also highlighted the potential consequences on quality of care and education when educator well-being is not experienced (Hamre & Pianta, 2004; Hall-Kenyon, 2014; Jeon, Buettner & Grant, 2018). The concept of well-being is a complex one, as its meaning tends to differ through societies and cultures (Cumming & Wong, 2019). Deci and Ryan (2000) describe well-being as concerning the experience of psychological health and life satisfaction. For the purpose of this research project, it is important to define well-being in the context of early years educators. Research on educator' well-being found the term "well-being" to be frequently used without any definition or conceptualisation (Cumming, 2017). Cumming and Wong (2019) therefore, took a multidisciplinary perspective approach, when defining educator well-being, taking Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory into consideration:

A dynamic state, involving the interaction of individual, relational, work-environmental, and socio-cultural political aspects and contexts. Educator's well-being is the responsibility of the individual and the agents of these contexts, requiring ongoing direct and indirect supports, across psychological, physiological and ethical dimensions (p. 276).

This literature review will firstly examine the political context of the early years sector in Ireland, both historically and presently. It will then outline educator well-being through the interlinking systems of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model, before moving on to discuss some of the dominant discourses that pervade the sector. An argument is made for emotional labour to be both recognised and valued in supporting the professionalising the sector. The three basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence

and relatedness are all explored independently and in relation to their importance to educators' psychological well-being. Attention is then drawn to the effects of low pay, with research finding clear links between salary and quality of care (King et al., 2016). Finally, the question of whether early years settings in Ireland should be profit driven is asked. Questioning the priorities and values that are held by both the Government and early years settings.

Overview of Early Years Sector

A period of change? In the past two decades, Ireland has experienced a period of rapid policy development in the early years sector (Wolfe et al., 2013). However as of yet, no single department or agency has taken ultimate responsibility for early years policy in Ireland despite recommendations dating back to the release of the white paper in 1999, proposing that the Department of Education and skills (DES) take control of all ECCE (Early Childhood Care and Education) policy (Walsh, 2016). It has been argued that despite a period of rapid change in the early years sector, a traditional policy paradigm has remained (Wolfe et al., 2013). Ideologically, ECCE in Ireland was considered to be a private family concern that did not require state intervention (Hayes, 2010). This has been evident with policy responsibility being passed between and shared among numerous government departments, relying on private and community providers (Walsh, 2016).

The first ECCE Regulations drafted in Ireland were the 1996 Child Care Regulations, which concentrated on the institutional aspects of facilities, including ratios, supplies, health, first aid and the number of children enrolled. However, there was no specific criteria for aspects of quality provision such as a curriculum, qualifications, or children's experiences (Hogan et al., 2014). In 2004, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) reported an urgent need for ECCE policy reform in Ireland. This was

one of the driving forces behind significant changes in ECCE policy and practice in the years that followed. Central to these changes, was the introduction of the free pre-school year, along with the introduction of the *Aistear* Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009). The primary function of *Aistear* is to provide and support an environment where all children can grow and develop as competent and confident learners within loving relationships with others (NCCA, 2009). *Síolta*, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education, was developed in 2006 on behalf of DES. Its framework is there to guide and support educators and settings through a process of reflection and self-evaluation. Both *Síolta* and *Aistear* are designed for those working with children from birth to six years and both can be used to complement existing curricula such as Montessori (Hogan et al., 2014). However, the implementation of both *Síolta* and *Aistear* is currently not compulsory and quality training on the *Aistear* curriculum is specifically limited (Gray & Ryan, 2016), questioning the government's commitment to its successful implementation.

The early years sector in Ireland has been heavily critiqued in recent years, claiming that it is a profession in crisis. Central to this claim is the lack of state investment in the sector. Government investment has traditionally been quite low (Moloney, 2010). In 2017, investment was estimated to be at 0.1% GDP by the EU social justice index, significantly lower than the EU average of 0.8% GDP (ECI, 2017). This coincided with Ireland being ranked lowest among 28 EU countries for investment in early years education (OECD, 2017). The low levels of government investment in the early years sector has resulted in some of the highest childcare fees in Europe, low salaries, and high staff turnover. On the 5th February 2020 over 30,000 early years educators marched in a national protest in Dublin city centre, voicing the increasing tensions and issues that pervade the sector.

A profession in crisis. The Joint Committee on Children and Youth Affairs (JCCYA, 2017) reported that a “lack of recognition of the sector by government, chronic

under investment, high staff turnover, burnout, an exodus of qualified staff from the profession, and sustainability issues” (p. 26) have all contributed to this crisis. Walsh (2016) argues that investment in the early years sector needs to start with “the people who deliver the service and who are fundamental to the quality of experiences and outcomes experienced by the child” (p. 89). Therefore, salaries and career prospects need to be improved in order to both attract and retain qualified educators (Murphy, 2015). Although childcare costs in Ireland are among the highest in Europe, most educators are paid below a living wage (JCCYA, 2017). Pobal (2019) recently estimated that 39% of educators who had left a service in the past year had also left the sector entirely.

Moloney (2019) describes the reality of working life for educators as, juggling multiple competing expectations, engaging in complex thinking and decision-making processes, and working with various partners to do what's best for young children. The demands and responsibilities of an educator's daily working life far outweigh the professional recognition that is awarded to them by the both the Government and society. Therefore, the high staff-turnover rates cannot be questioned when the reality of the job requirements and lack of benefits come into perspective. Even more concerning than the damage that high staff turnover does to the profession itself, is the effect it has on the infants and young children in the setting, whom at this stage in their lives are so heavily dependent on building strong, meaningful connections with the adults around them (Huntsman, 2008; Grant et al., 2019; King et al., 2016).

Acknowledging the issues facing the early years sector in Ireland, the government has made clear attempts to tackle these issues with the generation of new initiatives and schemes. However, the JCCYA (2017) claim that the policies and schemes that have been implemented thus far have failed to have any meaningful impact on those working in the sector. The

newest scheme has been the introduction of the First 5 strategy (2019-2028), in 2018 by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA).

First 5 Strategy. The First 5 strategy aims at building on significant developments in early years education over recent years and “seeks to further improve affordability, accessibility and quality” (DCYA, 2018, p. 87). It recognises the importance of relationships and interactions in the early years of a child’s life, and advocates a need for high-quality settings where children are able to “develop a positive sense of who they are and a feeling that they are valued” (DCYA, 2018, p. 87). A main concern discussed in the policy is that of high staff-turnover. As well as poor wages, the policy also acknowledges the limited time available for reflection, planning and paperwork. Factors that are considered essential for high-quality settings (Moss & Dahlberg, 2008).

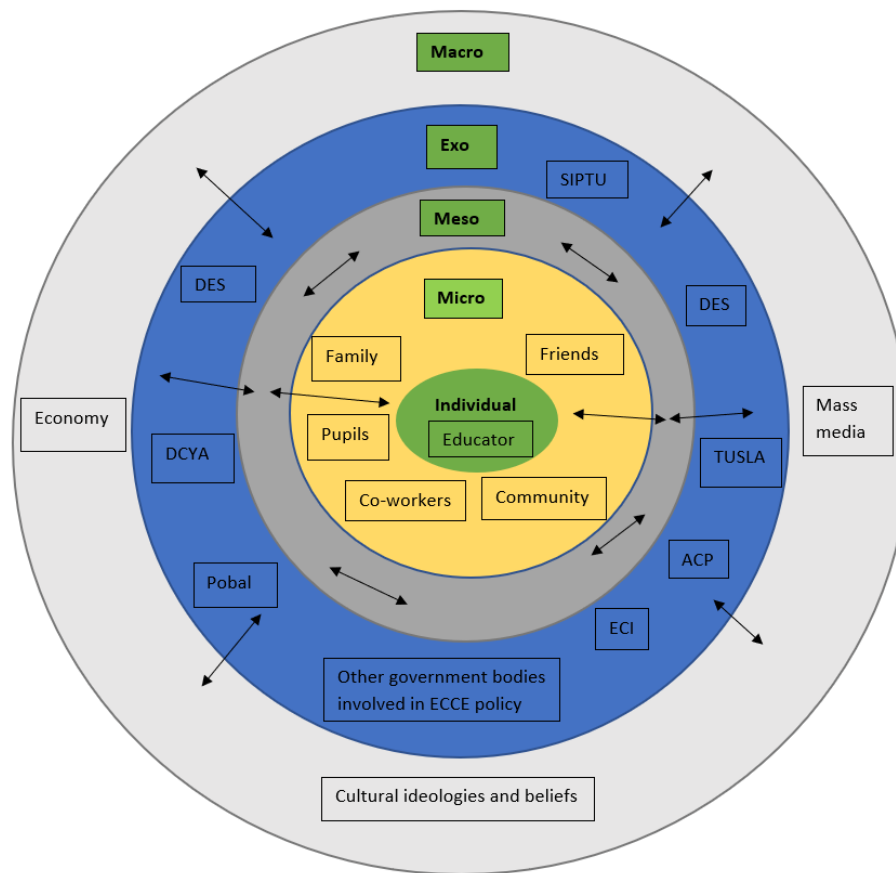
The First 5 strategy recognises that whilst progress has been achieved in raising qualifications, investment in the sector is still relatively low. This is especially the case in programs for children under the age of three, where the qualification requirements are lower. The First 5 aims to reform the sector through the introduction of a new funding model and to move to a graduate led workforce. The funding model claims that employers will be supported in providing more favourable working conditions that will both attract and retain staff (DCYA, 2018). However, the first scheme that has come from the First 5 strategy, the National Childcare Scheme (NCS) has been met with some criticism, regarding the negative effects the scheme will have on lower-income families (Wayman, 2019). Thus, in policy a funding model proposed by First 5 strategy may seem like a resolution but in practice it could end up simply being more government rhetoric that continues to evade the sector of any meaningful transformation.

This section has highlighted the urgent need for change in the early years sector in Ireland. This research study aims to contribute to that change, by exploring the relation between high-turnover rates and educators' psychological and financial well-being. Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory will be used in understanding the many different interlinking contexts in which educator well-being is situated in.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, shows us that our lives are "lived interdependently through a network of shared relationships" (Hayes, O'Toole & Halpenny, 2017, p. 17). Jorde-Bloom (1988) claims that early years educators bring their own experiences, values and expectations with them to their respective roles, however their attitudes and behaviors are influenced particularly by the environment in which they work. This is a reciprocal relationship, one where the individual has just as much an effect on their environment as the environment has on them. Cumming (2017) found that educator well-being was often conceptualised on an individual basis and claimed that "the contextual, relational, systemic and discursive influences on educators' work and workplaces are just as important for understanding, and better supporting, educators' well-being" (p591). Thus, this research study seeks to explore the multi-layered aspects of the working environment and the influence they have on educator well-being. This research project proposes an adapted version of the ecological systems theory, that is best suited to explore the psychological and financial well-being of early years educators currently working in Ireland. The layers in the systems that influence and are influenced by the early years educators' well-being are outlined in the adapted model seen in figure 1. This chapter will be structured according to this model.

Figure 1: The ecological model of educator well-being



Note: Model created by Author

Source: Adapted from Bone (2015) & Santrock (2014)

Systems of proposed model

Individual educator. The individual early years educator is at the centre of this model. They are influenced by environmental settings such as their early years setting, home, community, culture and society in general (Bone, 2015). When exploring educator well-being we can use this model to observe and recognise the influences and impacts that all systems may have on an individual's well-being. The individual is positioned as active rather than passive, thus the individual can influence their environment just as equally as the environment influences them (Bone, 2015). An example of this in the ECCE sector in Ireland

can be seen in the high staff turnover rates, where an individual's decision to leave the sector can cause a ripple effect all the way out to the macro-system.

Educator micro-system. Bronfenbrenner (1994) states that “a microsystem is a pattern of activities, social roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given face-to-face setting” (p. 1645). In other words, the microsystem is the day to day interactions with people, objects and places. For early years educators the microsystem includes family, friends, community, co-workers, pupils, and the families of pupils. These interactions are directly experienced by the educator and are experiential spaces where the educator forms perceptions (Bones, 2015).

Educator meso-system. Bronfenbrenner describes the mesosystem as a system of two or more microsystem. The mesosystem refers to the interactions among the elements within the microsystem. This could be relations between supervisors and co-workers, children and educators, or even the community and co-workers. The concept of the mesosystem shows us how one micro-system can affect another, either positively or negatively. Bone (2015) claims that “various elements of an individual's life overlap creating a chain-of-influence effect. The mesosystem is where an analysis of these overlapping and interrelated domains of an employees' life can occur” (p. 263). Thus, the mesosystem allows us to explore the relationships that educators have with families, children and co-workers. The importance of such relationships will be discussed further within psychological well-being.

Educator exo-system. The environmental influences that the individual educator may be affected by on a day to day basis are included in the micro-system, such as relationships within each setting. However, the outer layers of both the exo-system and macro system may play an even greater impact on educator well-being with ECCE policy and dominant

discourses that are ingrained in perceptions of Irish society (Hogan et al., 2014). The exo-system refers to “the linkages and processes taking place between two or more settings, at least one of which does not contain the developing person, but in which events occur that indirectly influence processes within the immediate setting in which the developing person lives” (Bronfenbrenner, 1994, p. 1646). This would be more distant influences on an educator’s well-being that they may or may not be in day to day contact with but are still affected indirectly by (Hayes, O’Toole & Halpenny, 2017). This could include government departments which are directly associated with policy in early years care and education, such as the Department of Education and Skills (DES), The Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA), the Child and Family Agency (Tusla), Pobal and wider government departments and agencies that also contribute to the sector such as the Department of Finance. It would also include non-governmental bodies that are in place to support the early years profession such as Early Childhood Ireland (ECI), Association of Childhood Professionals (ACP), and trade union SIPTU.

Educator macro-system. The macrosystem is the largest of the systems and one which the educator is not in direct contact with but has the most significant influence on their well-being (Hayes, O’Toole & Halpenny, 2017). Bronfenbrenner (1979) describes the macrosystem as “consistencies, in the form and content of lower-order systems (micro-, meso-, and exo-) that exist, or could exist, at the level of the subculture or the culture as a whole, along with any belief systems or ideology underlying such consistencies” (p. 26). The educator’s macrosystem is composed of cultural ideologies and values such as the dominant discourses that pervade the early years sector in Ireland.

Dominant Discourses

Foucault (1974) argues that knowledge is formed through discourse and defined it as “practices that systematically stand for the objects of which they speak” (p. 49). Discourses that are highly dominant in society are easy to accept as they guide people on how to think, feel and act (Ebrahim, 2010). Dominant discourses that permeate early childhood education are situated within a neoliberal context. When discussing how neoliberalism has impacted the early years sector in the United Kingdom, Moss (2017) describes it as a story of quality and high returns. He claims it is within this political environment “with its reduction of human life to economic transactions and relationships, enacted through competition, calculation, choice and contract” (p. 16) that enables the situation of quality and high returns that permeates the early years sector.

Hogan et al., (2014) argue that although ECCE policies reflect that the Irish Government aspires to follow the Nordic model² of ECCE provision, in reality however it is much more similar to the situation of “quality and high returns”. Neoliberalism has seen to have a devastating impact on early childhood education across the globe, with its focus on standardisation and positioning children as investments for the future economy (Sim, 2017). Neoliberalism is deeply embedded in the early years sector in Ireland. It can even be seen through the terminology used in describing the sector. Moss (2017) disputes the term ‘care’ as it places emphasis on ‘care’ being exclusive to young children. Instead it should be implied that multiple sectors of society incorporate an ‘ethics of care’ into their practice but do not have to apply it to the terminology when describing the sector.

² The Nordic model refers to the ECCE policies adopted by Nordic countries.

Currently the early years sector in Ireland is exclusively female at 98.2% (Pobal, 2019). JCYA (2017) suggest that the gender imbalance in the sector contributes to the value society places on the notion of care within the sector. The discourse around the notion of care feeds into a maternalistic view of 'woman's work'. Osgood (2006) claims that the neoliberal construction of professionalism favours more masculine traits, which run counter to the beliefs and practices of educators. However, Osgood (2006) also believes that embracing an 'ethics of care' should be the cornerstone of professionalising the sector. Hall-Kenyon et al., (2014) have also called for a reclamation of the 'care' aspect of educators' role as a central part of their professional identity.

The Professionalisation of the Early Years Sector

A recent survey carried out on early years educators in Ireland found that vast majority of them felt that society did not recognise their career as a profession (Greer-Murphy 2019). It could be argued that the Irish Government has made clear attempts to tackle this issue through increasing levels of qualifications and regulations. However, these attempts could also be viewed as detrimental to the professional identities of educators. For instance, Moloney et al. (2019) argue that the effectiveness of a highly regulated system is debatable with these actions being often identified as de-professionalisation. Consequently, they claim a service that performs 'high quality' practice through the inspection process addresses the government's economic agenda rather than supporting the rights of the child, their family, the educators and the community at large. Osgood (2010) refers to the process of increasing regulations as an "audit culture". The Ofsted inspections of early years settings in the UK was initially welcomed into the sector as it would enable early years settings to be held in the same regards as schools. However, Osgood (2010), notes that these inspections are often carried out by inspectors who lack expertise within the field and can consist of just a two-hour visit. In Ireland early years services are inspected by numerous governmental bodies,

including Tusla, DES and Pobal. Therefore, early childhood policy in Ireland is “underscored by robust accountability and is rigidly policed” (Moloney et al., 2019, p. 3).

The move towards increasing qualifications in the early years sector could be argued as the governments strongest attempt so far in professionalising the sector. However, research suggests that educators feel they are not given recognition as a professional regardless of the level of qualification or experience that they have (Boyd, 2013; Greer-Murphy, 2019). The introduction of the *Aistear* curriculum framework can be seen as another attempt to professionalise the sector. The *Aistear* curriculum is designed for those working with children from birth to six years. However, it is only the ECCE rooms (3 to 5 years) that receive DES inspections and access to government provided programs such as, better start and AIM (Access and Inclusion Model). The higher capitation rates which provides further funding to the ECCE rooms are only available to educators who have a level 7 or above qualification. Hence, the most qualified educators end up working with this age group. Research has been clear when it states that the first 1,000 days in a child’s life are the most important to their development, yet those working with these children require lesser qualifications and typically earn lower wages than those working with children over three years (JCYA, 2017). The most recent Pobal (2019) report showed that educators working with children below three years receive a lower salary than their co-workers working with children three years or above, even though they share the same qualifications and experience. Thus, educators’ self-value and professional identity is tested with policy placing more importance on working with a specific age group.

As previously argued the government’s attempts to professionalise the sector have so far, been unsuccessful. However, it is vital that we remain open to multiple meanings of professionalism and if “those meanings remain fluid rather than static, discourses of professionalism can function as a technology for change” (Duhn, 2010, p. 54). When

discussing identities of early years educators, Dockett (2019) questions whose voices dominate the discussions around professionalisation of ECCE and argues for the inclusion of the very people it affects.

Perhaps if other perspectives of professionalising the early years sector were considered in policy then maybe the sector would see greater transformation. Perspectives such as Osgood (2010), who argues that the state must acknowledge and value the emotional labour carried out by educators. She states that emotional professionalism must be “celebrated rather than denigrated and obscured from public discourse” (p. 131).

Emotional labour.

“When love and skill work together, expect a masterpiece” (Ruskin, 1992)

Vincent and Braun (2013) discusses emotional labour as being a skill that requires the educator to be consistent in displaying positive emotions such as warmth, reassurance and capability. Oke et al., (2019) argue that having a highly qualified workforce in the early years sector does not necessarily mean that they will be effective educators in their settings, claiming that qualifications and training do not “substitute for a love of working with children” (p. 3054). Colley et al., (2003) drawing on the work of Bourdieu (1990) developed the term vocational habitus to explain how “the learner aspires to a certain combination of dispositions demanded by the vocational culture” (p. 485). Thus, emotional labour is not just an inherent ability that educators are naturally equipped with, but involves a complex skill set, requiring educators to negotiate certain dispositions in managing both their own and the children's emotions.

In discussing ways that educators can connect with children who have experienced adversity or trauma, Bone (2008) draws on the importance of spirituality within a holistic curriculum. She states that educators must not only be caring and effective but also be

consistently reflecting on their approach to pedagogy. Bone (2008) states this enables change and growth to occur within “spaces where relationships are realised in certain ways and spaces where the potential for transformation is always present” (p. 270).

Moyles (2001) has argued that emotional labour hinders the professionalisation of the early years sector. Taggart (2011) claims that emotional labour can be easily exploited and argues that to avoid this exploitation educators should base their profession upon a political ethics of care that “challenges the privatisation and domestication of care and places it at the heart of thinking about society” (p. 86). Giving recognition and value to the emotional labour involved in the early years sector will not only acknowledge the complexity of the role of the educator but be the foundation in establishing educators' professional identities.

There appears to be continuous research arguing a need for the acknowledgement and recognition of emotional labour and in supporting the professionalisation of the sector. Moloney (2010) argues that aspects relating to self-esteem, self-belief, job satisfaction and belonging are equally as important to professionalising the early years sector. These aspects correspond to educators' psychological well-being, specifically to the basic needs of self-determination theory, including autonomy, competence and relatedness.

Psychological Well-being

The concept of psychological well-being is understood through various perspectives across literature. For instance, Ryff and Singer (2008) found it to include aspects of personal development, forming secure relationships, autonomy, competence and self-acceptance. Whereas, Cumming and Wong (2019) found educator well-being to be discussed in terms of psychological distress, such as depression, stress or burnout. Other research that focused on how the classroom environment affects educators' psychological well-being found environments that were deemed as chaotic resulted in educators reporting higher levels of

stress, depression and emotional exhaustion (Jeon et al., 2018). There is a noticeable lack of research carried out on early years educator's psychological well-being in Ireland. However, given the sectors high staff turnover rate it could be argued that there is an urgent need for research in the area. For the purpose of this research study, the focus on psychological well-being will be placed on the basic needs of self-determination theory, including autonomy, competence and relatedness.

Self-determination theory. Ryan and Deci's (2017) self-determination theory (SDT) studies the effects that the environment has on an individual by examining how the "biological, social and cultural condition either enhance or undermine the inherent human capacities for psychological growth, engagement, and wellness, both in general and in specific domains and endeavours" (p. 3). Thus, whilst self-determination theory is strongly rooted within the ecological systems theory, it also allows us to explore more specific aspects of educators' psychological well-being.

According to self-determination theory, well-being is described in terms of thriving rather than simply having a positive outlook. Ryan and Deci (2017) describe thriving as being "characterised by vitality, awareness, access to and exercise of one's human capacities and true self-regulation" (p. 241). For an individuals' psychological well-being to thrive then their needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness must be satisfied. These three basic needs are essential to "optimal development, integrity, and well-being. Failure to satisfy any of these needs will be manifested in diminished growth integrity and wellness" (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 242). SDT also draws on the work of Frey (1993), who developed on from the idea of intrinsic motivation. Frey argues that intrinsic motivation motivates educators "to do their best and excel at their vocation" (As cited in Oke et al., 2019, p. 3054).

Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Deci & Ryan (2017) describe intrinsically motivated behaviour as behaviour that is performed out of genuine interest and passion for which “the primary reward is the spontaneous feelings of effectance³ and enjoyment” (p. 14). Intrinsic rewards are a direct result of the daily interactions and engagements educators have in their working lives. Whereas, extrinsically motivated behaviours are motivated by an external reward, such as salary or promotion opportunities. Watt and Richardson (2008) found teachers with more intrinsic motivation for entering the profession were more engaged in their job, professional development and more likely to remain in their settings than teachers with more extrinsic motivation.

They also found that more intrinsically motivated teachers when faced with high demands were more likely to remain within the sector, rather than more extrinsically motivated teachers who were more likely to leave the sector completely. Grant, Jeon & Buettner (2019) also found that more intrinsically motivated teachers were more likely to remain in the profession and displayed higher professional commitment compared to teachers with more extrinsic motivation. For early years educators in Ireland there are few extrinsic rewards currently offered, therefore it would be assumed that the vast majority entering the sector are intrinsically motivated and more likely to remain in the sector during times of difficulty.

Respondents from a recent survey carried out on early years educators in Ireland found that most educators enjoyed their occupation and were passionate about their work. However, due to the stressful working conditions, low pay and a lack of recognition over half of the respondents claimed that they are currently looking for other employment opportunities, whilst most stated they would leave the sector within five years if the situation

³ The state of having a causal effect on objects and events in the environment

had not changed (Greer-Murphy, 2019). Therefore, although these educators may have been intrinsically motivated to enter the profession, they are still planning on leaving the sector, as they are unable to cope with the working conditions. Perhaps one explanation for this could be due to those very intrinsic motives being jeopardised. Where time for meaningful interactions and engagements with children has not been prioritised by management. Watt and Richardson (2008) claim that understanding the kind of rewards educators seek, whether intrinsic or extrinsic, can enlighten management and policymakers on how best to improve quality of practice.

Basic psychological needs. Deci and Ryan (2000) engaged in diverse studies to show how the satisfaction of autonomy, competence and relatedness were directly linked to well-being. They found that these three needs “specify the conditions under which people can most fully realize their human potentials” (p. 263). Each of these three needs will be discussed independently however all three needs are interlinked and relate to each other.

Competence. Ryan & Deci (2017) define competence in SDT as a basic need to feel effectance and mastery. According to SDT, educators who feel more confident should show a higher level of job performance and register a higher degree of psychological well-being. Research has also found higher levels of competence to correlate with greater well-being (Collie et al., 2016). Jeon et al., (2018) found that teachers who had higher levels of job competence were less likely to be depressed and stressed. Jennings (2015) also found that teachers who are more socially and emotionally competent can better manage their classrooms, through positive reinforcement rather than punishment. This in turn, creates a healthy classroom climate which directly influences positive aspects of both the children and educator well-being.

Ryan & Deci (2017) claim that “the need for competence is evident as an inherent striving, manifested in curiosity, manipulation, and a wide range of epistemic motives” (p. 11). However, competence tends to diminish in environments that are deemed too challenging. Environments where “negative feedback is pervasive, or feelings of mastery and effectiveness are diminished or undermined by interpersonal factors such as personal focused criticism and social comparisons (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 11). This can be seen within the micro- and meso-systems with relationships between management and co-workers but also seen through dominant discourses in the exo-system and micro-system, where educators feel a lack of recognition by society and government (Greer-Murphy, 2019) and where an ‘audit culture’ of rigid regulations and inspections leaves early years settings feeling incompetent in their profession.

Autonomy. Autonomy described by Ryan and Deci (2017) is the need to self-regulate one’s experiences and actions. They state that when “acting with autonomy, behaviours are engaged whole-heartedly, whereas one experiences incongruence and conflict when doing what is contrary to one’s volition” (p. 10). Thus, autonomy is aligned with an individual’s authentic interests and values. Research has found early childhood educators’ autonomy in the workplace to contribute significantly to educators’ psychological well-being (Royer & Moreau, 2016). Cassidy et al., (2017) found teachers’ autonomy in the work environment was directly linked to the emotional support of the children in their care. Thus, when the basic psychological need for autonomy is not met for the educator, then the children’s own well-being is impacted too.

As previously seen, autonomy is directly linked to forming strong professional identities. However, with neoliberal policy greatly reducing autonomy through rigid regulation, Pearson & Moonmaw (2005) argue the need for educators to have curriculum autonomy finding it to increase both empowerment and professionalism. There are many

actors involved within the diverse and complex field of early childhood education. Educators who seek different perspectives and are drawn in by shared values, who have been inspired through the work of early childhood theorists such as Froebel, Montessori, Steiner, Reggio Emilia and Malaguzzi.

A socio-cultural perspective in early childhood education recognises, values and celebrates the culture it is based in, much like New Zealand's early years curriculum, *Te Whāriki* (Moss, 2017). The *Aistear* curriculum framework is also rooted within a socio-cultural perspective, however its connection to Irish culture may not be as apparent as *Te Whāriki*. Encouraging and celebrating the diversity and complexity of the many different theoretical perspectives that occupy the field of early years education allows educators to be intrinsically motivated to apply this knowledge to their own practice. This in turn creates feelings of both autonomy and competence of practice. Although policy has embraced this perspective with the implementation of the *Aistear* framework it also needs to increase quality training on ways of incorporating different theoretical perspectives and support educators to continuously reflect on and critique their own practice.

Relatedness. Ryan and Deci (2017) describe the need for relatedness to concern feelings of being socially connected. It is within the micro- and meso-systems that we can further explore aspects of educator well-being through the relationships that are formed here. Corr et al., (2015) found that having good working relationships with co-workers, management, children and their families was associated with better mental health. Thus, workplace relationships show us that well-being is not only an individual response but is interconnected to everyone within the setting (Cumming, 2017). Research also found that the relationship educators have with both their supervisor and management was a strong indicator of their workplace satisfaction (Jeon & Wells, 2018). Cassidy et al., (2011) found that increased stress and workload occurred when colleagues left the early years setting. Unlike

other professions, an early years setting can be greatly impacted by the resignation of even one educator, particularly if that staff member has been there a significant period and has taken on a lot of responsibilities. Educators that are left to fill their boots whilst also training in a new member may become overwhelmed, resulting in a snowballing effect of resignations. Creating an environment which supports 'belongingness' could support early years settings when faced with these situations through creating an environment in which all educators feel supported by each other, management and families.

Ryan and Deci (2018) state that all three basic needs of SDT are interrelated and equally contribute to high quality relationships and well-being. However, when relatedness and autonomy are turned against each other, poorer quality relationships and well-being results. For example, if an educator's relationship with their manager in turn results in a lack of autonomy this would have negative implications for the relationship and in turn effect their well-being.

Research has found the greatest source of job satisfaction among educators is from their interactions with children (Jorde-Bloom, 1988). Bronfenbrenner & Morris (2006) suggests that to be "effective, interactions must occur on a fairly regular basis over extended periods of time" (p. 297). Time for these interactions to occur is therefore, fundamental in building meaningful relationships with children. However, this may prove difficult depending on staff ratios and multiple other factors relating to job duties. Prioritizing time for interactions should therefore be recognized with great importance for future policy, given that these interactions are what predominately intrinsically motivates educators to remain in the sector.

Financial Well- being

Ryan & Deci (2017) claim that pay also relates to competence, autonomy and relatedness, in that pay needs to be perceived as equitable. Research has found that educators' financial well-being to be equally as important as their psychological well-being (Jorde-Bloom, 1988; King et al., 2016; Grant, Jeon & Buettner, 2019). Grant, Jeon & Buettner (2019) found that educators who perceived better working conditions such as pay, and promotion opportunities showed a decreased likelihood of intending to leave the sector and maintained a greater sense of professional commitment to the field. Hall-Kenyon et al., (2014) on a review of literature, found nearly all studies to conclude that low pay had a negative impact on not only educators' well-being but the entire sector. King et al., (2016) found strong links between educators that had greater financial well-being and their ability to demonstrate greater emotional availability in interactions with children. It is evident from research that educators' financial well-being is an issue that urgently needs to be addressed, particularly in the Irish context, where there is a significant lack of research on the topic.

The early years sector in Ireland is one of the lowest paid professions in Ireland, with an average rate of pay of €11.93 per hour (ECI, 2018). Research carried out by SIPTU found most educators working in Ireland had poor financial health. Educators reported issues such as, difficulty managing their salaries and being unable to cope with unexpected expenses and almost all educators surveyed believed the sector to be unfairly paid (Greer-Murphy, 2019). Financial well-being, however, is more than just feeling financially secure and being able to pay bills. It's also about being paid a salary that reflects a feeling of recognition and value from not only the early years setting, but the Government and society too. Moloney and Pope (2013) found that salary in the early years sector in Ireland undermined graduates' confidence and self-esteem and how they valued their own work. Hence, resulting in a lack of

competence. Unless adequate pay and working conditions are introduced to the sector, there will continue to be a consistent high turnover (Moloney & Pope, 2013).

Horgan et al., (2014) claims that until recently the main ECCE policy focus was on creating places for childcare rather than promoting the quality of care and pedagogy or addressing affordability and financial sustainability issues. On analyses of the split-system of the early years sector in Ireland, Walsh (2016) recommends that one single agency needs to solely take responsibility for the sector and recommends the introduction of appropriate salary structures and scales be introduced for early years educators.

Although financial well-being is a current issue in early years policy in Ireland, research has found that increasing pay and opportunities in the sector will not alone lead to the desired outcomes of decreasing turnover in the sector. (Bridges et al., 2011). Similarly, to increasing salary, research in the U.S found that a high percentage of educators in training, had planned to leave the sector once they were qualified (Ryan & Ackerman, 2005). The same could be argued for the situation in Ireland, with increasing numbers of educators graduating with degrees and then using those degrees to pursue more financially stable employment opportunities without even entering the early years sector. Hall-Kenyon et al., (2014) propose that educators should not only be supported through the training and qualification process but that educators should be further incentivised to remain within the sector, these incentives need to go beyond salary in order to have a significant impact.

Supporting educators in their efforts to improve quality should consider the knowledge, skills and expectations of educators, rather than simply assuming quality would improve automatically with additional education (Hall-Kenyon et., 2014). This is an important argument to make with the governments push on qualifications in the early years sector. Encouraging educators that have worked in the sector for most of their lives to go

back and re-train needs to be more than just financially encouraged, it needs to be intrinsically motivated. Financial incentives and the threat of loss of employment will not encourage autonomous motivation to return to education and retrain. Policy should therefore incorporate the ideas of self-determination theory when supporting educators in gaining more insights into the often complex and diverse realm of early childhood education.

A Business Model

The question of whether early years settings in Ireland should be profit driven is what has initially driven this research. High-quality early childhood education and commercial early years settings have rarely been well matched with profit sometimes prioritized before the needs of children and educators (Cumming & Wong, 2019). Research has found quality is generally higher in non-profit early years settings, where turnover rates were significantly lower and interactions with children were more positive (Sosinsky et al., 2007). According to Pobal (2019), educators working in community services on average, remain in their settings longer than educators in private settings. However, there is no apparent difference in turnover rates between community and private settings. After making personal contact with Pobal, it was discovered that staff on government employment schemes were also included in the turnover rates in community settings (E. Hogan, personal communication, February 23, 2020). This could impact the current findings given that 25% of staff in community settings are on government employment schemes (Pobal, 2019).

Although private settings make up most of the early year's settings in Ireland, there is little attention given to the different type of private settings, such as chain or independent, full-time or sessional services. A survey carried out in 2005 by The Australian Institution found corporate chain settings to provide poorer quality care compared to community based centers (Rush & Downie, 2006). However, the survey results indicated a consistent quality

difference between independent private and chain settings. This suggests that it is not 'for-profit' status itself, which is the problem, but the pressure that private chains settings are under to pursue a profit.

It could be argued that a neoliberal approach to the early years sector has created a system that profits from young children's care and education. Privatising this sector has created a competitive market, where profit prevails over the care and well-being of the child. Moloney et al., (2019) claims that a business approach to ECCE positions "parents as consumers and early childhood services as a commodity to be bought" (p.8) and imposes constraints on the professionalisation of the sector. Within this neoliberal market, assumptions are made by the Government that places will materialise faster, and competition will drive down prices and increase quality. Thus, this becomes accepted as the only possibly economic option available (Moloney et al., 2019). It might be assumed that a simple solution to the crisis in the sector is for the Irish Government to simply increase funding. However, as Duhn (2010) argues, there lies a danger in becoming a privatised sector that is completely publicly funded. Government involvement and funding is usually accompanied with increased regulation, where quality, curriculum and standards are set targets to be achieved. Settings are therefore at risk of becoming less autonomous with spending less time to reflect on their own practice and instead focusing and prioritising government targets.

Moss (2017) contests the notion that early years settings should be viewed as a business or a place to apply predetermined goals. Instead, he argues for a reform in the sector, where settings should be viewed as public spaces that incorporate the diversity and culture and place emphasis on belonging. This ideologic perspective may seem in the distant future, but it is important to continuously reflect on the sector as interchangeable. As argued previously, the early years sector in Ireland is a profession in crisis, and as Freidman (1982) claims it is only in a crisis that "the actions taken depend on the ideas that are lying around"

(p. ix, As cited in Moss, 2017, p. 27). Therefore, we must remain open to multiple meanings of early childhood education if we are to make any real change.

Conclusion

On conclusion of this literature review it has become evident that there is a need for further research into early years educators' well-being in Ireland. Cumming & Wong (2019) argue that the responsibility for early years educators' well-being should be "shared between those experiencing it, as well as all of those in the various contexts that shape and benefit from it" (p.267). Thus, settings, policymakers and society need to be just as accountable for early years educators' well-being as they are themselves.

Cumming and Wong (2019) further recommend that in order for policy to take responsibility for educators' well-being then they need to "reconceptualise the 'quality' of an early childhood education and care setting to include the quality of the adult work environment" (p. 276). With increasing regulations around practice and qualifications requirements, the work of an early year's educator in Ireland is rapidly changing, with few incentives being offered. However, this literature review has found the situation is far more complex than just simply focusing on educators' financial well-being. The Government also need to acknowledge research on educator well-being and reflect its findings through policy, supporting educators in being both autonomous and competent in their practice whilst also prioritising the time for building meaningful relationships within settings.

Chapter Three: Research Design and Methodology

This research intends to explore early year's educators' psychological and financial well-being in both non-profit and for-profit early years settings in Ireland. The following chapter firstly outlines the researcher's positionality, the role of the researcher and the research paradigm. It then discusses the research sample, research design and data collection, data analysis. It finally reviews the ethical considerations, and limitations of the research study.

Researcher Positionality

The role of the researcher is an important one, and one that should be acknowledged before commencing this research. Within this study, the researcher is focusing on a topic that directly affects her as a professional working in the sector. Stringer (2007) argues that “all stakeholders – those whose lives are affected by the problem in the study – should be engaged in the processes of investigation” (As cited in Agee, 2009, p. 424). Therefore, it is argued that the researcher may have more insight into questions that will elicit higher quality data. Questionnaires also tend to have a higher response rate if they are conducted by colleagues or someone who has professional commitment to the sector (Mukherji & Albon, 2018). Insider research also has the advantages of being able to have a deep level of understanding and interpretation of the sector, whilst also having a pre-existing understanding that helps during analysis and interpretation of the data (Fleming, 2018).

The researcher recognised the importance of their role in the research, being both involved in the sector currently and having a varied background of working with all ages across a multitude of settings including both for-profit and non-profit settings both within and outside of Ireland. This perspective made the researcher aware of the multiple factors that exist within each individual setting. Being directly involved in the sector and research, the

researcher began to reflect on her own perspective as the research evolved. The questions that initiated the research study began to change and in doing so, produced a greater understanding of the issue (Creswell, 2007).

Reflexivity was found to be important to the theoretical perspective of this research, in that reflection allowed the researcher to consider both her own and the participants' various personal and social positionings (Roulston & Shelton, 2015). The researcher kept a self-reflective journal as a useful source to explore and examine her own assumptions and experiences on the issue (Ortlipp, 2008). This enabled her to both reflect and be critical of her own positioning on the topic of research. The researcher recognised and critiqued her own ideological assumptions on the topic of research, these assumptions positioned the researcher in believing there to be single truth. That non-profit early years' settings result in better working environments for educators which then results in higher quality of care and education. Realising this, the research instead decided to place her focus on exploring the multiple truths and realities of educator well-being through a critical theory approach.

Research Overview and Design

Rehman & Alharthi (2016) claim that the ontological position of critical theorists is that of historical realism. Thus, reality has been “shaped by cultural, political, ethnic, gender and religious factors which interact with each other to create a social system” (p. 57). An epistemological stance in critical theory would situate the researcher as having a moral obligation to not only investigate the topic but to bring about change from the findings. Mukherji & Albon (2018) claim that “researchers working within ‘critical’ theories are looking to both understand and change positions of inequality for research participants and/or social groups” (p. 88). Patton (2002) also claims that the aim of critical research is to not only investigate or explain society but to change it. The researcher aims to not only explore and

understand the topic of research but to inform policy and improve practice. Rehman & Alharthi (2016) state that “the task of critical researchers is to confront those in positions of power and expose the oppressive structures that subjugate people and create inequality” (p. 57). This research study explores and confronts those positions of power through using Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory and investigating the dominant discourses that permeate the early years sector in Ireland. A mixed methods approach to this research project was decided on by the researcher for multiple reasons. Mukherji and Albon (2018) claim that when carrying out triangulation⁴ in research “the strengths of one method compensate for the weakness of another” (p. 100). Combining both quantitative and qualitative is useful for this research as it also enables the researcher to firstly gain more perspective from a larger group and then further investigate specific key findings through more in-depth interviews with a smaller number of participants. Aubrey et al. (2000) argue that quantitative and qualitative research should not be viewed in opposition with each other but believe they are complementary to one another. The use of a mixed methods approach was relevant to this research in gaining a clearer perspective from early years educators working in different settings.

This research is based on a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design.

Guetterman et al. (2015) states that an explanatory design begins with a quantitative data collection and analysis phase, which informs the follow-up qualitative phase. Similarly, Onwuegbuzie et al. (2007) claim that when quantitative and qualitative analytical techniques are utilized through a sequential mixed analysis then the results from the quantitative phase should then inform the qualitative research or vice versa. Therefore, the information that the researcher obtained from the survey was then used to inform the semi-structured interviews

⁴ The process of using more than one method to collect data

in the qualitative phase. The survey was carried out five weeks before conducting the semi-structured interviews. This allowed the survey to be open to respondents for three weeks and allowed two weeks for the initial analyse of the data to be conducted to inform the structure of the semi-structured interviews. Piccioli (2019) states that mixed-methods designs have great value in allowing the researcher “to be left free to use quantitative tools and approaches together with qualitative ones (p. 435). The researcher carefully planned out the research steps involved prior to conducting the research.

Research Sample

The research sample targeted early years educators currently working in early years settings in Ireland. The questionnaire was open to not only educators but to managers, owners and students also. This was to ensure that these respondents were not completing the survey under the target sample identity. These groups were later eliminated from the research in order to primarily focus on the experiences and opinions of the educators. The survey questionnaire sample was a non-probability sample as it involved opportunity sampling, snowball sampling and purposive sampling. The researcher disseminated the survey link to colleagues in the profession. They were also encouraged to forward the survey link to others who were currently working in the sector. The researcher also posted the link to the survey with a short introduction onto social media sites that contained groups of individuals working in early years settings. These groups included the Montessori & Early Childhood Professionals Ireland (MECPI) and Early Childhood Network Ireland. Survey links were also sent directly to individual services through email. Table 1 displays the composition of respondents from the online survey. The total number of responses amounted to 277 responses. When filters were applied to only include early years educators, the survey resulted in a total of 115 respondents. This consisted of 23 educators working in community

settings, 77 in independent private settings and 15 educators working in private chain settings.

Table 1

Composition of respondents from survey

Type of setting:	Community	Private independent	Private chain
Owner/Manager	13	52	4
EYE (room leader)	17	60	10
EYE (assistant)	6	17	5
Student	2	3	1
Total:	38	133	20

The interview sample was based on representing the three main early years setting types in Ireland. These include community, private independent and private chain settings. According to Early Childhood Ireland, a private early childhood care and education service may be operated by an individual, a partnership, or a limited company (ECI, n.d). Although there is no formal definition for private chain settings in Ireland, Langford (2011) describes them to include settings with more than four centres with a minimum capacity for 200 children. Early Childhood Ireland define community settings as not-for-profit facilities that are managed by a voluntary management committee and often prioritises places for low income families (ECI, n.d). For the purpose of this research study community early years settings include all non-profit early year's settings in Ireland. The researcher targeted educators working in all three sub-groups who had varied backgrounds, in both their qualifications and experience.

The target sample for the semi-structured interviews was originally set to be a total of six educators, two from each of the sub-groups. However, on the 12th of March 2020 the Irish

Government announced the immediate closure of schools and childcare facilities in a bid to curve the spread of COVID-19. Given the extreme circumstances, the researcher felt that proceeding with the remaining two interviews would impact heavily on the data already collected and in turn would affect the validity and reliability of the overall results. The researcher also felt ethically obligated to refrain from discussing well-being with educators at a time that was both mentally and financially distressing for them. The researcher, therefore, focused on the four interviews that had been conducted prior to the announcement of the closures of early years services. These four interviews consisted of two educators working in private independent settings, one educator in a private chain and one in a state funded community setting. Further details on the participants profiles is provided in the findings chapter.

Instrumentation and Data Collection

The researcher chose a mixed methods design due to the combination of both qualitative and quantitative approaches providing a greater understanding on this topic. Greene et al., (1989) list five reasons for mixing methods, these include;

1. Triangulation (To seek convergence),
2. Complementarity (To measure overlapping but also different facets of a phenomenon)
3. Development (Results from the survey inform the interviews)
4. Initiation (New perspectives emerging)
5. Expansion (Aiming for scope and breadth in gaining as much data from the sample).

All five reasons are consistent with this mixed methods research study. Through initiation, the researcher found new perspectives emerging from the questionnaires, such as the significance of the type of relationship educators had with management. There was also a consistency in the negative attitude's educators held toward both their workload and the lack

of recognition they received for it. This perspective motivated the researcher to delve deeper into these issues during the semi-structured interviews.

The researcher chose to conduct a survey through the form of questionnaires in order to gain high quality feedback on the attitudes and experiences of early years educators in Ireland. Semi-structured interviews were chosen for greater flexibility and their adaptability in suiting the individual needs of each participant (Mukherji & Albon, 2018). The reasons for carrying out semi-structured interviews was to enable the researcher to further explore themes that had emerged from both literature and the initial analysis from the survey. Barriball and While (1994) claim that semi-structured interviews are well matched for exploring respondents' thoughts and perspectives on more sensitive topics. Another advantage of using semi-structured interviews was its flexibility when interviewing early years educators for whom English is a second language. The use of semi-structured interviews is also associated with a more friendly and relaxed approach that ensures both relatability and validity (Barriball & While, 1994)

Questionnaires. The quantitative research focused on a cross-sectional descriptive survey which comprised of a questionnaire (see Appendix A). The questionnaires were made up of 30 questions in total, this included analysing qualitative data for six open ended questions. Mukherji and Albon (2018) claim that the advantage of open-ended questions in a survey is that it can provide very rich information as it allows more freedom in the responses. The focus of the questionnaire was to gain as many perspectives from early years educators on their experiences and opinions in relation their workplace well-being. The questionnaire also sought opinions from educators in improving quality in their settings. The researcher took into consideration both the five facets identified by Jorde-Bloom (1998) as being most important to job satisfaction in the early childhood setting and the three basic needs of self-determination theory, being autonomy, competence and relatedness (Ryan and Deci, 2017).

The questionnaire also drew insight from recent research carried out by Jeon and Wells (2018), who devised the Early Childhood Job Attitude Survey (ECJAS). Unlike previous research conducted in the field, the ECJAS “acknowledges that there are inter-correlated factors that concurrently affect turnover rates” (p. 566). The three main aspects it focused on included, classroom responsibilities, workplace satisfaction and on-going support, it was also developed to examine both intrinsic and extrinsic aspects of job attitudes.

Table 2 shows the interrelation between SDT, Jorde-Bloom's job satisfaction facets, and the ECJAS. Whilst also showing which questions in the survey relate to them. The remaining questions on the survey were concerned with gathering information such as the respondents age, role in their setting, type of setting and their qualifications achieved. To gain more insight into educators' experience and opinions, six of the questions on the survey were open response questions.

Table 2

Questions on survey relating to theory

SDT (Self-determination theory)	Autonomy, Competence & Intrinsic motivation	Relatedness & Intrinsic motivation	Extrinsic motivation	
Jorde-Bloom (1988)	The work itself	Co-workers & Supervisor relations	Pay & Promotion opportunities	Working conditions (Hours, non-contact times, ratios, resources)
ECJAS (Jeon and Wells, 2018)	Intrinsic motivation & Classroom responsibilities	On-going support	Extrinsic motivation	Workplace satisfaction
Questions in Survey	Q.13, Q.15, Q.16, Q.17, Q.19, Q.20, Q.21, Q.22, Q.23, Q.24	Q.12, Q.13, Q.14, Q.21, Q.22, Q.23, Q.24	Q.21, Q.24, Q.25, Q.26, Q.27	Q.11, Q.16, Q.17, Q.18, Q.21, Q.22, Q.23, Q.24, Q.28

Semi-structured interviews. The qualitative research focused on semi-structured interviews although qualitative data had also been collected from the questionnaire. The purpose of this was to adhere to the appropriate research questions while still allowing the freedom for the researcher and participant to explore topics further if needed. The semi-structured interviews not only gave the researcher the choice of wording of the questions but also the use of probes, which Barriball & While (1994) claim to be an invaluable tool for guaranteeing reliability of the data. The typology of the semi-structured interviews used in this research was based on a descriptive/corrective approach. This approach particularly focuses on participants whose opinions and experiences are typically absent from research (McIntosh & Morse, 2015). This is incredibly relevant to this study, given the lack of research carried out on the actual experiences and perspectives of early years educators in Ireland. McIntosh and Morse (2015) state the intention of a descriptive/ corrective typology is “that the participants’ actual experiences of the phenomenon will act as a corrective to the assumptions in the dominant discourse and effect political action for change” (p. 3). Making it compatible with a critical perspective approach.

The questions for the semi-structured interviews were informed by the findings of the survey. The themes and topics that emerged the strongest were given priority, however the participants were free to discuss other issues they felt strongly about. The interviews took place in pre-determined venues that were mutually agreed upon by both researcher and interviewee. Interviews lasted between twenty-five minutes to forty-five minutes. Interviews were recorded on an audio recording device. A second back up recording device was also used. The participants were given an information sheet prior to the interview (see Appendix B) which informed them background details of both the researcher and the study and that their consent was both voluntary and confidential. The participants were then given a consent

form to sign (see Appendix C) which again outlined details of confidentiality and their right to withdraw from the research study.

Participants also reflected on their previous experience from working in other types of early years settings and used it as a comparison to their current settings. This conversation opened dialogue into best practice and improving quality in settings. The semi-structured interviews were guided by certain questions that had emerged as important factors from both the literature and findings from the questionnaire. However, participants also discussed issues personal to their own experience and the conversation would often go in other directions if it was relevant to the research. The table below shows a list of topics that the semi-structured interviews questions were based on.

Table 3

Questions that guided semi-structured interviews

Background questions	• Description of current setting • Experience in early years • Qualifications • Reasons for entering the profession
Job satisfaction	• Positive aspects of working in current setting • Negative aspects of working in current setting
Relationships	• Management • Co-workers • Children and Families
Working conditions	• Non-contact time • Time to reflect on practice • Attitudes around pay
Job specifics	• Curriculum and planning control • Attitudes towards responsibilities • Decision making
Recommendations for improvements	• Recommendations for improvements for both staff, children and families in current settings and the early years sector

Data Analysis

The quantitative analysis was carried out using online survey development software Survey Monkey™. Initial analysis was carried out on both the quantitative and qualitative data on the site. The qualitative data from the open-ended questions was coded by applying tags using SurveyMonkey™ software. It was then transferred to MAXQDA™ for further analysing. The quantitative data from the general information, multiple-choice, ranking and scale questions were analysed through SurveyMonkey™ software. Once all interviews had been transcribed, all identifying information that was deemed to compromise the privacy of the participants was either removed or edited. All participants of the interviews and respondents to the survey were allocated numbers to be used during analysis.

For the qualitative analysis of this study, the researcher focused on thematic analysis, due to its flexibility. Thematic analysis as Braun and Clarke (2008) state “is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within data. It minimally organizes and describes your data set in detail and interprets various aspects of the research topic” (p. 79). The researcher focused on the four interviews that were conducted prior to the closure of services on the 12th of March. This included at least one participant from each sub-group.

The researcher followed Braun and Clark's (2006) model for thematic analysis of the data. Which included the following steps;

1. Familiarisation with the data
2. Generating initial data
3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Producing the report

The researcher became familiar with the interviews firstly by reading them numerous times before finding similar themes across all interviews. The interview transcripts were then uploaded to MAXQDA™ software and data was then coded by the researcher and grouped according to sub-groups. The researcher then re-coded and found similar themes across all three groups. The themes were then reviewed again. Themes that were not relevant to the study were eliminated. The themes that were prioritised as most relevant to the study were chosen as they related to theory and were found consistently throughout both data sources. The researcher then re-named the core themes accordingly and found contrasting themes among all three groups (see Appendix D).

As previously mentioned, this research study was based on an explanatory design using a sequential mixed analysis, where the initial findings from the survey influenced the questions and structure of the semi-structured interviews. Both the quantitative and qualitative data were analysed separately, however, the researcher chose to use a joint display of data to provide a clearer structure in discussing the integrated analysis. Guetterman et al., (2015) state that integration of the data is “needed to reach the full potential of a mixed methods approach and gain new insights” (p. 559). Thus, statistics from the survey were merged with the corresponding themes from the qualitative data, by assisting the reader to understand how both qualitative and quantitative data related to each other through collaboration.

Ethical Considerations

The researcher was aware of the ethical considerations involved and acknowledged the areas concerned with duty, rights, harm and benefit when conducting research with educators. Obtaining consent from participants was one of the main ethical considerations. The researcher recognised that consent to participate in research needs to be gained before

any collection of personal data can begin. Before commencing the study, the researcher was granted ethical approval from the research ethics committee at Marino Institute of Education. All ethical protocols that were demanded by Marino Institute of Education were adhered to. The researcher adhered to the principles and guidelines set out by the Ethical Code for Early Childhood Researchers (Bertram et al., 2015).

It was important to acknowledge the challenges that came with insider research when conducting research with co-workers. These included minimizing the potential for implicit coercion, ensuring privacy and trustworthiness, acknowledging preconceived ideas and an awareness of the potential of professional conflicts in the dual roles of being an academic and researcher within the same context (Fleming, 2018). The purpose of the research was explained to all participants before partaking in both the survey and interviews. Participants were each given an information sheet and an informed consent form to read and agree to before commencing the research (see Appendices B and C) (Mukherji & Albon, 2018). Participants were made aware of the purpose of the study and that participation in the study was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study up to two weeks after their data was collected.

Consent was sought again, verbally before commencing each interview. The identity of the respondents to the survey remained anonymous to the researcher. However, the data collected from the questionnaires remained on a password encoded device throughout the duration of the research. Interviews with voluntary participants took place in a mutually agreed private space, where participants felt relaxed to share their opinions and experiences (Mukherji & Albon, 2018). All identifying aspects were removed from the interview transcripts to protect confidentiality. Audio recordings from the interviews were kept on a password protected USB. The researcher stored the data received from the survey and interviews on their own personal computer, on a file that was password protected on an

encoded software device. This was done as an extra step in order to ensure anonymity and confidentiality of the participants in the study. This data will be destroyed 13 months after completion of the research.

As discussed previously, ethical issues arose for the researcher during the data generation process when she was faced with the dilemma of whether to continue with the two remaining interviews after the closure of all early years' settings due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Sensing that both emotions and tensions were high, the researcher felt ethically obliged to refrain from continuing her research. Instead focusing on the data already collected from the four interviews and questionnaires.

Limitations

One main aspect that must be discussed in the limitations is that of the early years sector protest that took place in Dublin on the 5th February 2020. This fell within the same week of the survey being disseminated. As a result of these attitudes and feelings could have resulted in increased negative opinions towards the sector. However, the poor working conditions and high staff turnover rates reported in previous years, could just as equally contribute to a general sense of negativity towards the sector.

Another limitation to the survey responses was observed in the response rates of educators working in private chain settings and respondents working with a younger age group. A further and even more significant limitation to the research was the impact of COVID-19. With all early year's services closed from the 12th of March the researcher decided to only focus on the data that had already been generated for ethical and reliability reasons. This in turn limited the data during analysis.

Chapter Four: Findings and Analysis

The analysis and results section of this study is structured according to the key themes that emerged from the qualitative data. Both the qualitative data from the survey and semi-structured interviews were analysed separately using thematic analysis. Following a sequential mixed analysis design, the quantitative data was analysed independently. Its findings were then used to inform the qualitative data collection (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2007). The following chapter uses a joint display of data to assist the reader in gaining a greater understanding of the findings from both the quantitative and qualitative data (Guetterman et al., 2015; Johnson, Grove, & Clarke, 2017).

Participant profile. Respondents from the survey are denoted by the acronym R (001 – 115). Participants of the semi-structured interviews are referred to by their participant number (P01- P04). Table 4 displays details of the participants that took part in the semi-structure interviews.

Table 4

Composition of interview participants

Participants	P01	P02	P03	P04
Type of setting	Private independent	Community (Government funded)	Private independent	Private chain
Qualification	Level 7	Level 8	Level 8	Level 7
Current position	Room leader	Room leader	Room assistant	Room leader
Age group	3-4 years and afterschool	All ages	2-4 years	3-4 years and afterschool
Experience	10 years in total in all private independent settings	8 years in total. previous experience includes work in other community settings and a private chain	6 months but previous experience of work placements in community, better start and a private chain	1.5 years in early years setting. Experience in Spain will school aged children
Time in setting	3 years	3 years	6 months	1.5 years

Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis was applied to the qualitative data from the semi-structured interviews and open-response questions from the survey. Thematic maps for both are represented below in figure 2 and figure 3 (see Appendix E). These display the key themes and sub-themes that emerged from the data. This section will be structured according to those themes. Both the qualitative and quantitative data from both the survey and interviews will be represented according to each theme.

Thematic maps.

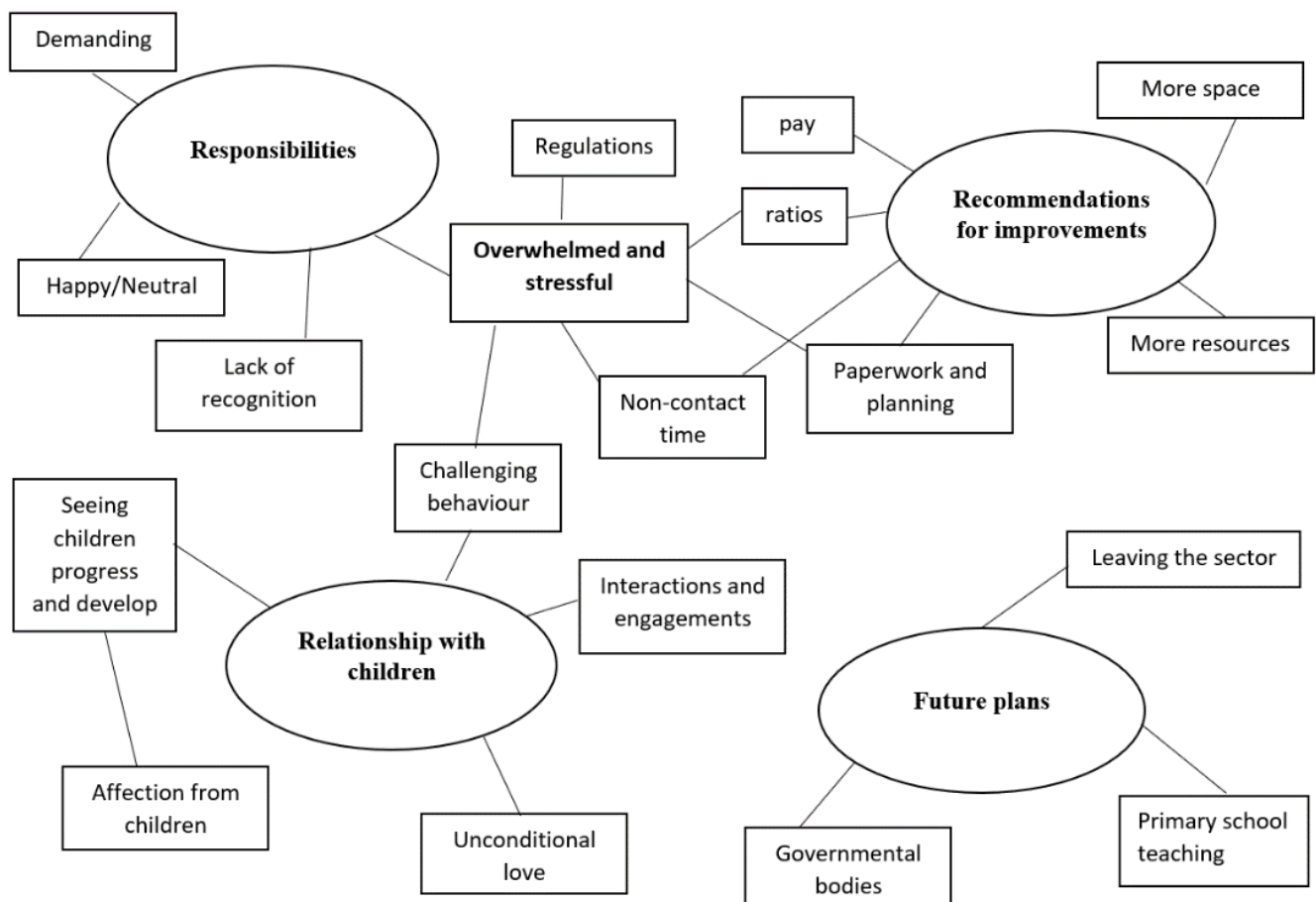


Figure 2 Thematic map for open-response questions

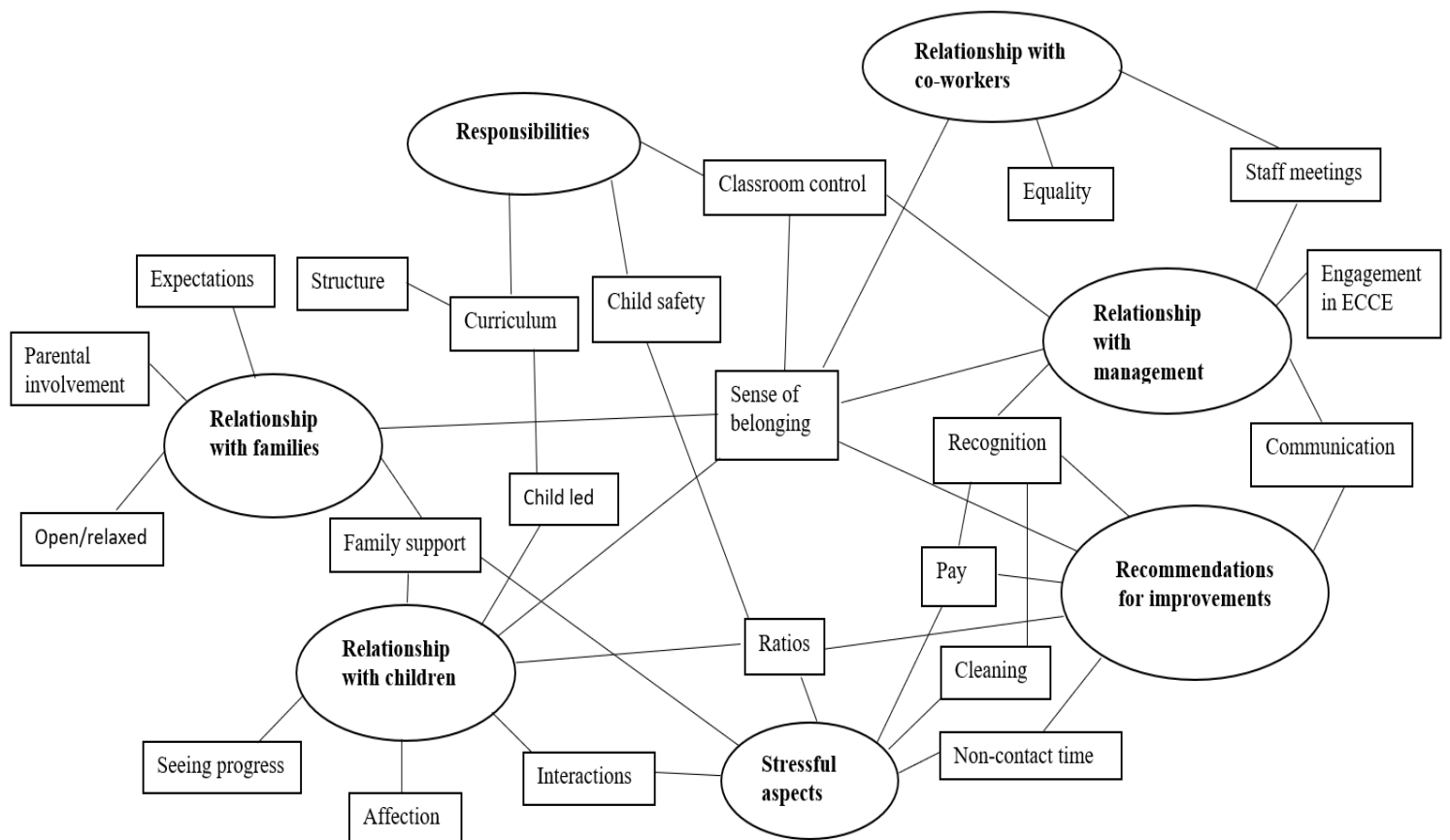


Figure 3 Thematic map for semi-structured interviews

Theme One: Relationships

Relationships within early years settings emerged as one of the key themes for this research study. This key theme was divided into sub-themes which were explored independently. However, the central theme of ‘belongingness’ resonated among all of them. As discussed previously, relatedness is a psychological need of self-determination theory that emphasises the importance of being socially connected to others (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Workplace relationships show us that well-being is not only an individual response but is interconnected to everyone within the setting (Cumming, 2017). Therefore, relatedness is the foundation for creating a sense of belonging in early years settings, not only for staff but children and families too. The key relationships this study focused on were the relationships educators had with the children, families and co-workers in their settings.

Sub-theme - Relationship with children. Research suggests that the greatest source of job satisfaction among educators is from their interactions with children (Jorde-Bloom, 1988) and that it is those interactions that intrinsically motivate educators for both entering and remaining in the sector (Grant, Jeon & Buettner, 2019). Thus, making the relationship educators have with the children in their settings central to research on educator well-being. Quantitative data found that most educators described their relationship with the children in their settings as informal (Figure 4) and nearly all (98%) educators said they felt valued by children in their settings. Most educators across all three sub-groups (88%) stated interactions and engagements with the children was the most important aspect of their work.

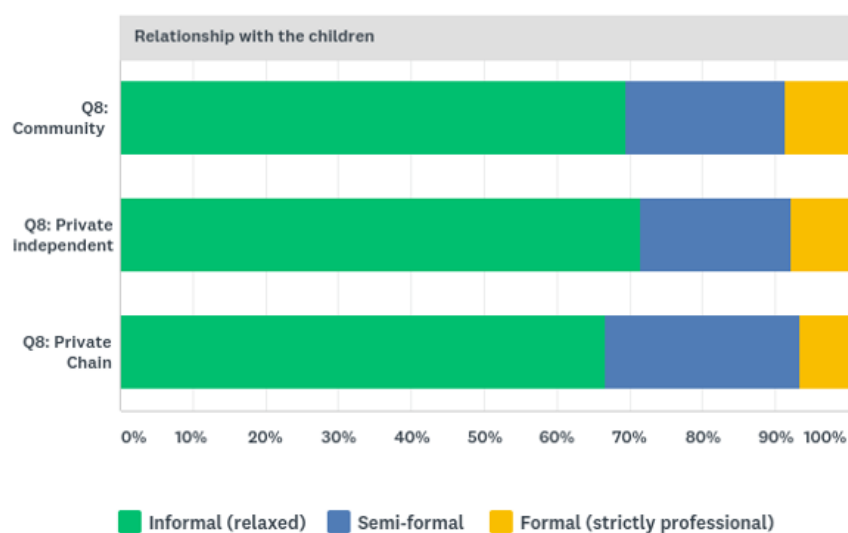


Figure 4 Type of relationship with children

Similarly, the qualitative data from the survey found that 75% of educators named the children themselves and the relationships with them as being one of the most rewarding aspects. Corresponding with previous research identifying the reason for entering the profession (Grant, Jeon & Buettner, 2019). Most comments from respondents of the survey stated rewarding aspects including “interactions with the children” (R109), “Seeing the children thrive and develop” (R066), “Seeing the children being happy and interacting with

one another” (R081), whilst others focused on the affection they receive from children such as the “hugs, cuddles and smiles” (R073). One respondent from the survey even stated this rewarding aspect being their reason for remaining in the sector: “I love the connections I still have with the children that were in my class last year.....that’s what keeps me in this underpaid position” (R068).

Although most educators felt strongly about their relationship with the children in their settings, both time and ratios were important factors in forming these relationships. In their community setting, P02 spoke positively about having the “time to focus on each child, where they are at, what they are learning and if they need more support with their development”. P02 later refers to the low child to adult ratios in the setting as being a reason for getting “so much time to spend with the children”. P04 (Chain) in describing affection for the children, explained the difficulty in building strong consistent relationships with each child due to high ratios.

I feel in the end I cannot have one to one with the children. Like I love all of them and I feel that when they have a problem I can only stay with one, talking with him and what happened with you then I have 39 others there....messing, and you can imagine what it’s like...

Findings from the quantitative data showed that 84% of educators across all sub-groups wanted time prioritised for both interactions and engagements with children. However, findings showed that only 48% of educators in community settings felt they had enough time for one-to-one interactions compared to 38% in private independent and 27% in private chain settings (Figure 5).

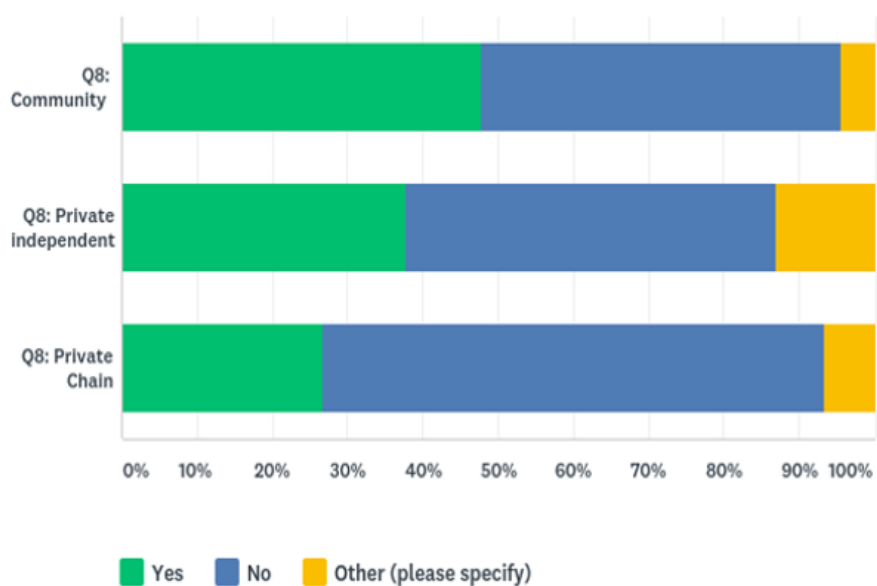


Figure 5 Do you have time for one-to-one interactions

It is evident that the relationship educators have with the children in their setting is of particular importance and one that drives their intrinsic motivation to remain in their settings, however it is also clear that there are numerous issues affecting their ability in ensuring the formation of consistent strong and meaningful relationships. Differences within the sub-group are also apparent with evidence pointing to community settings prioritising more time for interactions and connections with children and private chain settings the least time. The next sub-theme will discuss the relationship educators have with families in their settings.

Sub-theme: Relationship with families. Research suggests, educators that have good working relationships with not only co-workers but also with children and their families will have better mental health and well-being (Corr et al., 2015). Quantitative data found that 40% of all educators described their relationship with families as informal/relaxed and 44% semi-formal and 75% of all educators felt valued by families. These figures slightly differed among the subgroups with over a third of educators in chain settings describing the relationship as strictly professional (Figure 6).

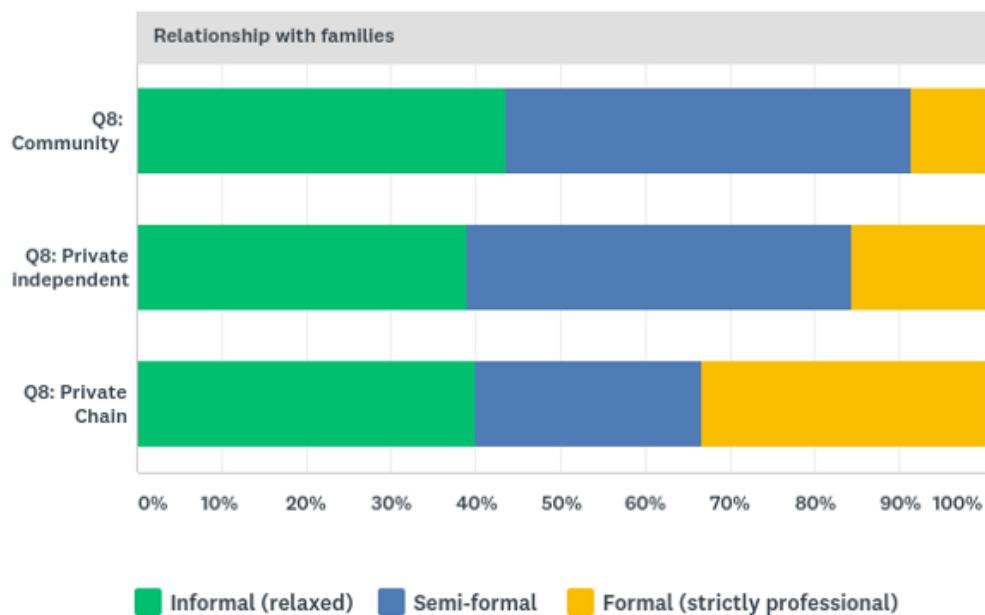


Figure 6 Type of relationship with families

Qualitative data from the survey found that 12% of educators said the relationship they had with families was one of the most rewarding aspects of their job. Educators discussed this relationship as being both positive and supportive. Educators valued the “appreciation” (R102) and “recognition” (R043) they received from families. P03 (Independent private) found the communication with the families to be very “relaxed and open”. P03 believes this open relationship is important as it allows the educators to become aware of important factors relating to the child’s home life and “to know everything really that’s going on”.

Parents expectations was a sub-theme that emerged in the interviews with both P02 and P01. P01 (Independent) described the new parents in the setting as having a certain set of expectations that they had brought with them from previous experience of settings. Stating that at the start “they thought it was all over the place... but that’s what they were used to from having their child in chain creches where everything is so kind of by the book and

organized". P01 describes at first impression may appear "a little bit disjointed". However, it is this aspect that P01 attributes to enabling a sense of belonging in her setting where "everybody knows everybody".

P02 (Community) also discussed parents' expectations when reflecting on previous experience of working in a community setting in the mornings and a private chain setting in the afternoons. P02 describes the how the relationship differed with the parents in the community setting and chain setting. P02 refers to the families in the community setting as being very tight knit with building relationships very quickly: "The families really spent a lot of time getting to know you, interacting with you, engaging with you, like they want to know who you are".

However, P02 stated the relationship with families in the chain setting differed enormously. P02 describes "walking into the room the first day and parents didn't even blink an eyelid that [she] was new". P02 also felt the expectations of the parents in both the community setting and chain setting differed, with parents from the chain setting being preoccupied with certain aspects of their child's day whereas in the community setting parents enquired more about their child's well-being.

In the community setting the parents' focus was on well-being, like was my child ok today? were they happy today? ...I've just found in private services it's like questions, what did they eat today? did they sleep? how long for? ... it's like a checklist record (P02 – Community).

However, P04 (Chain) discussed the handover exchange⁵ in their chain setting as very beneficial in "building the relationship up" with the families. P04 felt the time that was

⁵ A frequent practice in larger childcare settings where parents line up when collecting their child to be given a summary of their day

allocated to this daily practice enabled the opportunity to engage in discussions with parents and to form “really good relationships with some of the parents out of work”.

The relationship educators have with families in their settings is complex with different factors to consider. However, this relationship is an important one in creating a sense of belonging and is also vital to the relationship the educator has with the children. It could be argued that the different expectations parents have is directly associated to the setting's priorities and values, and if that setting place real value in creating belonging.

Sub-theme: Relationship with co-workers. The relationship educators have with their co-workers is central to feeling socially connected in the workplace. This relationship is so tightly knit that levels of stress and anxiety have shown to increase when a co-worker leaves (Cassidy et al., 2017). Quantitative data found that 80% of all educators described their relationship with co-workers as informal/relaxed and 18% semi-formal. It also found that across all three sub-groups 84% of all educators felt valued by their co-workers. There were no significant differences among the subgroups (figure 7).

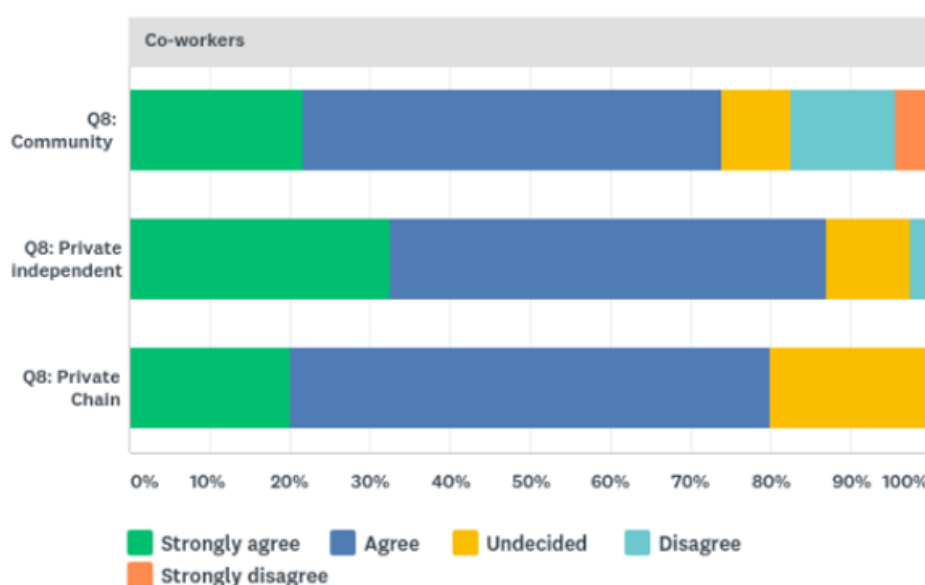


Figure 7 Do you feel value by your co-workers?

All participants spoke positively about their relationship with their co-workers. One theme that emerged strongly from the qualitative data was having equal input in their classrooms. Describing the need of relatedness, Ryan and Deci (2017) claim that it is equally as important to experience “oneself as giving or contributing to others” (p. 11) as it is to be receiving. P04 (Chain) discussed the importance of allowing co-workers to share the workload.

I want that my team feels they are the same as me and they were doing the same as me also. They were managing the room, organising the activities. I prefer that they take the initiative to do all the things (P04 – Chain).

It is evident here of what Deci & Ryan (2017) discuss in relation to the three basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness being interlinked. P04's relationship with their co-workers is based on reciprocity and equality and P04 supports the formation of strong relationships with their co-workers by enabling them to fulfil their own autonomy and competence needs. The relationship that P02 (Community) describes with co-workers is also one based on reciprocity and equality. Although being team leader, P02 finds that most of the decisions are made as a team. Through encouraging autonomy and competence to flourish among co-workers which results in a strong sense of relatedness: “I think most of the reason for that is that the team is so great....there's no leadership required. everyone is really motivated and really really on board” (P02 – Community).

Relatedness is clearly a key theme that is both present and valued by educators in their own settings. However, further exploration of working relationships allows us to find solutions in how best to support them. This research has found that there are significant differences in the quality of relationships among the sub-groups. The next theme will explore and discuss the relationship educators have with management.

Theme Two: Role of Management

The role of management became an important theme when analysing the qualitative data in this research and was divided into four sub-themes which are discussed separately. These include, the type of relationship, communication, curriculum autonomy, and finally priorities and values.

Sub-theme: Type of relationship. Quantitative data found the relationship educators have with management differed among the sub-groups. Most educators (68%) working in community settings described their relationship with management as informal/relaxed compared to 59% in independent private and 26% in chain settings (Figure 8). It was also found that 70% of educators in community settings felt valued by management compared to 68% of private independent and 47% of educators working in chains (figure 9).

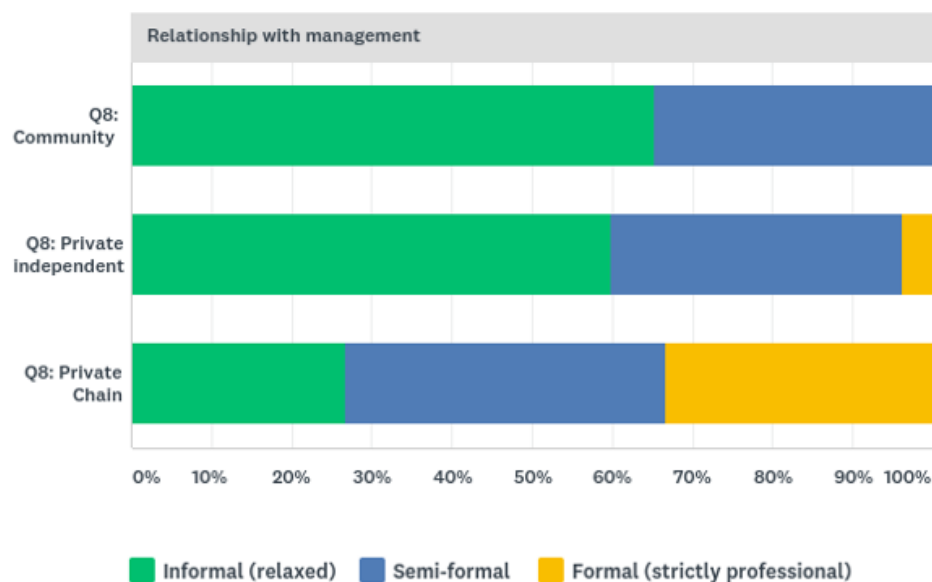


Figure 8 Type of relationship with management

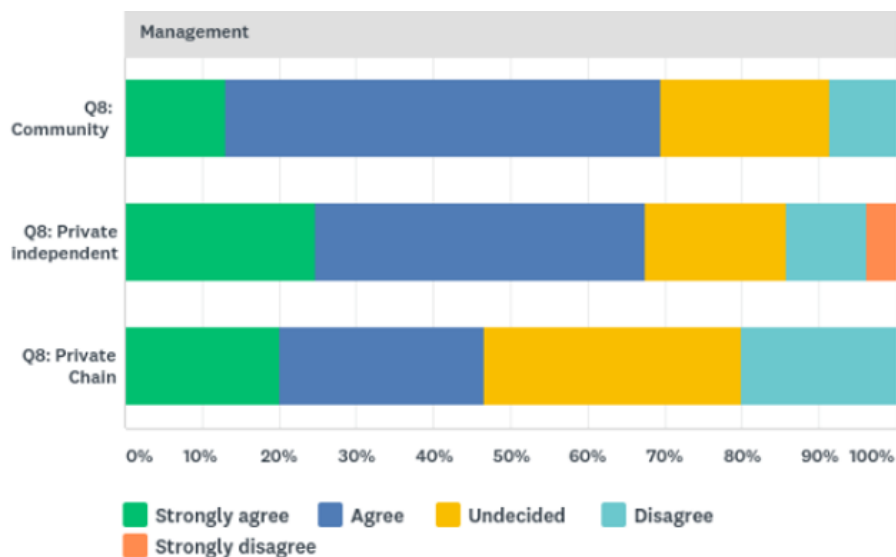


Figure 9 I feel valued by management

One interesting and significant finding came from analysis of the quantitative data when comparing the type of relationship educators had with management. Although a small percentage of respondents from the survey stated having a formal relationship with management, this type of relationship was directly linked to higher levels of dissatisfaction in the workplace and feeling less valued by management (figure 10). Further analysis found that informal relationships with management directly related to better job satisfaction.

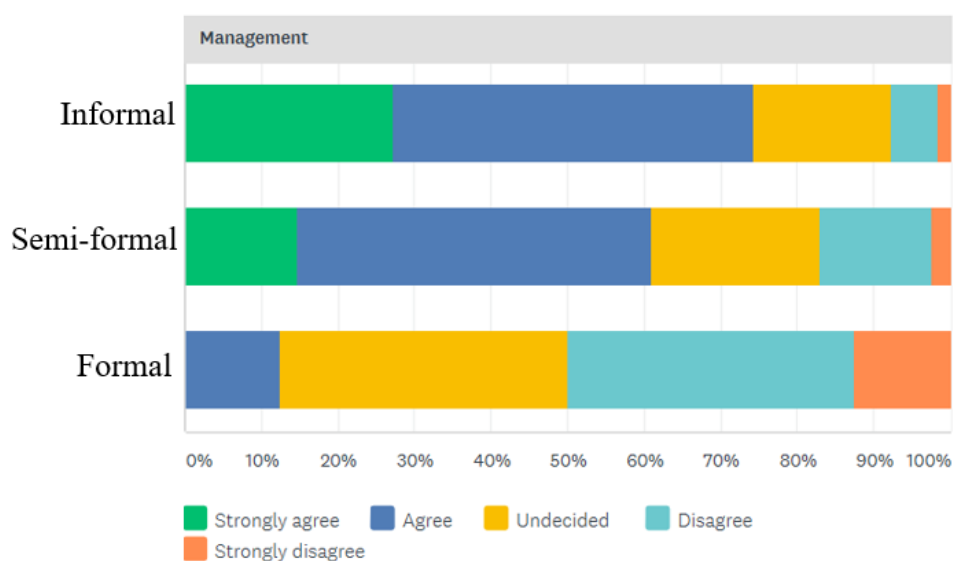


Figure 10 Valued by management

The type of relationship educators had with management showed significant differences in satisfaction with the classroom environment, staff facilities, time allocated to reflect on practice (figure 11), and paperwork and planning (figure 12). Educators who stated having formal (strictly professional) relationships with their management had the highest rates of dissatisfaction across all aspects.

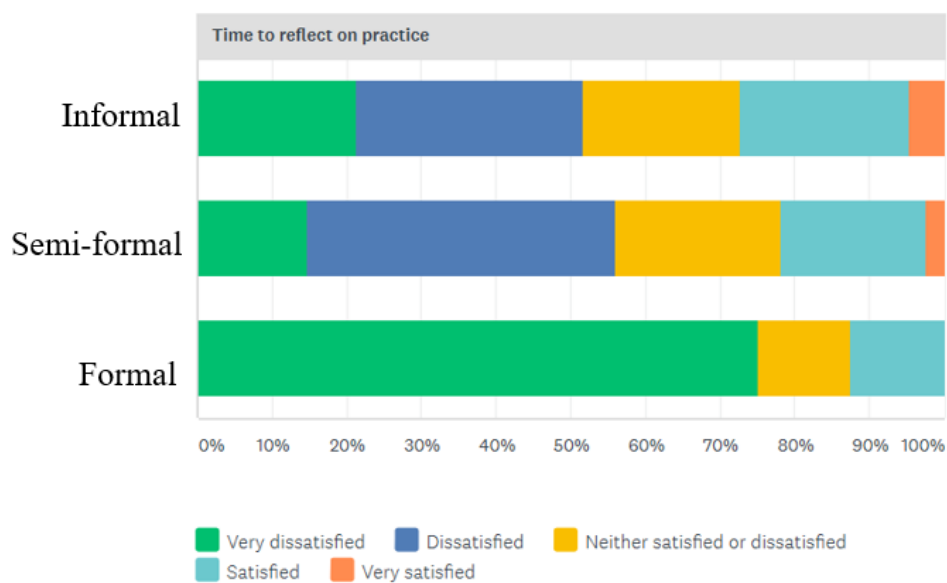


Figure 11 Satisfied with time to reflect on practice

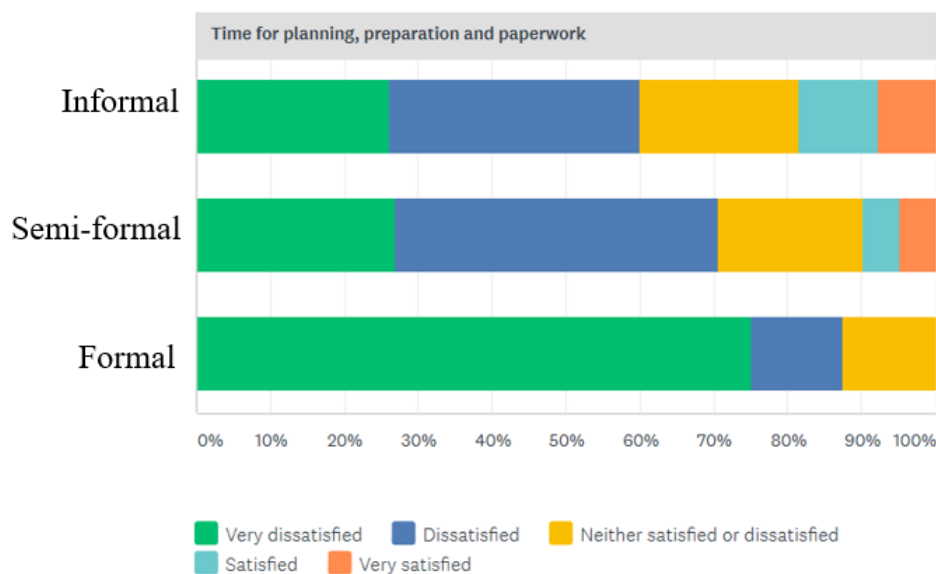


Figure 12 Satisfied with time for planning and paperwork

This research study also found the relationship with management to directly relate to the quality of care and education that is being provided. 88% of educators that have a formal relationship with management felt there were too many children in their classrooms and only 37% of those educators claimed that ratios were being maintained throughout the day. These figures were significantly different to educators who described having informal and semi-formal relationships with management (figures 13 & 14). It could be argued that managers who are driven by business (extrinsic) motives through increasing profit might maintain a strictly professional (formal) relationship with their staff.

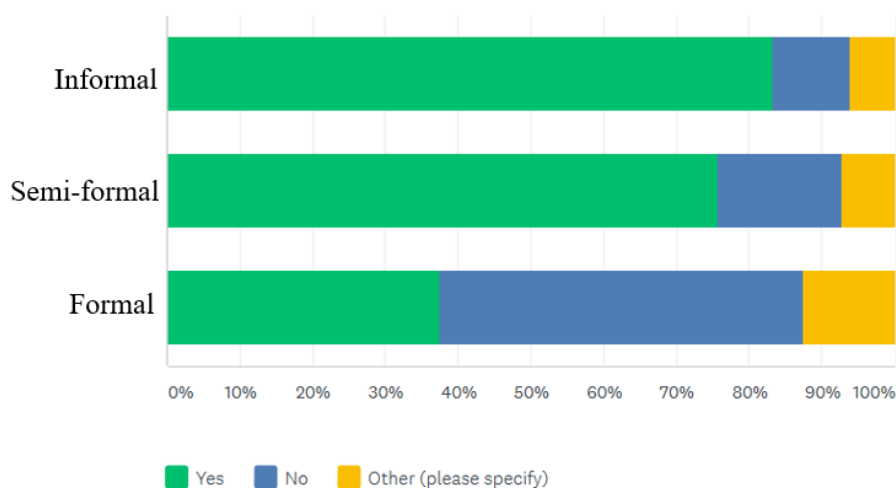


Figure 13 Are ratios maintained throughout the day?

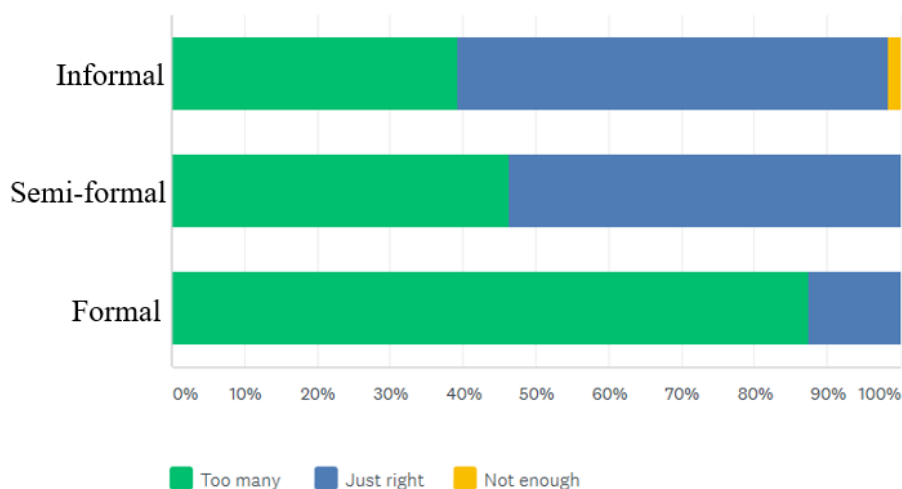


Figure 14 How do you feel about the number of children in your setting?

Another significant finding showed that the type of relationship educators had with management related to turnover. 87% of educators with formal relationships with management stated they were not satisfied in their current setting and planned on finding other employment (Figure 15). Previous studies such as Jeon and Wells (2018) have also found the relationship with management to correspond with job satisfaction and predicted turnover rates, however this current study focused on specific types of educator/management relationships and also found it to directly impact quality.

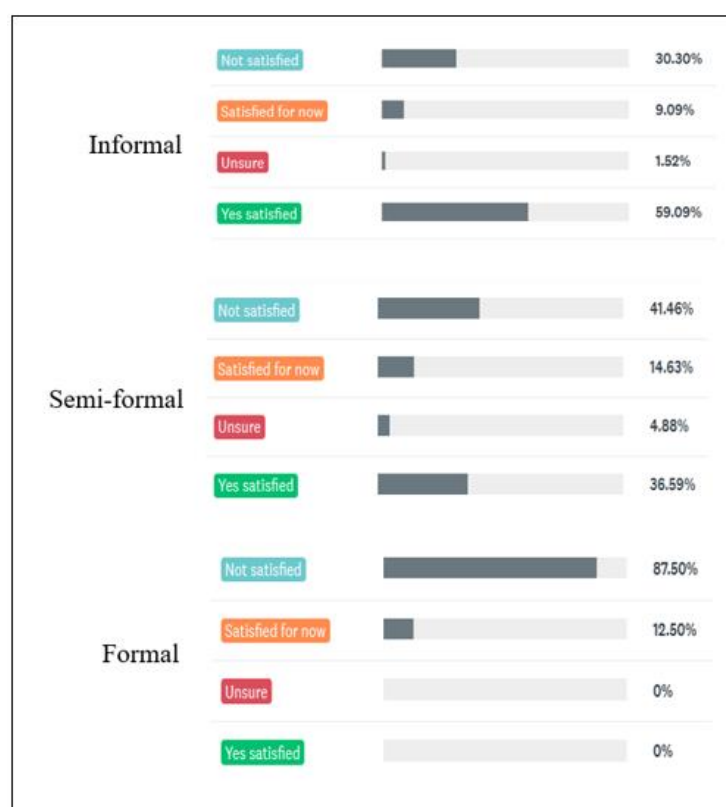


Figure 15 Are you satisfied in your current setting?

The findings show that educators with informal relationships with management have greater job satisfaction, provide higher quality of care and education and feel more valued by management. This finding then shows that educators in community settings have better relationships with management given that the majority of those educators stated having

informal relationships with management. This finding is of significance importance to the overall study and answers the main research question, whilst also opening the opportunity to both further explore this relationship and how best to support it.

Sub-theme: Communication. The relationship educators have with management tends to be a reflection on their ability to communicate effectively. Qualitative data found relationships with management differed among educators, for instance, P02 (Community) described the relationship with management as both relaxed and professional: “It’s very informal but when it needs be formal its formal....but the rest of the time it’s very comfortably relaxed and very supportive”.

P01 (Independent) felt they had a good relationship with management, however more organisation on their part was needed: “It’s just frustrating that sometimes you have to speak up about something more than once and have to get openly and outwardly frustrated for it to be heard”. P04 (Chain) described the relationship with management as difficult and felt that better communication would be a way of repairing these relations:

More communication with the staff and give them solutions. Not like go solve your problems alone. Because the thing that they want is.... you go to the office with a solution not with the problem. And that is so difficult... feeling that (P04 – Chain).

One respondent from the survey discussed a similar relationship with management. Describing how their opinions and expertise as an educator are never considered by management regarding decision making:

None of our skills are utilised. We are rarely consulted on any aspect of the day to day running of the classroom. Any input we try to give is rarely taken into account....I have spoken to my manager months ago and voiced my dissatisfaction with work, but nothing has changed. (R057- Private Independent)

Ryan and Deci (2017) describe how the need of competence tends to diminish in environments where “negative feedback is pervasive, or feelings of mastery and effectiveness are diminished or undermined by interpersonal factors such as personal focused criticism and social comparisons” (p.11). Thus, educators may find it difficult to fulfil the need of competence in settings where management dismiss opportunities for meaningful and effective communication.

Sub-theme: curriculum autonomy: A positive sub-theme to emerge when exploring the role of management was that of curriculum autonomy. Educators spoke positively about the freedom of control they had in applying their own knowledge and values in their settings. Deci and Ryan (2017) claim that “when managers are more autonomy-supportive, employees internalize the value of their work efforts, are more autonomously motivated, and thus perform better and display higher job satisfaction and well-being” (p. 532). Thus, curriculum autonomy was a positive attribute recognised through the role of management.

P04 (Chain) discussed how they liked the way management would leave him to construct and shape the curriculum: “If you say you want to learn one week about a topic then you can do it.....it’s one thing that I like”. P01 (Independent) also discussed autonomy in terms of allowing educators to add a “stamp of character” to their own rooms: “You are very much allowed to treat your room as kind of its own entity, and you have a lot of freedom to do what you want with it”. P03 (Independent) spoke about enjoying running her own afternoon class and how this also made them “feel valued....as part of the whole team”.

It is clear that educators have openly embraced the freedom that has been extended to them by management through curriculum autonomy. However, it could be argued that this is

not due to management taking a stance on supporting autonomy but more a result of the implementation of the *Aistear* curriculum framework, which promotes this freedom.

Sub-theme: priorities and values. The sub-theme of priorities and values of management was an important one to discuss in this research and became apparent with the differences between the types of early years settings. For instance, in their private chain setting P04 felt management placed financial priorities first: “I was talking to the manager and she said to me it’s not your problem because this is a business and I feel it’s more a business than a creche and I don’t like that”. P04 discussed this business ethos employed by management further by referring to how this led to feeling undervalued:

I mean because it is a big company and I feel we are numbers for them. Because they know that when someone left the company, they know they are going to have five or six more people waiting to start. I feel that they don’t care if we are happy there or not. At the end we are numbers (P04 – Chain).

P04 went to management numerous times to discuss the issue of having too many children in the room. However, P04 felt management priorities were more concerned with increasing capacity: “The manager is like ‘more children more children more children’ and we can’t manage them.... 40 children at that time in a class [meant] for 27”.

Some educators spoke positively about certain values and priorities that their settings had. For example, P03 (Independent) and P01 (Independent) both discussed the benefits of having the owners and managers in their settings trained in early years education and working directly with the children in their settings. P03 found this created a relaxed environment where the manager values the educators’ opinions and expertise, allowing educators to feel competent in their practice:

She's [Manager] constantly coming in and mixes with the children and mixes with us and she's always open to look for suggestions and ideas, so you don't feel like she is doing all the planning and you're not involved (P03 – Independent).

P01 (Independent) reflected on the fact that the owners in her setting are trained and qualified as being important to why it is one of the best places she has worked:

I think there's a huge difference where there's a place that run as a business and the owners are only financially invested and not necessarily like educationally invested. I think that's a big difference. Because they care more (P01 – Independent).

The concept of owners who are only financially invested is an interesting one to explore in relation to extrinsic motivation. If owners are only extrinsically motivated by profit, then this could entail repercussions for the quality of care and education. As this research has found, educators in community settings have on average better relationships with management than educators in private settings. One possible reason for this could be that management priorities and values are in line with the educators.

Theme Three: Responsibilities and Recognition

It became evident through initial analysis that responsibilities were interlinked with recognition. The researcher therefore decided to analyse these two themes together.

Qualitative data from the survey showed that educators across all three sub-groups had similar attitudes to the responsibilities that came with their profession. A quarter of respondents from the survey stated that were happy with the amount of responsibilities that came with their occupation, however there was a clear lack of recognition for it: "The amount of responsibility is not reflected in the pay and leads to a sense of lack of worth" (R092). This key theme is divided into two separate sub-themes, quality provision, and pay and status.

Sub-theme: Quality provision. Quality provision became a sub-theme in relation to findings from the survey and the semi-structured interviews where educators spoke about ratios, paperwork and planning, regulations and their general workload. Quantitative data from the survey showed that quality differed among the three sub-groups. It was noted that educators working in community settings had the highest level of qualifications (Figure 15). There was also a noticeable difference between the sub-groups in relation to how long they had been in their current settings for, with 35% of educators from community settings there 5 years or more, compared to 23% in private independent and only 7% in private chain settings.

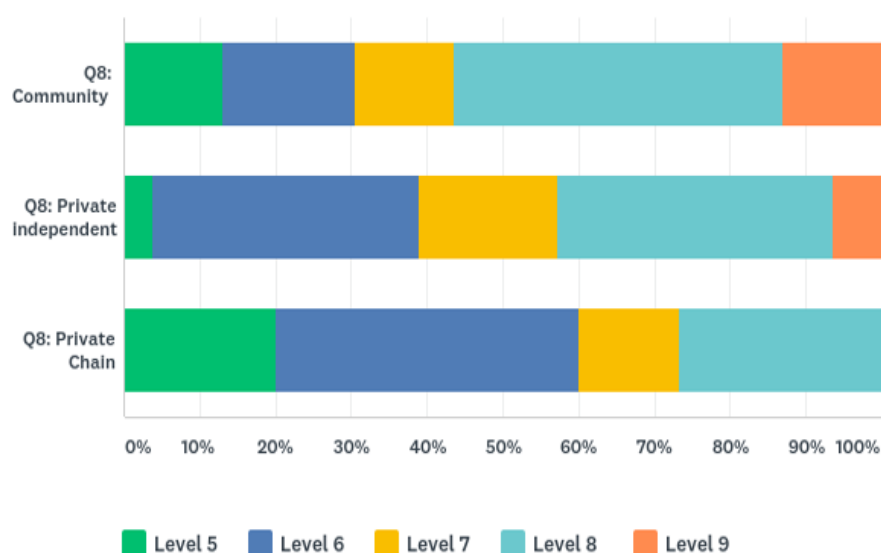


Figure 15 Level of qualification in early childhood education

Quantitative data also showed that 78% of all educators claimed that ratios are being maintained throughout the day however, this differed among the sub-groups with 91% of educators in community settings, 77% in private independent and 60% in chain settings (figure 16). Time for one-to-one interactions also differed among the sub-groups (Figure 17). Only 52% of educators in private independent settings felt that there were enough staff in their settings to provide quality care and education, this compared to 36% in community settings and 27% in chain settings.

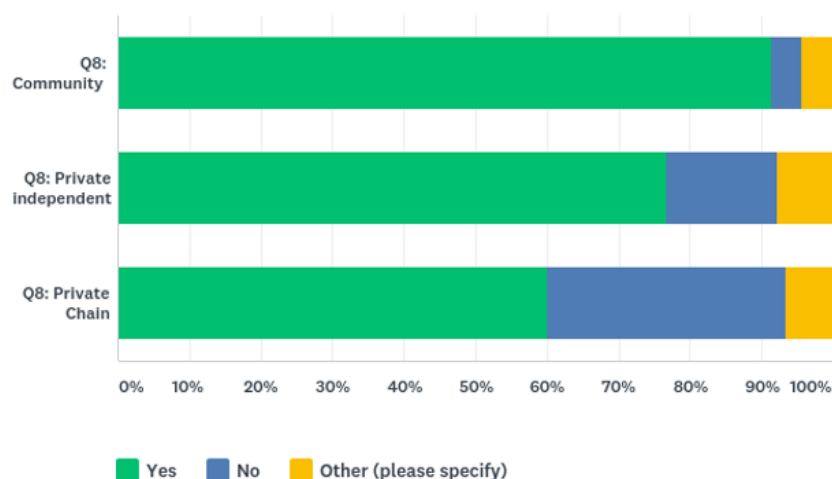


Figure 16 Are ratios maintained throughout the day

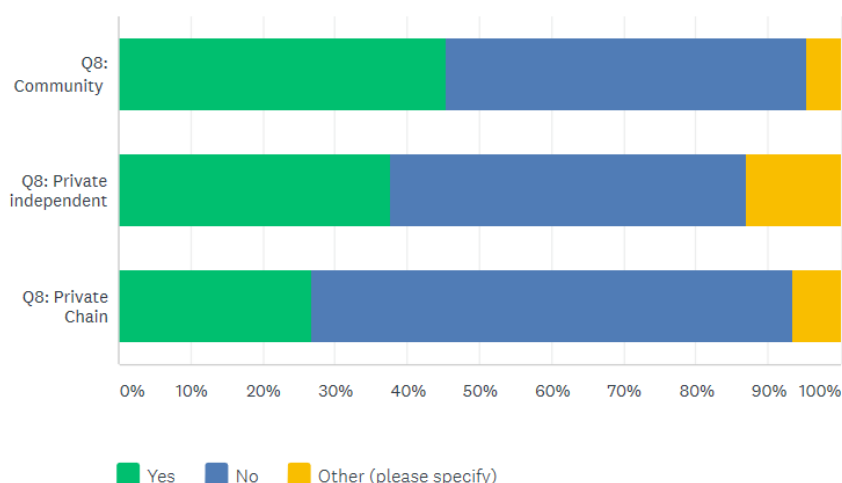


Figure 17 Time for one-to-one interactions

High child to adult ratios were also discussed by some educators from the open response questions and by P04 (Chain) in the semi-structured interviews. A respondent from the survey described feeling overwhelmed by the expectations that were placed on them:

I have no non-contact time, not enough resources and maintaining ratios is currently a big issue at present. I enjoy my responsibility as a room leader when given the time and resources to work with.... there is a lot of pressure to clean daily and constant fear of an accident happening due to ratios being over what they should be (R026).

P04 (Chain) described feeling overwhelmed with the number of children in his setting, P04 discussed issues around child safety due to these high ratios:

You need to manage 40 children in not a big room...for example when it's raining and you can't go outside and the children were fighting, they have accidents... and at the end your head..... it was really stressful (P04 – Chain).

Research has found that educators working in childcare environments that were more chaotic were more likely to experience depression, stress and burn out (Jeon et al., 2018). Thus, directly impacting their psychological well-being. This then influences the quality of care and education that is provided. Other aspects that educators mentioned as stressful aspects came from the qualitative data from the survey. Respondents frequently mentioned “paperwork” “planning” and a “lack of non-contact time” as sources of daily stress. Some respondents stated that this work would often be carried out in their own time: “It’s ridiculous. Some evenings I just don't see my family as I'm catching up on work” (R081).

This finding corresponded with quantitative data from the survey which found 65% of all educators were dissatisfied with time allocated for planning and paperwork. 21% of educators in community settings said they were satisfied with time for planning and paperwork compared to 12% in private independent and 7% in private chains. Overall 70% of educators reported getting zero non-contact hours (Figure 18). Educators working in community settings reported getting on average more non-contact time than educators working in chain and independent settings.

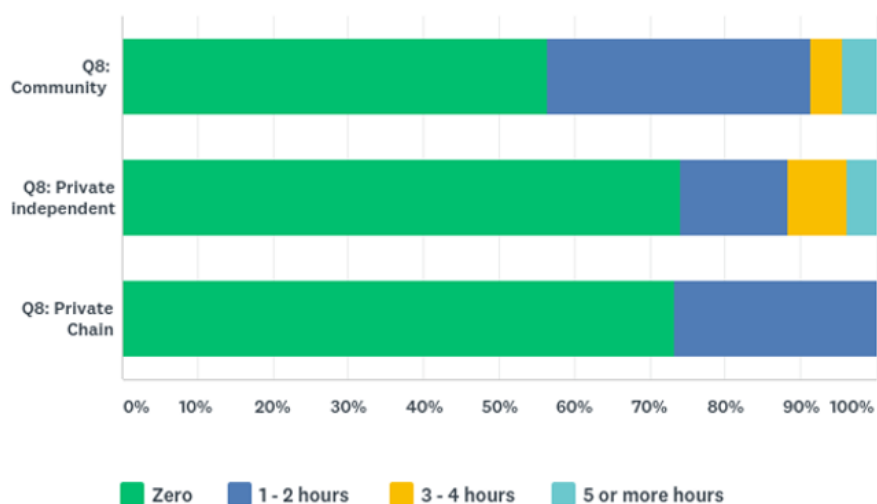


Figure 18 Non-contact hours received per week

The issue of non-contact time arose from educators discussing the paperwork overload, either having to complete paperwork in their own time or cutting into time that was meant to be spent with the children. Both P01 and P03 felt that although management were aware of the need of non-contact time there were still no set times set aside for this to happen:

It's a big issue like. And I know to be fair to them they are quite aware that we need it and they are trying their best to give it to us but one minute they are like 'oh we are so over staffed and the next, one persons out and all of a sudden nobody is getting their non-contact time. (P01 – Independent)

We are with the children pretty much all the time, so we don't get the time to do the extras that we need to do, like their *Aistear* books, like planning for the next day or planning for the week, we don't get time for that. (P03 - Independent)

P02 (Community) was the only educator that was interviewed who was satisfied with the time allocated for non-contact time. Although P02 admitted this was more difficult for part time staff: "I am the team leader so the strategy I would use is any day that it's a little bit quieter or less children I would say to one staff to go out and take an hour you know".

Quantitative data found that 43% of all educators working in chain settings claimed cleaning as took up the majority of their time compared to 16% in private independent settings and 9% in community settings (Appendix). This finding also corresponding to qualitative data from the semi-structured interviews. P04 (Chain) discussed how a lot of time is taken up with cleaning and how this related to feeling a lack of recognition by management and described feeling “at the end we feel like we are just cleaners”.

As previously discussed, research has found educators to be intrinsically motivated through their interactions with children. If the time for these interactions is restricted or threatened due to high-ratios, paperwork and workload, then educators are at risk of losing the very thing that motivates them to remain in the sector. Even more than that, educators' psychological well-being is negatively impacted, as Deci and Ryan (2017) point out that educator's experience “incongruence and conflict when doing what is contrary to one's volition” (p.10).

Another aspect that was found to effect quality in settings was pay. P04, P02 and P01 all admitted feeling that their job performance would improve if their pay increased. P01 (Independent) stated they were struggling to pay bills and rent and “budgeting week to week”. P02 (Community) admitted that although they loved working in their current setting and wouldn't leave, P02 struggles immensely with paying rent and bills. This has made P02 turn to childminding on evenings. P02 claimed that although they would like to imagine they are providing the children with the best quality care and education they also admitted that because of working nights that they are often tired. The next section will explore the connection between pay and recognition more closely.

Sub-theme: Pay and Status. Ryan and Deci (2017) state that pay is also related to self-determination theory in that pay should be seen as fair. Research found that recently

graduated educators' self-esteem and self-worth was affected by their salaries (Moloney and Pope, 2013). Therefore, both pay and status are discussed together for this research study.

Quantitative data from the survey found that 91% of all educators did not feel valued by the Government (Figure 19) and 66% of all educators did not feel valued by society (Figure 20).

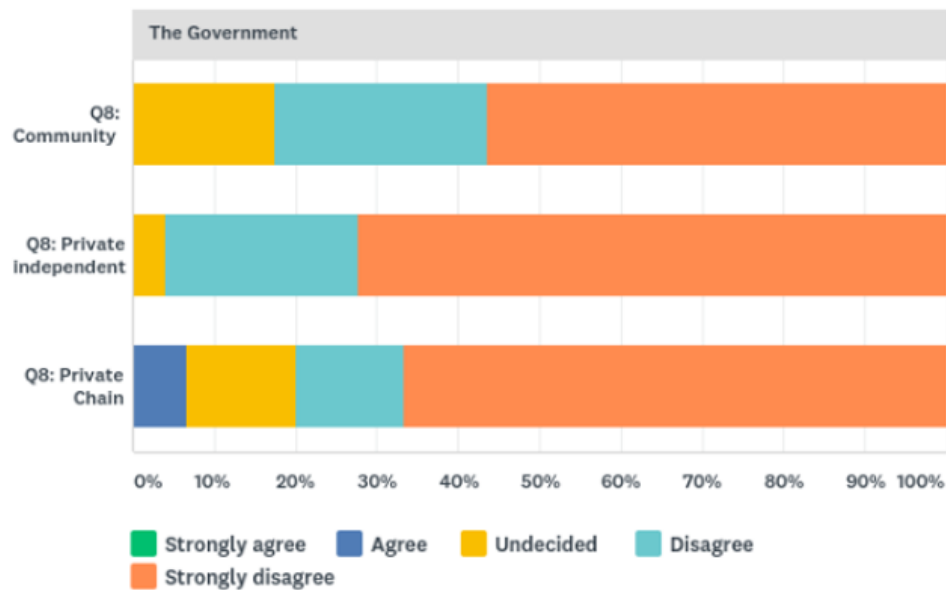


Figure 19 I feel valued by the Government

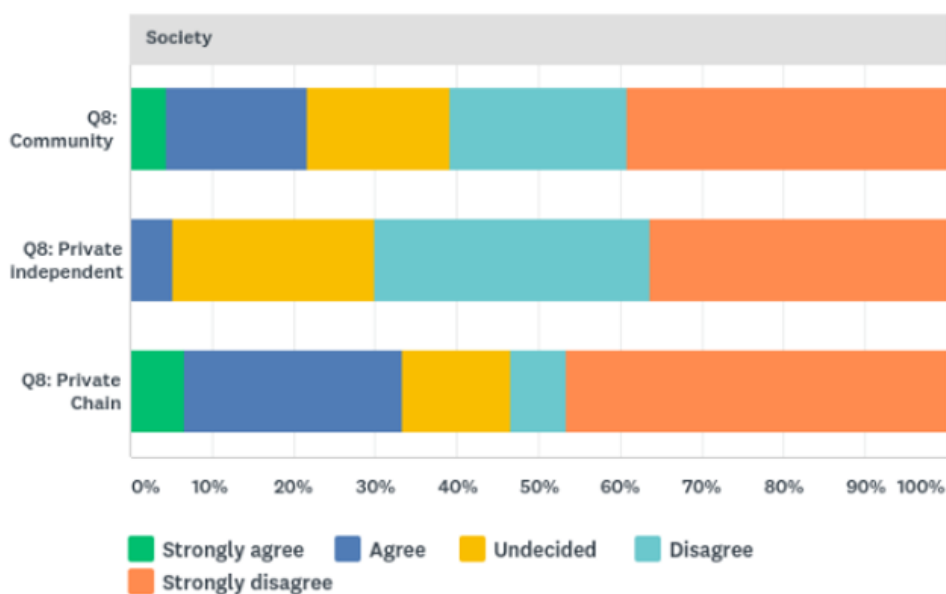


Figure 20 I feel valued by society

Recognition was mentioned frequently by respondents from the survey such as when discussing their responsibilities and stressful aspects of their occupation. P01 (Independent) discussed it in relation to small tokens of appreciation from management. P03 (Independent) discussed how important recognition is for them as an educator and even described it later as a reason as to why they will be leaving the sector and moving into primary school teaching: “I feel like people would see primary school teaching as a proper profession whereas what we are doing they wouldn’t see it as much”.

Recognition and pay were discussed by educators in terms of their connection. Low pay was viewed by educators as a lack of recognition not only from management but by the government too. The quantitative data found that educators working in chain settings received the lowest pay (Figure 21), however the majority of educators across all three sub-groups expressed dissatisfaction with their salary (Figure 22).

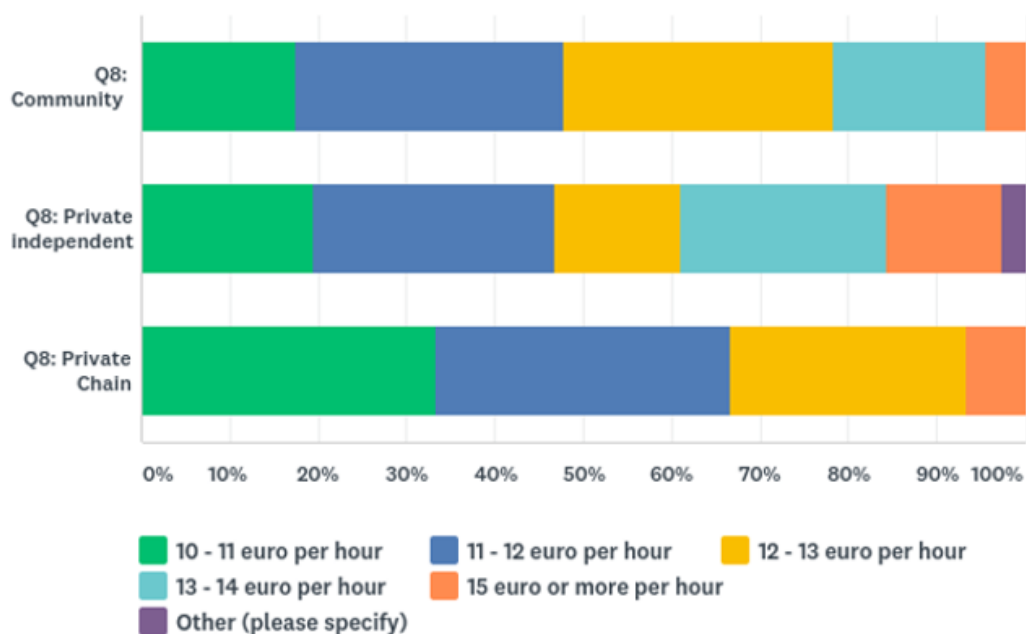


Figure 21 Rate of pay

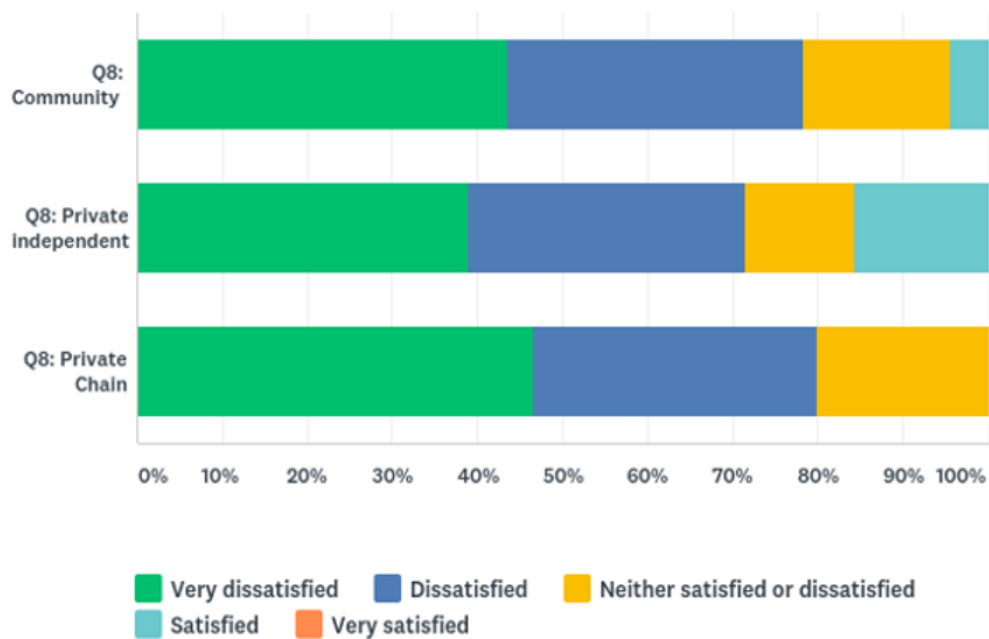


Figure 22 Satisfaction with pay

In the qualitative data from the survey, pay came up as one of the main reasons as to why educators across all three sub-groups were either considering leaving the sector. Across the three groups 56% of educators stated they would leave the sector in the next five years:

I love my job but financially I'm finding it a struggle and I am considering employment in a different field of work. As there hasn't been any recognition or better terms of pay in the 18 years I've been in childcare. (R023)

P04 (Chain) claimed that perhaps if pay was increased, then they would appreciate the job more and also feel more valued by management: "I would appreciate it more, they would appreciate my work because I did a lot of things for them, doing extra hours".

When discussing reasons for the pay in the sector being low, P01 (Independent) believed the reason for this relates to the caring aspect of the profession: "It's like this idea that they know that this is the kind of profession where you care and as a result, they don't feel like they have to pay us as much because we care so much". It is apparent that the need

for competence is closely interlinked with recognition and diminishes when educators are not given recognition for the emotional labour that is involved in the profession.

Summary

It is apparent on analysis that there are noticeable differences among the three sub-groups, particularly among the experiences of educators working in private chain settings. It is evident that educators working in community settings have on average, higher job-satisfaction and provide higher quality of care and education than educators working in independent private and private chain settings. Most significant to the findings is the importance of the relationship educators have with management as this has shown to relate to job satisfaction and the quality of care and education. This chapter has presented the key themes and subs-themes that arose from both the quantitative and qualitative data analysis. The next chapter will discuss these findings together in relation to current literature.

Chapter Five: Discussion and Conclusion

Overview of study

This research study has explored aspects relating to educators' psychological and financial well-being in community, independent private and private chain early years settings in Ireland. It also examined factors that contribute and benefit educators' psychological and financial well-being in the workplace. This study argues that an urgent change is needed to address the significant high-turnover rates in the sector, which have shown to have negative implications on the quality of care and education (Cassidy et al., 2011; Jeon, Buettner & Grant, 2018). A concerning finding from the study showed that the majority of educators across all the sub-groups described dissatisfaction with their pay, felt a lack of recognition from both the Government and society and expressed a strong desire in permanently leaving the sector.

This research study also found significant differences in educators' psychological well-being among community, independent private and private chain settings. Educators working in community settings described better working conditions, higher job-satisfaction and stronger relationships with management than educators in private settings. Educators in private chain settings showed the most dissatisfaction with working conditions and felt the least valued by management. Findings from this study also suggest an important variable in educator well-being is the type of relationship educators have with management, with informal and relaxed relationships directly corresponding to higher job-satisfaction and quality of care and education. This study further suggests that the type of relationship educators have with management may relate to management priorities and values being in line with the educators.

Cumming and Wong (2019) argue that educators have a right to high-quality work environments and that the responsibility of their work-related well-being should be “shared between educators and the systems and structures that shape the contexts and the discourses and the relationships within them” (p. 277). These contexts and discourses of educator well-being have been explored in this research study through Bronfenbrenner’s systems theory. It has shown how “a small change in one component may affect big changes in multiple other components” (Jeon & Wells, 2018, p. 566) or vice versa. The thematic maps from the qualitative data have demonstrated just how interlinked educator well-being is to every facet of an educator’s daily working life. The following section further discusses findings from this research study and is structured to improve and inform future policy, through creating an environment for all.

Creating an environment for all

The government’s commitment to the implementation of a holistic approach to learning can be seen through the introduction of the *Aistear* curriculum framework. This approach considers how best to support all aspects of a child’s well-being. It has been argued, however that early childhood work environments need to nurture adults as well as children (Bloom, 1988; Cumming & Wong, 2019). Therefore, this research study argues for early years settings to adopt a holistic working environment, by creating a sense of belonging, encouraging autonomy and promoting competence. The following section has adapted three learning goals from the *Aistear theme well-being* (NCCA, 2009) (see Appendix G) to demonstrate how policy could also reflect a holistic working environment for educators.

Relatedness: Educators will make strong attachments and develop warm and supportive relationships. The findings from this study suggest that the relationships educators have within their working environment are vital to their psychological well-being.

This finding is supported with previous studies that have shown the relationship educators have with children is what drives their intrinsic motivation to remain in their settings (Bloom, 1988). However, this research has also highlighted the numerous issues that affect the formation of these relationships. These issues include both time and ratios.

Bronfenbrenner & Morris (2006) claim that for relationships to be effective, then “interactions must occur on a fairly regular basis over extended periods of time” (p. 297). Time for interactions should therefore be given priority for the formation of these relationships. Findings from this study suggest that educators in community settings have on average more time for one-to-one interactions than educators in private settings. However, more significant to this finding is that although nearly all educators stated a desire for this time, very few receive it, particularly educators working in private chain settings.

Ratios were a consistent point of discussion among some educators' ability in not being able to build relationships with each child. Particularly within private chains settings, where educators instead implemented ‘crowd control’ and raised concerns over safety issues due to the high numbers of children in their settings. Previous research suggests that the more chaotic a childcare environment is the more likely the educator is to be depressed, stressed or emotionally exhausted (Jeon et al., 2018). It could be argued that the room environment also needs be considered as an important factor in enabling educators to build relationships with children. This could possibly begin with following the Nordic model of ECCE through increasing indoor floor space requirements per child and introducing a required outdoor space per child (see Appendix F).

Another factor that considerably hindered educators' ability in building meaningful relationships with children was time. Paperwork, planning and cleaning were mentioned among all the sub-groups as being continuous sources of stress for educators whilst trying to

balance the time spent with children. The lack or inconsistency of non-contact time was mentioned frequently among the sub-groups; however, it was noted that educators in community settings received on average slightly more non-contact time than educators in private settings.

This study has found what previous research has suggested, that educators are intrinsically motivated through their interactions with children to both enter and remain in the sector. If the time for these interactions is restricted or threatened due to high-ratios, paperwork and workload, then educators are at risk of losing the very thing that motivates them to remain in the sector. Therefore, this research suggests non-contact time should not only be a recommendation but a requirement. The issue of non-contact time to be provided for educators has been recognised by government agencies. Pobal (2019) recently reported a graph displaying the distribution of non-contact hours among settings. It showed 71% of educators to receive 1-5 non-contact hours per week (see Appendix G). However, this graph proves deceptive in that it excludes educators who don't receive non-contact time, which was in fact nearly half of all the educators surveyed (E. Hogan, personal communication, February 28, 2020). One thing to note, is that the annual Pobal survey is often completed by managers and/or owners. If the Government are to get a better understanding of the reality of the working conditions and quality of care and education in early years settings, then they need to recognise and value the opinions and experiences of the very educators working in them. Therefore, future Pobal reports should include the voices of early years educators through an anonymous but obligatory survey.

Competence: Educators will demonstrate a sense of mastery and belief in their own abilities. This research study found that the relationship educators have with management tends to be a reflection on the ability to communicate effectively. Qualitative data found that effective communication promoted competence and contributed to feeling

valued by management. Whereas, competence lacked in settings where management dismissed opportunities for effective communication. Communication between management and educators appeared to be more effective in community settings and least in private chain settings.

As previously mentioned, the over regulation of the early years sector in Ireland has seen multiple governmental bodies almost competing amongst each other with increasing regulations. This 'audit culture' as Osgood (2010) refers to it, undermines educators own self-belief as competence tends to diminish in environments that are deemed too challenging (Ryan & Deci, 2017). The findings from this study also suggest that competence is negatively impacted low pay. Educators expressed their dissatisfaction with their salary and viewed it as a lack of recognition from both Government and society.

In order to ensure the need for competence is met, management need to recognise the importance of effective communication with their staff, valuing both their opinions and expertise. This should result in educators having a sense of mastery and belief in their own abilities which then produces higher levels of job performance and psychological well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2017). As this research has shown, competency has directly related to pay, in that educators feel their chosen profession is not valued by Government and society. Therefore, the introduction of a professional pay scale is further recommended to ensure educators feel that their profession is both valued and recognised at a macro level.

Autonomy: Educators will show increasing independence and be able to make choices and decisions. Deci and Ryan (2017) claim that “when managers are more autonomy-supportive, employees internalize the value of their work efforts, are more autonomously motivated, and thus perform better and display higher job satisfaction and well-being” (p. 532). One positive aspect awarded to educators across all the sub-groups was

that of curriculum autonomy. This research study found educators to both speak positively and affectionately when referring to how they apply their own values and experience to the learning environment.

As previously discussed, the *Aistear* curriculum framework is based on a socio-cultural perspective. It encourages and celebrates the many different theoretical perspectives that occupy the field of early childhood education. Therefore, it is in fact, policy that is awarding this type of autonomy to educators rather than management. With policy recognising the value of curriculum autonomy for educators, then perhaps it can also recognise the detrimental effect that an over-regulated sector has on both autonomy and competence. These regulations may conflict with an educator's authentic interests and values, and in effect have negative implications on their autonomy (Ryan and Deci, 2017).

In creating an autonomy-supportive environment for educators, both management and policy need to promote educators' independence and their ability to make choices and decisions. If the government truly believe the best approach to early years education and care is a holistic approach which values both well-being and relationships. Then perhaps the same approach is needed in creating a work environment that values educators' well-being, by ensuring their needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness are met. This approach could not only enable the children's own needs to be fulfilled but also strengthen it. If a holistic approach to the early years sector is to be implemented to the best of its ability then that environment needs to be adapted for all in that service, not only the children but educators and families too.

Priorities and Values: From Macro to Micro level

Findings from this study suggests that the priorities and values of early year settings is an important factor that may influence the working conditions for educators and the quality of

care and education it provides for the children. For managements' priorities and values to be in line with educators then they also need to be intrinsically motivated and educationally invested. Therefore, it should be a requirement that both owners and managers complete a higher-level qualification in early years education and frequently engage in professional development. This may improve the relationship management have with their staff as findings from this research study suggest that stronger relationships with management occur when both the educator and management share the same priorities and values.

Findings also suggest that equality is an important aspect in the relationship educators have with their co-workers. This relationship was shown to be based on reciprocity, which encourages both autonomy and competence, that demonstrates how the three needs of SDT interlink. Management could replicate a similar relationship with educators by acknowledging the benefits of this relationship.

As well as discussing the priorities and values of management, government priorities for the early years sector are equally as important. With increasing demands for childcare for a growing workforce the Irish Government intentionally created a market within the early years sector, prioritising quantity over quality. This open market constructed parents as consumers and early years settings as a commodity to be bought (Maloney et al., 2019). In the past decade, the early years sector in Ireland has come under increasing regulatory pressure from numerous governmental bodies. It has been suggested that this pressure is resulting in small independent early years settings being forced to close (O'Brien, 2019). It could be argued that these regulations are more suited to accommodate larger childcare settings, such as private chains, which this research study has found to consist of poorer working conditions for staff, and poorer quality of care and education.

As this study has found, recognition is vitally important to both attract and retain educators. The professionalisation of the early years sector is central to this recognition and should be a key priority for government. Bronfenbrenner's systems theory demonstrates how one small change from the macro level can affect all levels within and vice versa. This small change could possibly be in the language that government officials use when discussing the sector. For instance, the language applied to the sector during the Covid-19 pandemic further emphasizes the aspect of 'care' and demotes conceptions of professionalising the sector (Maloney, 2020). Therefore, this research study suggests that simple changes in terminology and language that is attributed to the sector may have a significant impact on certain discourses that evade the sector.

A Crisis within a Crisis

As previously argued, the early years sector in Ireland is a profession in crisis. Central to this argument is the need for increased government investment to improve both the working conditions and the quality of care and education. This crisis came to the attention of many when thousands of workers in the early years sector protested on the 5th February 2020. The lack of Government support for this protest was evident with the DCYA initially announcing the deduction of funding from the early years settings the partook in the protest. This statement was later retracted after it was met by outrage among the sector.

Research has argued that the professionalisation of the early years sector should be a key priority of government investment (Moloney et al., 2019, Moss., 2017). As previously discussed, it is important to continuously reflect on the sector as interchangeable, where multiple meanings of professionalism remain fluid rather than static (Duhn, 2010), and discourses change from socio-cultural and social- policy contexts are challenged (Ebrahim, 2010). These contexts are beginning to slowly change, with the voices of educators finally

being acknowledged and their expertise and opinions valued. However, Ireland has experienced a paradigm shift economically and politically due to the Covid-19 pandemic (Maloney, 2020) and changes within these socio-cultural and social-policy contexts have exceeded, with the state almost overnight temporarily nationalising the early years sector. The Covid-19 pandemic has however, highlighted the neo-liberal privatisation of the early years sector, exposing the disparities among individual settings. This has been evident in the difficulty in drafting policies around the re-opening of early years settings. Perhaps the time is now for the state to fully involve itself in the sector and begin to take on the responsibilities that come with it. However, it is also important to approach any discussions over the future of the sector with cautious optimism and remember the advice of Duhn (2010), who describes the dangers of a privatised sector that is publicly funded, in that, government involvement is usually accompanied with increased regulation which inevitably leads to decreases in both competence and autonomy.

Conclusion

On conclusion of this research study it has become evident that there are noticeable differences in educators' psychological well-being among the sub-groups, particularly among the experiences of educators working in private chain settings. Although community settings appear to provide better working conditions and quality of care and education, there are also distinct differences among the quality of care and education being provided in private independent and private chain early years settings, thus, it is not necessarily the business for-profit model being flawed but management prioritising profit before quality.

Despite the difference among the sub-groups, all the educators appear to share the same dissatisfaction with their salary, feel a lack of recognition for their chosen profession and have a strong desire for more time to be spent with the children and less time on

paperwork and planning. Another significant finding from this study is the importance of the relationship educators have with management as this has shown to directly relate to job satisfaction and the quality of care and education. It is hoped that these findings can be used to both inform and improve future policy.

Moloney (2019) argues that it is time for the Irish Government to acknowledge that quality costs and that it cannot be achieved on a shoe-string budget. Perhaps if the Government re-acknowledge the value of the educators' role in children's lives and the many cost involved when educators do not experience well-being, then this might act as a catalyst for action (Cumming & Wong, 2019). If Government investment is to acknowledge and value the early years sector as a professional sector, then it needs to ensure educators are not only paid a "living wage" but a professional wage, a wage that represents the daily demands and responsibilities of an educator's working life and recognises the acquired skillset of the emotional labour involved.

This research study argues that Government intervention is urgently needed in the sector, as findings from this study suggest that over half of all early year's educators intend to permanently leave the sector. It is recommended that future investment in the sector, should reflect findings from this study in creating a working environment that values belongingness, encourages competence and promotes autonomy.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are for intended for future research:

- Due to the limited responses from educators working in chain settings, further research is recommended into the experiences of educators working in these settings and the effects on the quality of care and education.
- Further research is recommended on exploring parents' experiences of early years settings and to examine whether these experiences differ among setting type.

The following recommendations are to inform future policy in improving working conditions and the quality of care and education in early years settings in Ireland:

- It is recommended that policy considers the benefits of a holistic working environment for educators, through prioritising time for relationships, encouraging autonomy and promoting competence.
- To prioritise time for the formation of meaningful relationships with children then adequate paid non-contact time for educators should not only be a recommendation but a requirement.
- To enable stronger relationships between management and staff, both owners and managers should be required to complete a higher-level qualification in early years education and frequently engage in professional development.
- The introduction of a professional pay scale for a professional sector is recommended to not only to promote the need for competence but to also retain educators in the sector.
- For Government to gain a better insight into the realities of the early years sector then future Pobal reports should include the voices of early years educators through a confidential but obligatory survey.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Questionnaire on survey monkey**Welcome to My Survey**

You are invited to participate in a web based online questionnaire from Survey Monkey exploring Early Years Educators' psychological and financial well-being. This is a research study conducted by Elaine Sharkey in completion of the MA in Early Years Education at Marino Institute of Education.

Researchers are increasingly recognising the links between early years educators' well-being and high-quality education and care. Given the high rates of staff turnover in the early years sector in Ireland, I believe there is an urgent need for research in the area.

Your feedback is extremely important to this research. I have taken into consideration the often busy and hectic schedules that educators have by making this survey as compact as possible with completion of the survey taking only 10-15 minutes. The participation in this research study is completely voluntary. No compensation will be given for participation.

To protect the confidentiality of the participants there will be no need to share any personal information. The online questionnaire will be secured through the use of both username and passcode. Your questionnaire answers will be sent to a link at SurveyMonkey.com where data will be stored in a password protected electronic format. Survey Monkey will not obtain any personal data therefore, your responses are anonymous. All data will be destroyed thirteen months after submission of this dissertation.

If you have any questions or queries regarding the study or its procedures, your rights as a participant, concerns or complaints, you may contact me by e-mail at esharkeymece18@momail.mie.ie

Please select your choice below. Clicking on the "yes" button indicates that

1. You have read and agree to the above information
2. You are participating voluntarily
3. You are 18 years of age

* 1. Do you agree to the above terms? By clicking Yes, you consent that you are willing to answer the questions in this survey.

☐ Yes

☐ No

2. How old are you?

- ☐ Under 18
- ☐ 18-24
- ☐ 25-34
- ☐ 35-44
- ☐ 45-54
- ☐ 55-64
- ☐ 65+

3. How long have you been working in the sector?

4. How long have you been working in your current setting?

5. Why did you leave your previous setting?

6. Level of qualification in early years education and care

- ☐ Level 5
- ☐ Level 6
- ☐ Level 7
- ☐ Level 8
- ☐ Level 9

7. What best describes your role in your setting?

- ☐ Owner
- ☐ Manager
- ☐ Early years educator - room leader
- ☐ Early years educator - assistant
- ☐ Student

8. What type of setting do you work in?

- ☐ Community
- ☐ Private independent
- ☐ Private Chain
- ☐ Other (please specify)

9. Which best describes your employment situation?

- ☐ Full-time employment (32hours +)
- ☐ Part-time employment (up to 31 hours)
- ☐ Sessional ECCE times
- ☐ Government working scheme
- ☐ Other (please specify)

10. What age are the majority of children you work with?

- ☐ Birth to one year
- ☐ 1 to 2 years
- ☐ 2 to 3 years
- ☐ 3 to 4 years
- ☐ 4 to 5 years
- ☐ School aged
- ☐ All ages

11. How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with each of the following?

	Very dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Neither satisfied or dissatisfied	Satisfied	Very satisfied
Classroom environment	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Staff room and staff facilities	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Time to reflect on practice	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Time for planning, preparation and paperwork	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

12. How best would describe your relationship with the following

	Informal (relaxed)	Semi-formal	Formal (strictly professional)
Relationship with management	☐	☐	☐
Relationship with co-workers	☐	☐	☐
Relationship with the children	☐	☐	☐
Relationship with families	☐	☐	☐

13. I feel highly valued by

	Strongly agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Co-workers	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Management	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Children	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Families	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The Government	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Society	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

14. Do you feel you have time for one-to-one interactions with the children in your classroom?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Other (please specify)

15. Do you feel you are making a positive impact on the children in your classroom?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Unsure

16. How do you feel about the number of children in your room?

- ☐ Too many
- ☐ Just right
- ☐ Not enough

17. Do you feel there are enough early years educators in your setting to provide quality education and care?

- ☐ Yes
☐ No
☐ Unsure

18. In your current setting are ratios maintained throughout the day?

- ☐ Yes
☐ No
☐ Other (please specify)

19. How do you feel about the responsibilities that come with your role as an early year's educator?

20. Do you ever feel stressed or overwhelmed from aspects of your workload? If yes, please list most stressful aspects.

21. What are the most rewarding aspects of your job as an early years educator?

22. Place in order what aspects of your daily workload take up the majority of your time. 1 - being the most time and 5 - being the least time



Paperwork and preparation

☐ N/A



Engaging with children in groups

☐ N/A



Keeping classroom clean

☐ N/A



Leading daily activities/ Setting up activities

☐ N/A



One to one interactions with children

☐ N/A

23. Place in order what aspects of your daily workload you would like to take up the majority of your time. 1 - being the most time and 5 - being the least time

Paperwork and preparation

☐ N/A

Engaging with children in groups

☐ N/A

Keeping classroom clean

☐ N/A

Leading daily activities/ Setting up activities

☐ N/A

One to one interactions with children

☐ N/A

24. In your opinion, list the most important aspects of working as an early years educator. 1 - being the most important and 5 - being the least important



Interactions and connections made with children

☐ N/A



Interactions and connections made with co-workers

☐ N/A



Salary

☐ N/A



Working environment

☐ N/A



Applying your own knowledge and interests to the curriculum

☐ N/A

25. What is your hourly rate of pay?

- ☐ 10 - 11 euro per hour
- ☐ 11 - 12 euro per hour
- ☐ 12 - 13 euro per hour
- ☐ 13 - 14 euro per hour
- ☐ 15 euro or more per hour
- ☐ Other (please specify)

26. How satisfied are you with your salary?

- ☐ Very dissatisfied
- ☐ Dissatisfied
- ☐ Neither satisfied or dissatisfied
- ☐ Satisfied
- ☐ Very satisfied

27. Has your pay increased since commencing employment in your current setting?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Other (please specify)

28. How many non-contact hours per week do you receive?

- ☐ Zero
- ☐ 1 - 2 hours
- ☐ 3 - 4 hours
- ☐ 5 or more hours

29. What changes would you make to your current setting to improve quality?

30. Are you satisfied in your current setting? If not, do you intend on finding another job?

31. Where do you see yourself working in five years?

Appendix B: Information sheet for participants of interviews

You are invited to take part in a research study on early years educators currently working in Ireland. Before you decide you need to understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for you. Please take time to read the following information carefully. Ask questions if anything you read is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not to take part.

WHO I AM AND WHAT THIS STUDY IS ABOUT:

This is a research study conducted by Elaine Sharkey in completion of the MA in Early Years Education at Marino Institute of Education. Researchers are increasingly recognising the links between early years educators' well-being and high-quality education and care. Due to the high staff turnover rates in the early years sector there is an urgent need for research in this area. Thus, your feedback is extremely important to this research.

WHAT WILL TAKING PART INVOLVE?

The semi-structured interviews should last 30-40 minutes. The interviews will take place in a private space that has been mutually agreed on between both the researcher and the participant. The interviews will be informal, and the participant is free to expand on any topic or issue they feel strongly about. The conversation will be recorded as the researcher will need to transcribe the interview at a later date. The topics discussed will centre around your working conditions such as pay and non-contact time. Your relationships within your setting and your thoughts on how to improve quality in your setting.

WHY HAVE YOU BEEN INVITED TO TAKE PART?

This study is based on accessing the experiences and opinions of early years educator's working in Ireland. You have been selected by the researcher as you fit this profile.

DO YOU HAVE TO TAKE PART?

Participation is completely voluntary, and you have the right to refuse participation, refuse any question and withdraw at any time without any consequence whatsoever.

WILL TAKING PART BE CONFIDENTIAL?

To protect the confidentiality of the participants there will be no need to share any personal information. All names and identifying information will be deleted from the transcript and recordings will be kept on a password protected device accessible only by the researcher.

HOW WILL INFORMATION YOU PROVIDE BE RECORDED, STORED AND PROTECTED?

Signed consent forms and original audio recordings will be retained in the researchers own home. The consent forms will be kept in a locked folder and audio recordings on a password protected USB until after submission of the dissertation. All data will be destroyed thirteen

months after submission of this dissertation. A transcript of interviews in which all identifying information has been removed will be retained for a further two years after this. Under the freedom of information legalisation you are entitled to access the information you have provided at any time.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO THE RESULTS OF THE STUDY?

The researcher's plans for the study only consist in submitting the dissertation to Marino Institute of Education in partial fulfilment of the MA in Early Childhood Education.

WHO SHOULD YOU CONTACT FOR FURTHER INFORMATION?

If you have any questions or queries regarding the study or its procedures, your rights as a participant, concerns or complaints, you may contact me by e-mail at esharkeymece18@momail.mie.ie

THANK YOU

Appendix C: Letter of consent for participants of interviews

Exploring Early Years Educators' psychological and financial well-being in Ireland

Consent form for participants of semi-structured interviews

- I..... voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.
- I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind.
- I understand that I can withdraw permission to use data from my interview within two weeks after the interview, in which case the material will be deleted.
- I have had the purpose and nature of the study explained to me in writing and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.
- I understand that participation involves discussing my experiences and opinions on working as an early years educator.
- I understand that I will not benefit directly from participating in this research.
- I agree to my interview being audio-recorded.
- I understand that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially.
- I understand that in any report on the results of this research my identity will remain anonymous. This will be done by changing my name and disguising any details of my interview which may reveal my identity or the identity of people I speak about.
- I understand that disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted in the completed dissertation.
- I understand that if I inform the researcher that myself or someone else is at risk of harm they may have to report this to the relevant authorities - they will discuss this with me first but may be required to report with or without my permission.

- I understand that signed consent forms and original audio recordings will be retained by the researcher on a password encoded device until 13 months after the submission of the dissertation.
- I understand that a transcript of my interview in which all identifying information has been removed will be retained for be for two years from submission of the dissertation.
- I understand that under freedom of information legalisation I am entitled to access the information I have provided at any time while it is in storage as specified above.
- I understand that I am free to contact any of the people involved in the research to seek further clarification and information.

If you have any questions or queries regarding the study or its procedures, your rights as a participant, concerns or complaints, you may contact me by e-mail at esharkeymece18@momail.mie.ie

Signature of research participant

Signature of participant

Date

Signature of researcher

I believe the participant is giving informed consent to participate in this study

Signature of researcher

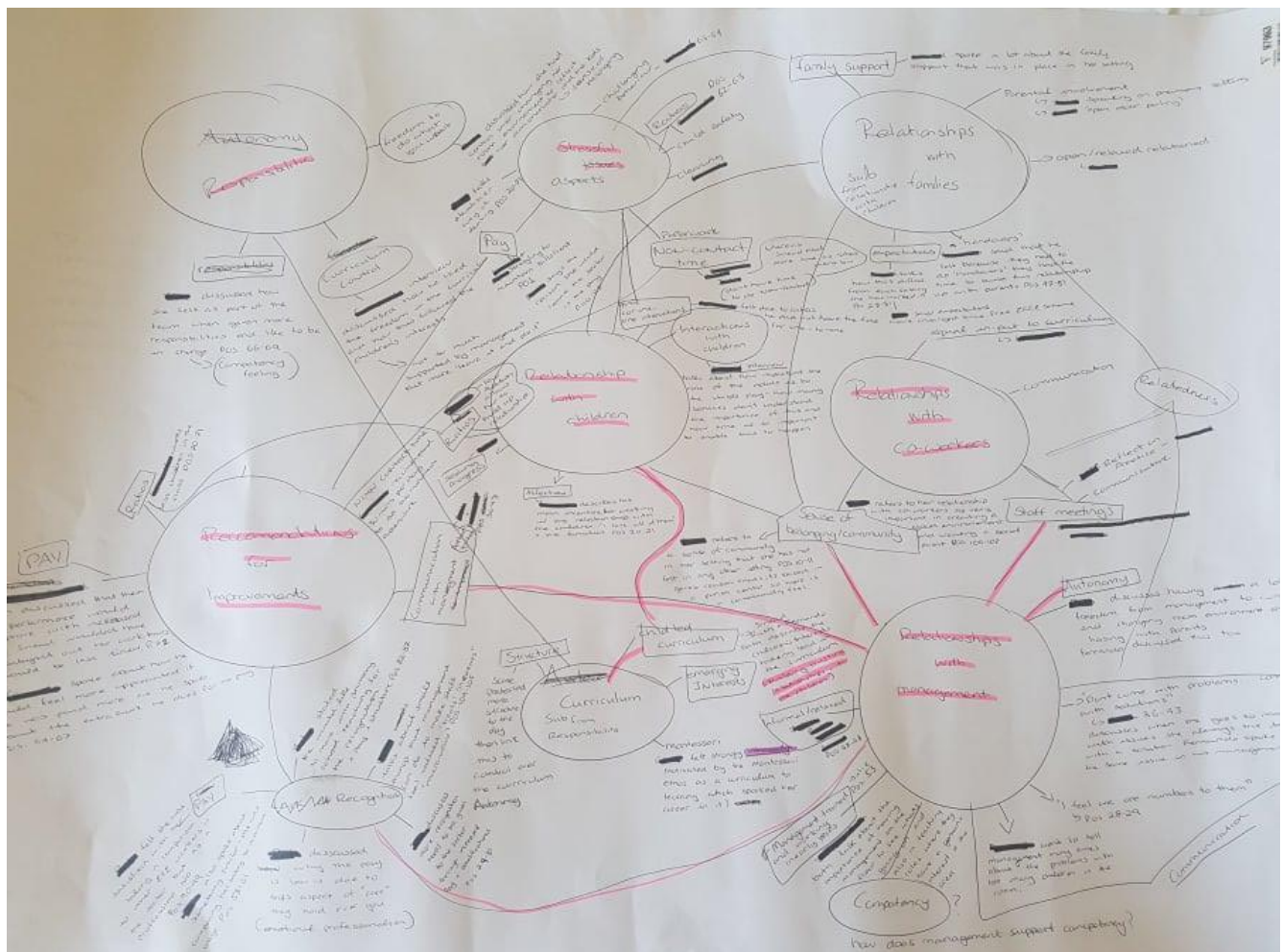
Date

Appendix D: Audit trail for qualitative data

Theme	Code	Raw data
Relationships	Relationship with children	"Watching the children learn and develop new skills" (R066). "I have a good relationship with all the children, in the end I love all of them" (P04)
	Relationship with families	"The families really spent a lot of time getting to know you, interacting with you, engaging with you, like they want to know who you are... there was a very strong sense of community" (P02)
	Relationship with co-workers	"it's a team involvement so everyone inputs" (P02) "I want that my team feels they are the same as me and they were doing the same as me also. They were managing the room, organising the activities" (P04)
The Role of Management	Relationship with management	"I feel that the don't care if we are happy there or not. At the end we are numbers" (P04). "So that everyone is relaxed. There's no like you know... even the manager is on the same level" (P03). "it's very positive, it's very relaxed. It's very informal but when it needs to be formal it's formal" (P02)
	Autonomy	"I like it that they leave you to do the thing that you want. If you say you want to learn one week about a topic then you can do it." (P04). "it's nice to be in your room and feeling that your character is translating to the kids" (P01)
	Communication	"More communication with the staff and give them solutions. Not like go solve your problems alone" (P04). "
	Priorities and values	"The manager is like 'more children more children' and we can't manage them" (P04). "I think there's a huge difference where there's a place that runs as a business and the owners are only financially invested and not necessarily like educationally invested. I think that's a big difference. Because they care more" (P01)

Responsibilities	Ratios	"I find you have so much time and in this particular service. For the interactions and for the engagements" (P02) " "There are too many expectations on me as an EYP considering that I have no non-contact time, not enough resources and maintaining ratios is currently a big issue at present"
	Paperwork and planning	"the paper work is overwhelming" R100. " "Yes I feel that our time with children is taken from us as paperwork often has to be done" R048.
	Recognition	"I have no problem with the responsibility, however we don't get the recognition for it" – R104 " "The amount of responsibility is not reflected in pay and leads to a sense of lack of worth" – R92 "I love the responsibility of shaping young minds and nurturing their development, I do feel undervalued by the government" – R08 "Paperwork, observations, activity prep all done out of payment hours. Its ridiculous. Some evenings I just don't see my family as I'm catching up on work" - R081
Relatedness	Sense of belonging	"Everyone is aware of each other. There is a real sense that everyone wants to be there, everyone is happy to be there" (P01). " "There was a very strong sense of community and you build relationships very quickly because of that" (P02).
Leaving the sector	Pay	"Probably not in childcare with this wage that does not reflect the level of work and responsibility" R102. " "Hopefully I will figure out how to work with children in Early years education and be financially stable. Unfortunately, I do not think that is possible." R- 069

Appendix E: Thematic map analysis of qualitative data



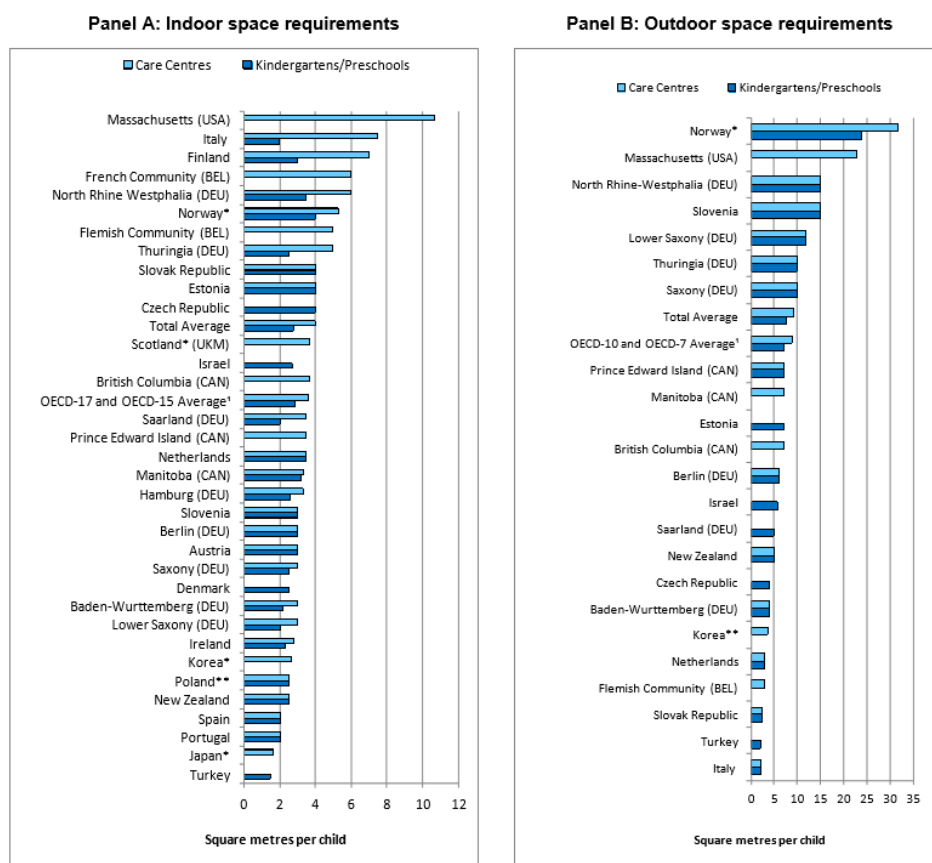
Appendix F: Required floor space per child

Tusla floor space per child requirements in Ireland

Type of Service	Clear Floor Space Requirement per Child
Full Day Care Services	0 - 1 year: 3.5 square metres clear floor space per child. 1 - 2 years: 2.8 square metres clear floor space per child. 2 - 3 years: 2.35 square metres clear floor space per child. 3 - 6 years: 2.3 square metres clear floor space per child.
Part-Time Day Care Services	0 - 1 year: 3.5 square metres clear floor space per child. 1 - 2 years: 2.8 square metres clear floor space per child. 2 - 3 years: 2.35 square metres clear floor space per child. 3 - 6 years: 2.3 square metres clear floor space per child.
Sessional Pre-School Service	A minimum of 1.818 square metres of clear floor space per child for the duration of the Sessional Service for the children attending that service.
• This measurement of 1.818 square metres applies to Full Day and Part-Time children who are availing of the ECCE/Sessional session for up to 3.5 hours. • When the ECCE session is finished, the Full Day or Part-Time space requirement applies (2.35 or 2.3 square metres depending on the children's ages)	

OECD report on average floor space requirements

Figure 4. Minimum space requirements as m² per child in kindergarten/preschool and childcare centre



Appendix G: Aistear theme Well-being

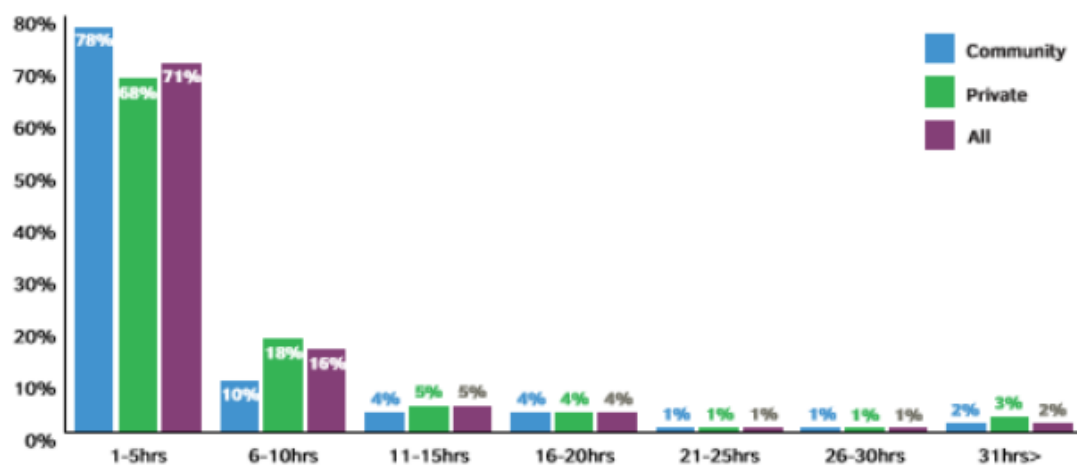
Table 1: Aims and learning goals for *Well-being*

Well-being	
Aims	Learning goals
Aim 1 Children will be strong psychologically and socially.	In partnership with the adult, children will 1. make strong attachments and develop warm and supportive relationships with family, peers and adults in out-of-home settings and in their community 2. be aware of and name their own feelings, and understand that others may have different feelings 3. handle transitions and changes well 4. be confident and self-reliant 5. respect themselves, others and the environment 6. make decisions and choices about their own learning and development.
Aim 2 Children will be as healthy and fit as they can be.	In partnership with the adult, children will 1. gain increasing control and co-ordination of body movements 2. be aware of their bodies, their bodily functions, and their changing abilities 3. discover, explore and refine gross and fine motor skills 4. use self-help skills in caring for their own bodies 5. show good judgement when taking risks 6. make healthy choices and demonstrate positive attitudes to nutrition, hygiene, exercise, and routine.
Aim 3 Children will be creative and spiritual.	In partnership with the adult, children will 1. express themselves creatively and experience the arts 2. express themselves through a variety of types of play 3. develop and nurture their sense of wonder and awe 4. become reflective and think flexibly 5. care for the environment 6. understand that others may have beliefs and values different to their own.
Aim 4 Children will have positive outlooks on learning and on life.	In partnership with the adult, children will 1. show increasing independence, and be able to make choices and decisions 2. demonstrate a sense of mastery and belief in their own abilities and display learning dispositions, such as determination and perseverance 3. think positively, take learning risks, and become resilient and resourceful when things go wrong 4. motivate themselves, and welcome and seek challenge 5. respect life, their own and others, and know that life has a meaning and purpose 6. be active citizens.

Appendix H: Distribution of non-contact time

Distribution of non-contact time from Pobal report (2018-2019)

Figure 7.4 Percentage of staff working directly with children who work non-contact hours per week



Distribution of non-contact time from this research study

Q28 How many non-contact hours per week do you receive?

